



The Mangrove
Collective

Roots, Relationships and Responsibilities

The Journey of
Women Leaders
in Asia and
the Pacific

Final Report

written by

Eunchim Choi

Roots, Relationships and Responsibilities:

The Journey of Women Leaders in Asia and the Pacific

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About The Mangrove Collective



The Mangrove
Collective

The Mangrove Collective is an international humanitarian, development and social impact consultancy. Based in New Zealand and Singapore, we service and support the full spectrum of for-purpose organisations to thrive. We do this by:

- *Supporting* humanitarian and development actors through the provision of technical advisory, management consulting and capacity strengthening services (both for a fee, and *pro bono*)
- *Contributing* knowledge products, tools and conversations to enhance the depth and quality of development practice
- *Connecting* to promote cross-pollination across the public, non-governmental and private sectors, including provoking and facilitating conversations on women's leadership in the sector
- *Investing* in partnerships with smaller for-purpose actors that support non-mainstream humanitarian and development causes, through *pro bono* advisory consulting services and small-scale funding investments

Further information about **The Mangrove Collective** and what we do can be found in our website: www.themangrovecollective.com.

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Author's Note

Eunchim Choi

Co-Founder of The Mangrove Collective & Project Lead,
The Journey of Women Leaders in Asia and the Pacific Project



There must be something about being a woman in her mid-forties. I've been feeling an incessant urge to create. Birthing something - or even someone - is not an unfamiliar act for a woman. In my thirties, I gave birth to three children (planned) and a consulting group (unplanned)! However, there must be something about years and years of bending, flexing, and posturing oneself to be in the service of others - whether for your spouse, children, employer, organisation, team, or clients - that leaves this huge, unscratched itch in a middle-aged woman's soul. The itch that shouts: *"Is there something else that I can show for my life, other than what I've poured out into others?!"*

Never having been the fine arts type (though I can carry a mean tune in the shower), I was likely to find my creative outlet in writing. Once upon a time, long before landing in Timor-Leste at the age of 26 to start my very first properly paid job in international development, I dreamt of becoming a journalist. I was motivated in equal parts by my love of writing and utter naïveté; I had no understanding of the grit and aggressiveness journalism required. Journalism did, however, open my eyes to the pains of the post-Cold War world: armed conflict, genocide, famine, disasters, poverty, and marginalisation - a never-ending list of human and environmental suffering. And so - writing became a trusty tool for the professional path I chose. It helped me design projects, win grants, conduct research and communicate the results of humanitarian and development work. When strangers ask what I do now as an international development consultant, I tell them: *"I do a lot of writing!"*

Writing remains my primary means of addressing the pains of inequality and injustice in the world. Nowadays, this mostly occurs through assignments and projects that my colleagues and I deliver for partners and clients of The Mangrove Collective ('Mangrove' or 'TMC'). Supporting their mission and objectives does make my soul sing, especially if they are from the Global South! However, the aforementioned itch in my soul remained unscratched - until the day I decided, nearly seven years into co-leading and managing Mangrove, to embark on a self-directed and self-funded project. That is how *The Journey of Women Leaders Project* ('The Journey Project') was born.

One of the beautiful things I've discovered about advancing in my professional years (almost 20 years!) is the number of brilliant women leaders I've come to know along the way. These women are in my networks: I've worked with them, worked for them, and even done life with some of them. As a working mother living a multifaceted life and navigating its changing seasons, creating something out of my own initiative and time has felt nearly impossible. Women are incredibly busy: we are always hustling, serving, caring, nurturing, encouraging, rallying, earning, budgeting, optimising, organising, coordinating, project-managing, multi-tasking, counselling, mediating, healing, soothing, communicating, problem-solving... The list goes on. Naturally, but tragically, stories of women's life journeys often go untold, unheard, and unnoticed. Thus, it was rather easy to conceptualise Mangrove's first self-initiated project: I wanted to speak with a number of women leaders to learn about their journeys and glean helpful lessons for others. I was brimming with excitement as I envisioned listening to and sharing the life stories of these formidable women leaders – some of whom I have known and admired for years. I was probably high with exuberant enthusiasm when I kicked off the two-hour conversations (interviews) with them.

Fast-forward several months. Unsurprisingly, the project took longer to complete than originally envisioned: it took double the time! A lot of life-things have happened between the energetic starting point and the ever-elusive finish line: I sold a house, transitioned three kids into a new school and school system, dealt with teenage storms (not mine!), navigated health issues of a family member, crafted a concept for another organisation I intend to launch, applied for permanent residency in the country I've been living in for the past 7 years – just to name a few. At one juncture I realised the time and effort it took for me to complete this project is a 'case in point'; evidence that creating and producing something based on self-initiative, as a working mum and entrepreneur, can be extremely difficult.

By the grace of God, with the affirming support of my colleagues, through multiple self-pep-talks (e.g. *'You can't possibly give up now!'*), and most importantly, by staying accountable to the responsibility I carried to bring the stories of these women leaders to the world, The Journey Project is now complete. The publication of this final report marks the end of my endeavours – cue the happy dance! Hopefully, it will also mark a start: I envision this report sparking a wave of conversations, gatherings and initiatives to better understand women's leadership throughout multiple life phases, and to create systems, practices and cultures that can better support women leaders – in Asia, the Pacific and in other parts of the world.

E.C. Choi

May 2025

Introduction

Since its founding in 2018, The Mangrove Collective (TMC) has been growing organically as a women-founded and women-led business. From the first day of incorporation, we have operated as a non-hierarchical, 'flat' organisation functioning on a co-leadership model. Some very astonishing things have happened in the last seven years: As of May 2025, TMC has delivered over 100 unique assignments for more than 50 international and national organisations, contributing to humanitarian and development initiatives in over 30 nations across the globe. TMC now has two offices (one in New Zealand and the other in Singapore) and a remote-based, all-women core team located across three nations: New Zealand, Australia and Singapore.

Like any other consulting business, the majority of our time and effort is spent delivering quality work for humanitarian and development actors in Asia and the Pacific, ensuring that our contributions enhance and add value to our partners (clients). However, very early in our journey, we decided that we would not become one of those consulting companies that mainly exists for profit-making. Of course, creating and evolving a viable business is no small feat; consistently generating opportunities to support the livelihoods of numerous consultants is a noble aim in and of itself. Still, we have always felt a gnawing in our collective spirit; a yearning to harness the knowledge, experiences and relationships we hold as an independent actor in the social impact ecosystem; a desire to contribute to the wider sector by sharing our insights and exercising thought leadership.

Roots, Relationships and Responsibilities: The Journey of Women Leaders in Asia and the Pacific is the first of (hopefully) many materials to be produced by The Mangrove Collective. Through these publications, we aim to generate broader and deeper conversations on themes of significance for humanitarian and development professionals. It is fitting that TMC dedicates its first publication to the theme of women in leadership: we are a group of women leaders who chose the path of entrepreneurship in response to systemic issues that obstruct the advancement and wellbeing of women in this sector. While we, the 'Mangrove ladies', chose to birth and build an entirely new organisation to express women's leadership in a way that is compatible with our multifaceted lives, many others have been travelling on leadership pathways appropriate to their circumstances. In this report, we learn from their unique life journeys and celebrate their courage, determination, and resilience.

The Journey of Women Leaders Project ('The Journey Project') was originally intended to be a qualitative study on the factors affecting women's leadership, based on key informant interviews (KIIs) with thirty women. However, after the first several interviews, the Project Lead had a change of heart. She felt that to view the women leaders as samples and their stories as data would do a disservice to these women leaders – as well as to the readers. Each story had great intrinsic value and was unique in flavour. Their narratives deserved to be heard and appreciated as they were, rather than being dissected and processed into 'conclusions and recommendations'! Consequently, the idea of a qualitative research project was discarded, and The Journey Project took on its current form. Its main objective is to celebrate the twelve – not thirty – women leaders who have generously shared their leadership journeys with a wider audience. Our hope is that their experiences will resonate deeply with the readers and inspire them to view their leadership journey as a 'long game' and

non-linear journey, as something that endures while constantly evolving through the many phases and seasons of their lives. The twelve women leaders featured in this report are based in two geographic regions where TMC has been most active: Asia, and the Pacific. We mention these as two distinct regions, as we find the conventional lumping together of 'Asia Pacific' into one region to be highly problematic. Asia alone is a behemoth of a region comprising 40 to 50 nations (depending on the preferred mode of categorisation), at least five sub-regions (Western, Central, South, South-East, East), and hosting no less than 60 per cent of the world's population. The Pacific region covers 33% of the Earth's ocean surface, consists of 16 island states with over 30,000 islands in at least three sub-regions (Polynesia, Melanesia and Micronesia). Combining two such mega-regions into a category named 'the Asia Pacific' is a practice that reeks of a Western-centric, colonial worldview. The twelve featured women leaders represent these two distinct regions (Asia, and the Pacific) and span a significant portion of the sub-regions. More importantly, they are leaders who genuinely are from the nations and sub-regions where they are based – not expatriates who are working in a cultural context far removed from their own. TMC has consistently supported the ownership of local actors and has advocated for international development to be marked by genuine and equitable partnerships. Profiling national and local women leaders with legitimacy in their nations and regions was therefore a natural, yet intentional, choice.

It was also important to us to represent diversity, as much as possible, in selecting the twelve women leaders. They come from 10 different nations across 5 sub-regions in Asia and the Pacific. They work in a variety of organisations, including international, regional and national NGOs and non-profits, academia, social enterprises, and more. In terms of age, the youngest interviewee is in her early 40s; the eldest, in her 70s. Some of these women are single, while others are married or partnered, with some having children and even grandchildren, and others without. A great breadth of lived experience can thus be found in this report.

The first section of the report presents short profile stories of the twelve women leaders. The articles, written in journalistic style based on interviews with the women, include snapshots of their origins, upbringing, defining moments, career highs and lows and leadership values. The subsequent section is a compilation of the author's reflections arising from this project. She highlights themes insights gleaned from deeply listening to the stories shared by the women leaders.

The three concepts appearing in the title of this report – roots, relationships and responsibilities – were common, recurring themes in their narratives. 'Roots' represent the foundational identities (ethnic, cultural, gender, etc.) that shaped these women. 'Relationships' signify the primary leadership style practiced by many of the interviewees, who prioritise relational influence over positional power, as well as the strength they find in relationships – both in their personal and professional lives. 'Responsibilities' speak of the sense of purpose that fuels their journeys; the responsibilities they feel towards their families, their teams and organisations, their societies, nations – and even the entire world.

Many of these women leaders have later told me that carving out the time and space to reflect on their life and leadership journeys has actually helped them understand where they are now, how they got there, and where they are going. It is our hope that as readers of this report take the time to absorb and appreciate the stories of these interviewees, they themselves will also have a chance to reflect on their journeys and find opportunities to tell their own stories – to one another, and to the emerging generation of women leaders around them.



Their Journeys

Raijeli Nicole

Shifting power and decolonising development to transform organisations

- Independent Consultant
- Previously Regional Director, Oxfam in the Pacific
- Previously CEO, Save the Children Fiji
- M.A. in International Law and Politics, University of Canterbury (New Zealand)
- B.A. in History, Politics and Economics, University of the South Pacific (Fiji)
- 56 years old



There is no doubt that Raijeli is a true daughter of the Pacific Islands: her cheerful “Yadra!” (‘good morning’ in Fijian), the flamboyant red tropical flower adorning her voluminous frizz, and the warm spirit that washes over me like the ocean waves surrounding Viti Levu¹. She expresses her origins and carries her culture with ease; yet, born at the cusp of independence, she describes herself as a child of colonial upbringing²: “We were brought up to speak English, we were told: No more talking in Fijian!”

This child, who was taught to view the ways of the West as superior to her own, became a visionary pioneer who would lead a landmark decolonisation process for a well-known international NGO (INGO). For almost seven years, Raijeli helmed the transition of this INGO, transforming it into a local entity governed, led and staffed by Pacific Islanders. Her appointment in 2015 as Pacific Regional Director almost felt like poetic justice as she took her place in a room filled with Australians and New Zealanders. Pinned famously on her office wall in Suva was an upside-down map of the world, symbolising her commitment to flipping power dynamics between the ‘Global North’ and ‘Global South’ – with Oceania (and the Pacific Ocean) at its centre.

Interestingly, Raijeli only applied for this pivotal role because she was shoulder-tapped – on the very day that applications were closing. Comically, she had forwarded the vacancy announcement to other women in her network. However, when asked to apply, she decided to give it a go. “I wasn’t ambitious for leadership roles. In fact, all the senior leadership roles I’ve held were the result of being shoulder-tapped. I didn’t go after them but when I was asked, I just knew I could do it.” A similar scenario had unfolded when she became the Executive Director (ED) of an international feminist organisation in the Philippines, at age 34. “I was their international advocacy officer. I was the social butterfly – at the heart of all things fun. Then one day, I was asked by a Board Member to put my name in for the ED role. It had been advertised twice and the Board couldn’t find anyone.”

¹ Viti Levu is the main and largest Island of Fiji hosting the majority of the population, and where the nation’s capital (Suva) is based

² Fiji only gained independence from British rule in 1970

Her first leadership role turned out to be a perfect storm. Just two weeks into her new job, the organisation lost its biggest funder, resulting in a two-thirds loss of its income. Then, her entire management committee resigned: *"I had said it to them straight: You guys need to move out of your comfort zone, and lead from the front. And then – they literally moved out! Three resignations in one day."* To compound the challenges, a previous legal case resurfaced, requiring financial compensation. The bitter cherry on top: the organisation had to pay significant new tax rates. Burdened by the weight of crisis leadership and without a supportive board, Raijeli faced crippling anxiety: *"I was scared to go to sleep, scared to wake up knowing the morning was coming. I needed to take three months off work at one point."* Still, she learned to embrace her vulnerability and sought the help she needed to build resilience.

After spending several years in New Zealand working in government and community services organisations, Raijeli returned to organisational leadership as the Chief Executive Officer of an INGO Country Office in Fiji. From that role, she was recruited into the regional directorship of the aforementioned organisation. Throughout those years, Raijeli viewed her leadership style as heavily influenced by her upbringing: *"The values that I brought to my work are the values that I grew up with as the eldest of five children, as the responsible one... on my maternal side, I'm always known as the head cousin."* Her grandmothers were her leadership role models – matriarchs who exercised influence behind the scenes, in a patriarchal society. It was the women in her family who would gather family members, coordinate their positions and create the conditions for problem solving. While formal structures assigned positional authority to men, the leadership of women was critical for the well-functioning of families and communities.

Raijeli's leadership journey also reflects the ethos and values of the Pacific region – embodying the strong sense of kinship, stewardship and self-determination that unites the 14 Pacific Island Countries (PICs) and their 30,000 islands. *"That's what sets us apart as Pacific Islanders. Regionalism is part and parcel of who we are,"* she states. As a Pacific Islander leading INGO offices in Fiji, Raijeli inevitably stood on the faultlines of power, grappling with the constant push-and-pull between funding offices and country (field) operations for direction-setting and decisionmaking. The compliance-heavy approach based on Westernised frameworks often misaligned with the needs and realities of local partners and stakeholders. To tackle the underlying colonial dynamics and tensions would have been to play with fire; yet, when she held the mandate to transform an INGO into a localised, Pacific entity, Raijeli committed herself to the flames – fully. And as if decolonising development wasn't complicated enough, she also began laying the groundwork for feminist leadership as part of the organisational change journey. At one point, all of the Country Directors under her supervision were women – Pacific islander women.

Despite numerous achievements, this was an experience that no one – not even the most resilient leaders – could emerge from unscathed. Nonetheless, Raijeli wears her battle scars with dignity and a refreshing sense of candour. She isn't afraid to call out colonial and racist behaviours on one side, while also critiquing those who choose to play the victim card: *"It's so easy for Pacific Islanders to blame 'white people', to blame others. Yes, there are things that may be wrong about them and their ways, but in the*

end we have to take ownership over our work. Once we gain self-determination and independence, then it's our responsibility to build new tools and new ways of working – to respond to the longstanding development aspirations in the region."

Since stepping away from formal organisational leadership roles in 2022 and moving back to New Zealand, Raijeli has immersed herself in the practice of non-positional power, following the way of her grandmothers. *"Leadership in a formal setting – it's impermanent. Today I don't have positional power, but I'm still influencing in the background. I actually enjoy not having positional power,"* she shares. Her thought leadership enhances her influence as she distills her philosophy, experiences and insights into frameworks that can guide organisations through feminist and decolonial transformation processes. With a rapidly evolving independent consulting practice, she continues to contribute actively to the praxis of feminist leadership. She also advocates for strengthening women's leadership through system-wide transformation: *"Just recruiting and installing women leaders doesn't really work. It's not just about training the women leaders, either. We need to create the environment and systems for these women leaders to succeed. It's the whole organisation that has to be transformed – the values, culture, ways of working, and so on."*

Now several years into a new phase of life in Christchurch, Raijeli finds time to breathe, reflect and also nurture the next generation – literally. She takes delight in spending time with her grandchildren, when *bubu* (grandmother) duty calls. Her elderly parents also require attention and care, so she slides into eldest daughter mode every now and then. While the days of navigating the frontlines of organisational leadership are becoming a distant memory, one thing is certain: Raijeli's journey is far from over. For her, leadership didn't begin with her first Executive Director appointment; it began in the family homes of Fiji – amid the daily antics and jostles of family life, guided by the assuring presence of matriarchs who brought order to chaos and solutions to challenges. Journeying onward, Raijeli weaves her roots into the web of relationships and responsibilities – familial, social and even international. It will be a privilege to witness how her leadership continues to evolve in the coming seasons of her life.

What are the pros and cons
of exercising influence
without positional authority,
for women leaders?

**Reflection
Question**



Christine Nurminen

Modeling effective multicultural leadership for Pacific peoples

- Co-Founder and Director, Manava Partners
- Previously International Portfolio Manager at Oxfam Aotearoa (New Zealand)
- Previously Chief Executive Officer at Pasifika Education Centre
- Previously Programme Manager at Counties Manukau District Health Board
- B.A. and M.A. in Education, University of Auckland (New Zealand)
- 49 years old

Upon first contact with Christine – which for me was many years ago – one is likely to scramble internally for a while, trying to identify which demographic category to place her in. Her first name (Christine) is English; her last name (Nurminen) is Finnish; her features, Polynesian; her accent, decidedly Kiwi (New Zealand English). It is only when you get to know her and have the privilege of listening to her story that you realise the truly multicultural, Kiwi-Tongan woman she is, with decades of leadership experience under her belt – or *kiekie*¹.

Learning her history is indeed a ‘privilege’. Christine’s parents, who were migrants to New Zealand from Tonga, taught her this: *“When you’re talking about your Tongan identity (to non-Tongans), that is a premium – because you’re bringing everyone with you (into that story): you’re bringing your mum, dad, your whole culture – that is quite a privilege. Not everyone deserves to hear your story – it’s a privilege you give them.”*

Her family’s strong appreciation for Tongan identity was by no means exclusionary; it did not prevent them from embracing other cultures. To the contrary, Christine was given her non-Tongan, English name to honour the family that took her parents in during the dawn raids² of the 1970s. *“That’s how you respect the relationship (with other cultures). There is reciprocity,”* she explains.

This mindset enabled Christine to flourish in the increasingly multicultural New Zealand society. Raised in South Auckland, a dynamic area heavily populated by Pacific Islanders and other migrant communities, Christine did well in school and breezed through her tertiary and post-graduate studies in Education and Sociology. After graduation, she took on policy roles in both central (Wellington) and local government entities. Researching issues related to immigration and health, she constantly examined the microcosm of ethnicities, cultures and identities present in New Zealand. However, she grew increasingly dissatisfied with her work: *“Working in government is a ‘slow burn’... and I realised that – surprise, surprise! – research does not always inform policy.”*

¹ A *kiekie* is a Tongan ornamental girdle around the waist, mostly worn by women on semi-formal occasions

² The ‘Dawn Raids’ of the 1970s took place in New Zealand (primarily in Auckland), during which New Zealand Police were instructed by the government to enter and search homes randomly at any time, including early morning hours (hence the name ‘dawn raids’), to identify illegal overstayers then deport them. The Dawn Raids specifically targeted homes of Pacific Islanders, although a majority of overstayers were from Europe and North America. For further information, see: <https://nzhistory.govt.nz/culture/dawn-raids>.

After her first parental leave, she applied for a Chief Executive Officer (CEO) role at a Charitable Trust working directly with Pasifika³ communities. *"My daughter was not yet one. I felt, though, that because I'm now a mother - being a mum, I'm unstoppable! If I can be a mum, I can show up as a leader,"* she recalls.

If applying for a CEO role straight out of parental leave wasn't unconventional enough, applying for the role at her age (in her late thirties) certainly was: *"The Board at the time, they were asking me about my age. They said, you potentially might be our youngest CEO. That didn't serve in my favour, they said."* Against the odds, Christine was appointed CEO of the organisation - the first Tongan to hold that position. In the six years she spent there, she revitalised the organisation financially and fostered innovative programming. She also challenged stereotypes about Pasifika women leaders: *"There's all this attention on how we women show up, what we wear, how we present our ideas.. questions about our marital status, what we should be like especially if our husbands are not in the room... It was fun challenging some of those stereotypes."* Alongside stereotype-smashing, Christine fine-tuned her leadership qualities during her years as CEO: *"I am patient. An active listener. In introducing change and piloting new ideas, I have a great capacity to listen and learn. Also, casting vision - and encouraging my team to think outside the box."*

Christine's leadership further evolved with a shift to international work across the Pacific Islands, with a New Zealand-based international NGO (INGO). She recalls observing the lingering colonial mindsets and practices in the sector, and experiencing some level of cognitive dissonance regarding her identity - from being Pasifika herself but relating to Pacific Islanders and organisations in the region as an 'international' funding office representative. However, she commends the sensitivity to the imbalance of power between international and local entities, and the values-based leadership that was practised in her team, especially by women leaders: *"Not everyone (in the social sector) leads on the basis of values - a lot of them are still transactional. The kind of leaders who practise values-based leadership are also those who invest in relationships. The women leaders I've come across have shared their journey, their professional journey but also their personal journey. Being relational builds trust quickly."*

Further to advocating for values-based leadership, Christine is a proponent of 'transformational leadership': *"When I think of the leaders that inspired me, it's those leaders who aspire to be transformational. I've pushed the organisation I was in, regarding the terminology around transformation: my view is that the origins of the term 'transformation' comes from spiritual beliefs. So - I want to see more transformative leadership (in the international development sector) that is more expressive of faith."*

Always eager to learn and grow, Christine is now the Director of *Manava Partners*, a consultancy focused on fostering partnerships for Pacific peoples. She co-founded

³ 'Pasifika' is a term used in New Zealand and Australia to describe all migrants from the Pacific Islands and their descendants

Manava with her sister: *"It was something I wanted to do for a long time, but I didn't want to do it alone. My sister and I needed to be in a place where we could both embark on this journey. It wasn't the ideal time for me to start a business – I had gone from one child to two, and juggling a new venture with a toddler at my heels is quite challenging."* Additionally, her extended family expressed concerns about the financial implications of her decision. Christine's response to their worries reflects her courageous mindset: *"Mana⁴ comes before money, not the other way around!"*

Through *Manava Partners*, Christine seeks to create environments where Pacific women and girls can lead and thrive. *"The future of the Pacific world will be built by women and led by women,"* she emphasises. She highlights the importance of family and community relationships in fostering positive social outcomes within the Pacific context: *"Being a woman in leadership changes our home lives; we have the ability to shape not just our children, but also to influence our nieces and nephews as aunties and grand-aunts. We need to leverage that influence even more."*

Listening to Christine's journey, I find myself visualising an ever-expanding woven mat, a treasured cultural item in many Pacific Island societies. There is a Tongan proverb, *'Oku hange 'a e tangata, ha fala 'oku lālanga,'* which means *'Society is like a mat being woven.'* This proverb illustrates how various elements – people, places, events, and experiences – come together to create a single unit, i.e. society. This concept also applies to one's life journey: Christine's unique origins serve as the starting edge of her mat, while the intersecting fibres represent the diverse cultures she embraces, alongside her experiences of womanhood, leadership, and entrepreneurship – which form distinct patterns in the mid-section. A woven mat can be limitless, allowing the designer to determine its size and scope: as long as they keep weaving, it keeps growing, adding more patterns and features along the way. This hybrid nature inherent in woven mats is a fitting metaphor for Christine's ongoing journey. I am certain her *fala* (mat) will keep expanding, adding in many significant moments for the Pacific peoples – particularly women and girls – whom she aims to uplift and empower.

Reflection Question

**What stereotypes for women
leaders exist, in your context?
Have you ever felt the
pressure to conform?**

⁴ *Mana* is a Māori word meaning authority, presence, essence, spiritual power, gravitas – typically associated with a person of great status and authority

Dolores Devesi

Transforming self-doubt into strength for local leadership and representation

- Director, Member Associations Support and Development, International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) Sub-Regional Office for the Pacific
- Previously Country Director, Oxfam in the Solomon Islands
- Previously Country Director, Oxfam Fiji, Polynesia and Micronesia Country Cluster
- Graduate Diploma in Not for Profit Management, UNITEC (New Zealand)
- 51 years old



Dolores is so very disarming. She is soft-spoken, relaxed and congenial. She is genuinely attentive; when speaking with Dolores you know that you are heard – and not merely listened to. For those accustomed to senior leaders exuding exaggerated confidence or staged charisma, Dolores Devesi is an aberration – a pleasant one. Now in her fourth directorship, she chats with me from her cozy flat in Suva, Fiji, the hub of the Pacific region and the geographic midpoint between two nations that are part of her personal history: the Solomon Islands and New Zealand.

The daughter of the first Governor-General of the Solomon Islands, Dolores' upbringing was far from ordinary: *"I was quite sheltered... but I think my upbringing has shaped me in terms of some of the characteristics required in a leader, around diplomacy and being respectful of those around you. We were brought up in a space where we met lots of dignitaries and VIPs, so having to deal with that and watching, observing our parents in that circle – I think that helped us."* Her exposure to the world beyond her native isles began early, and Dolores ventured out to attend high school in New Zealand.

As a young adult back in the Solomon Islands, however, Dolores was looking for ways to forge her own path. One day, she noticed a local newspaper advertisement: an international NGO (INGO) office in Honiara¹ seeking an administrative assistant. The island she was on lacked reliable postal services, so she hopped on a boat to Guadalcanal, application papers in hand. Sometime after dropping off her application, she received the good news: the job was hers! *"When I found that job, it helped me to come out of my shell. It helped me to do something more creative, to be able to challenge myself – because I wasn't really allowed to do that when growing up,"* she recalls.

Dolores didn't remain in the administrative role for long. She progressed quickly to project officer and programme manager-type roles, thriving as she visited and

¹ Honiara is the capital of the Solomon Islands, situated on Guadalcanal – the principal island. The nation is made up of approximately 1,000 islands.

connected with communities and grassroots actors across the country. However, as she rose through the ranks, she began to realise something: she was often the only Pacific islander and one of the few women in the room. *"I realised, OK, I'm here representing voices unable to be here with us in the room. I was young, and I didn't have a lot of experience – but this was my opportunity to stand up for those who didn't have the privilege or the access to the meetings I was in."*

This revelation was pivotal for Dolores. Despite feeling unprepared and inexperienced at times, she made a habit of saying yes to new opportunities – and being thrown into the deep end: *"I would often be put in situations where I had to quickly decide for myself: do I sink or swim? I've always chosen the latter. No, I may not be confident in this space, but I'm already here. So I'm going to make the most out of it."* Dolores highly values the willingness to learn, which is something that she intentionally tries to instill in people she leads and mentors.

After assuming local leadership roles, Dolores was headhunted regularly for senior positions. There was no shortage of organisations looking for Pacific Islanders to fill senior positions. *"I would say at least 90% of the time I was headhunted or being offered a role. At times I was hesitant, but I've been lucky in the sense that I've worked with supervisors and organisations that genuinely value having women – Pacific Islander women – in these positions."* Dolores served as Country Director for three INGO Country Offices (Polynesia and Micronesia, Fiji, and the Solomon Islands) as the first Pacific Islander to take on roles that used to be reserved for expats. She had a full-circle moment when she returned to the INGO Country Office in Honiara that she had crossed oceans to work in – this time, as Country Director. A Solomon Islander Country Director who first started as an administrative assistant: her story made the hearts of young Solomon Islander professionals in Honiara swell with pride and hope.

The experiences that awaited Dolores did catch her by surprise. She found herself needing to 'clean house', tackling entrenched attitudes and practices that had remained undetected and unaddressed by her predecessors. Then, she was attacked by other women in the office: *"If you ask me what my greatest professional challenge was back then, I would have said: Dealing with other women. The ones who are supposed to be your peers – they were the ones trying to shoot you down."* This was not an isolated incident but a recurring experience; Dolores was greatly disheartened.

Navigating the tensions between the agendas of funding offices and national/local needs augmented her difficulties. At times, she felt that her 'Western' counterparts did not trust her: *"They say that they value you, but if you look at their actions – that's not the case. They really don't believe in you. They still think that they can do better than us. Getting them to understand even the most basic things – like English is not our first language – was a struggle."* She witnessed far too many condescending approaches and behaviours. *"We already had in-house capacity, yet they said their role was to build our capacity. What we needed was more technical support, rather than people flying in and out to do things that we could do. But they were not listening to us."*

Somewhere in the middle of her leadership battles, Dolores also faced a personal crisis:

a breast cancer diagnosis. Amid multiple chemotherapy sessions and surgeries in New Zealand, Dolores continued working. *"At that time, I was the main income earner. So it was about survival. If I didn't work, then I wouldn't have money for me and my two children. The thought occurred to me that I can't bring my children over to this country (New Zealand) just to see everything fall apart. It was sheer determination - and a bit of pride: I didn't want my family and others to see that I had failed."* Thankfully, the treatments were successful, and she rejoiced when she was declared cancer-free.

Informed by her own experiences, as well as the countless experiences of other women she had observed, Dolores emphasises the importance of financial independence for women: *"This is something that I even tell my adult children: Don't let whatever happens in your personal life make you quit your job and give up your livelihood. Your job is your bread and butter. Whatever happens in your personal life or at home - you have to keep showing up at work. I keep telling other women: you need your financial security and independence. So that if something happens to your relationship - you still have footing. You can still look after your children."*

Having weathered life's storms and leadership trials, Dolores stands strong - perhaps even stronger, because of those challenging seasons. Now in a new phase of life with adult children and grandchildren, she has taken on a new adventure: living and working solo in the 'capital of the South Pacific'. *"I'm noticing that there's now a lot more Solomon Islander women who are working here in Fiji - without their spouses. There are some who are here with the children while the husbands are working overseas - or they're single mums."* She aims to support more women from her home country to cross oceans, like she did, to work in regional and multi-country roles: *"It takes a leap of faith and confidence in yourself. I keep telling them - you can do it. Just apply for that role. You'll never know until you give it a go. And you never know where it will take you!"*

Hearing about Dolores' current chapter of life, I sense the newfound freedom and focus she has found; they are well-earned rewards for her forbearance. Although now would be a good time for her to start taking things easy, Dolores is a self-appointed 'busybody'. She is unlikely to 'be chill' for long, despite being surrounded by the most breathtaking beaches in the world: *"I booked myself into one of the resorts here (Fiji), because I was forced to take leave - or forfeit it. By the second day, I was absolutely bored. I decided - I'm not the resort type!"* I foresee joyous hustles and bustles ahead of Dolores and a strong-sailing journey: a journey through which she will lift up more daughters of the Pacific Islands to take their place as leaders in their own region, their own islands.

How do you respond
to new opportunities
that come your way?
What enables you
to say 'yes'?

**Reflection
Question**



Beth Eggleston

Creating collaborative, equitable and inclusive humanitarian leadership

- Co-Founder and Director, Humanitarian Advisory Group (Australia)
- Previously Humanitarian Advocacy Coordinator, Oxfam Australia
- Previously held humanitarian roles at Oxfam Great Britain
- M.A. in Development Studies, Geopolitics, Disaster Management, Post-conflict Reconstruction, University of Melbourne
- Graduate Certificate in Humanitarian Leadership, Deakin University (Australia)
- B.A. in Psychology, Anthropology, Performance Studies at University of Sydney
- 47 years old

Her LinkedIn introduction almost says it all: *"I co-founded the Humanitarian Advisory Group after surviving the bureaucracy of large INGOs and the UN."* But if you're expecting a jaded, frustrated sort of activist-fighter vibe from Beth Eggleston, you will be flabbergasted. Beth radiates a genuine congeniality, showcased not only in her warm and affable demeanor (which is obvious, even through a Zoom call), but also in a captivating quality that draws people in. Perhaps she embodies the attributes she admires in leaders like Mary Robinson¹ or Jacinda Ardern²: compassion, empathy, emotional awareness, and – just being human. *"Could you be a leader and actually smile and laugh? When people criticised these leaders for expressing compassion or showing emotions, I love how they were able to say, no, actually that means I'm human,"* she comments.

The humanitarian world, her playing field of over two decades, certainly does not affirm women leaders – much less women leaders who show emotions: *"Women in humanitarian operations need to have really tough skin. They are in highly-politicised, militarised contexts. You have one bad conversation, then you have a bad humanitarian outcome: people will die. That is such a huge responsibility... there's a reason why women's leadership drops off in hostile environments."* Beth is no stranger to hostile and dangerous contexts; she's circumnavigated the globe as a humanitarian professional, from Liberia to Costa Rica to Afghanistan to Timor-Leste, and to wherever else duty called.

Initially uncertain about her place in humanitarian operations, Beth had questioned herself: *"I'm not an engineer, I'm not a doctor. What do I contribute?"* However, a RedR³ trainer and advisor helped her realise the crucial role of 'generalists' – those who can

¹ Mary Robinson is an Irish politician who was the first woman to serve as President in the Republic of Ireland. She also served as the UN Commissioner for Human Rights during 1997 – 2002.

² Jacinda Ardern is a New Zealand politician who served as the 40th Prime Minister of New Zealand. She was 37 when she became Prime Minister, which made her the world's youngest female head of government. She also became known as the second elected head of government who gave birth to a child while in office, followed by Benazir Bhutto of Pakistan.

³ RedR is an international NGO focused on humanitarian capacity building, which offers a variety of training courses for humanitarian professionals

coordinate and handle cross-cutting issues across organisations and agencies. He introduced her to his spouse, Phoebe Wynn-Pope (*née* Fraser), a seasoned humanitarian and international legal expert who founded CARE in Australia. Beth ended up working closely with her role model and went on to build expertise in areas such as civil-military coordination and protection of civilians, through numerous field deployments.

Like the many young women who still form a large part of the 'junior' humanitarian workforce, Beth had no hesitation in packing her bags to fly off to emergency response sites – on terribly short notice. This approach continued even as she navigated meeting her significant other and embarking on motherhood. It was 'business as usual' for Beth until, one day, she found herself stuck and unable to leave the Solomon Islands, where she had been deployed to support a tsunami response project: *"The plane just couldn't land (at the duty station), day after day after day.. and I started to lose my mind. I had thought it's fine to 'go away for a few days', but suddenly – I couldn't go back. And while I was there, I realised – I'm no longer a 'deployable' kind of capability."* When she finally did make it back home, her 1-year-old didn't recognise her. *"My partner was trying to hand my son over – but he didn't want to come to me. That was the last straw."*

The Humanitarian Advisory Group, sardonically yet intentionally referred to by its acronym ('HAG'), was born shortly after Beth embraced the realities of her new life stage. She found herself dreaming alongside several other women in similar situations: returned aid workers, new mothers and those seeking affordable homes – ultimately moving far away from the costly NGO (and coffee) capital of Australia, namely Melbourne. A remote-working organisation was an anomaly, at the time: *"We needed radical flexibility. It's not so radical now, but back then, it was!"* Setting up HAG wasn't just about working remotely, however: *"Most of us had six or seven years of working in the field. Now we felt like – how can we help shape it (the humanitarian sector)? We're hearing from our local counterparts about what's frustrating, what's keeping them up at night. How do we pull some levers here, that might be able to change the humanitarian ecosystem so it can be more impactful to them?"*

Transitioning from full-time employment to running an independent social enterprise didn't happen overnight for Beth and her co-founders ('the HAGs'). *"We initially thought this would be a part-time thing. But then, as we kept going, we started asking ourselves – are we an NGO? Are we going to be a business? Then, we decided – we're actually going to take this somewhere. This is going to be our 'real job',"* she explains. Fast forward a decade, and HAG is now a premier think tank actively shaping and influencing humanitarian policy and practice. Beth reflects on how starting with four co-founders and continuing with a co-leadership structure has supported her, first in making the significant leap from employee to entrepreneur, and later in growing HAG: *"I once heard a senior woman leader say that leadership can be very lonely. Whereas, I've always felt incredibly grateful to have a 'work wife' – and in the beginning, it was multiple 'work wives',"* she recalls with a playful smile. *"This concept of having a co-leader, a co-director, a co-conspirator – it's quite fabulous."*

At HAG, Beth and her co-leaders embody a leadership model that prioritises collaboration. In a sector often marked by competition for limited resources, Beth believes that genuine partnerships rooted in shared goals are key to maximising impact and fostering innovation. She also recognises flexibility and responsiveness to change as vital leadership capabilities in the humanitarian sector. Additionally, Beth highlights the importance of asking questions and staying open to new perspectives; her willingness to learn from others is a fundamental aspect of her leadership philosophy, centred on the power of listening and inquiry: *"Be the person that asks questions. It's a great way to build connections, to show people that their opinions are valued. You sometimes fall over yourself trying to demonstrate what you know, to show credibility. But someone told me recently: super-communicators ask ten times the number of questions compared to others."*

As a pioneer who has blazed a trail for humanitarian professionals at various levels of experience and stages in life, Beth redefines the concept of 'success': her goal is not to grow the organisation for growth's sake, or to chase after contracts and dollars. It is to exercise impact externally and nurture wellbeing internally. *"It would be great if we could adopt a four-day workweek. My attention is on this: Is everyone in the team happy and healthy? For all the women I know, I think our question to ourselves is: Have I been able to get to my kid's school event, and get my work done? Have I been able to cook dinner on the days I wanted to?"* Beth acknowledges that wellbeing is dynamic, varying from person to person and changing with the seasons: *"I can't keep thinking that I know what everyone else likes. I have to remind myself to re-ask people, what keeps you sparkling at work - these days?"*

Once a pensive girl who grew up isolated on a rural farm, Beth's world is now an ever-enlarging sphere of interconnected relationships and initiatives. Her natural inclination to connect people to people and proactively seek out new opportunities has led her through a meandering, but continuing, path of personal and professional growth. With a genuine intent to listen, learn and create change, not only has Beth reshaped her own professional life; she is contributing to the evolution of humanitarian practice itself. Beth is poised to elevate a new generation of humanitarian leaders, particularly those rooted in their local communities, to advocate for change - while remaining true to their humanity.

Reflection Question

**In what ways can a
co-leadership model
strengthen the
practice of women's
leadership?**

Angela Wilton

Practising values-based leadership to dismantle oppressive structures

- Chief Executive Officer, Belong Aotearoa (New Zealand)
- Professional Teaching Fellow, University of Auckland
- Previously Director of International Development / International Partnerships, Oxfam Aotearoa
- Previously Regional Director, Program Development and Quality (East Africa), Save the Children
- Ph.D. Candidate in Public Policy, University of Auckland
- M.A. in Culture and Development Studies, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (Belgium)
- M.A. in Ancient History, University of Auckland
- B.A University of Auckland



Angela Wilton in 'academic mode' is highly intriguing. I had known Angela primarily during her director days in the New Zealand international NGO (INGO) scene. She was the kind of boss that development professionals loved working with; those who worked with her flourished. Several years ago, she stepped away from the responsibilities of day-to-day leadership to pursue a Ph.D. in public policy¹. Now she is deeply immersed in the study of feminism, settler colonialism, *Te Tiriti o Waitangi*² (Treaty of Waitangi) and foreign policy in Aotearoa³. As a scholar, she skillfully deconstructs power structures, systems and policies that have been framed by Western colonisers and 'the patriarchy' in her nation.

Angela is not afraid to challenge injustices, yet she is acutely self-aware of her identity and the privileges that accompany it. *"Admittedly, I'm a white woman. The issue of identity is a big one for me, in that I have to be aware of power."* Blonde haired and blue-eyed, Angela is unmistakably *Pākehā*: a European New Zealander. However, there are multiple cultural undertones shaping her personhood: Angela actually grew up in Canada – and has the accent to prove it. She has studied and worked in India, Belgium, Tanzania and Kenya. Her multicultural family includes children whom she describes as Kenyan-*Pākehā*. Crossing continents and cultures has undoubtedly given her the depth of perception and an appreciation of intersectionalities in analysing injustice, systemic-structural oppression and marginalisation.

Above all else, the passion to 'make things better' has been the driving force behind Angela's impressive career. Originally trained as a teacher, she taught subjects like Classics, History and Anthropology in high schools. Interestingly, it was teaching that opened her eyes to injustices in society: *"I got increasingly into social justice causes as*

¹ At the time of this interview (2024), Angela was a Teaching Fellow at the University of Auckland and in the process of completing her Ph.D. degree

² *Te Tiriti o Waitangi* (The Treaty of Waitangi) is a foundational document signed in 1840 between the British Crown and Māori Chiefs in Aotearoa (New Zealand). The Treaty laid the basis for peaceful relationships between the British settlers and indigenous leaders in Aotearoa, and were written in both English and Te Reo Māori – but differing interpretations of the two versions have given rise to many disputes throughout New Zealand's history.

³ Aotearoa is the Māori name for New Zealand, meaning 'the land of the long white cloud'

I taught social sciences. That's when I said, I'm subjecting my students to all this social justice work – so why don't I go off, retrain and get into the sector myself?" Angela did exactly that: she got her Master's Degree in Development Studies and embarked on her 'second career' as an international development professional.

Her journey into leadership was both gradual and consistent; she progressively took on more responsibilities, from officer to manager to director. Her natural propensity for leadership can be traced back to her childhood and family upbringing: *"My father is a pastor, so I'd see him up there every Sunday. While I have been skeptical of institutionalised faith, I'm sure I was absorbing what it means to speak publicly, what it means to lead people on a journey. My mother is a nurse who used to work in an emergency department in Canada. I would work there too, during my University holidays, and so much of what I saw her do was leadership. The male doctors were usually calling the shots, but I knew that behind the scenes she was doing it all, really. And she did it with a sense of compassion and care."* At school, Angela was the type of student who took initiative because she 'just saw a lot of things that needed to change': this meant she would volunteer to lead social justice activities, or student councils and campus activities. Even in her earlier career in education, she was keen to take on leadership roles that could positively shape the schools she worked in.

She credits the support of other women leaders for the progression in her 'second career' (international development): *"It may sound like a cliché, being mentored or supported by a woman – but that is exactly my journey. It was other women who were in positions of power, who saw something in me. They were incredibly helpful, being a referee or picking up the phone and saying (to the recruiter) – hey, I see you have that job available. I know Angela's going to apply – please consider her."* She also spent time observing other leaders, identifying what she liked about them and what she didn't: *"It would all boil down to this: Do I align with that person's values?"*

Angela describes her leadership values as rooted in the feminist ethics of care which, according to her, means 'looking at things through the prism of relationships'. The relational perspective fosters the need to care – for people, for oneself and for society. In pivotal leadership roles, her approach centred around this concept of care and relationships. She recalls her experience as a Regional Director in East Africa, a role she had sought to connect her Kenyan-Pākehā family more meaningfully with Kenya. She was very aware that she was coming into an East African office as a 'white woman leader': *"It was a regional office with 60 staff. I guess my main aim in that leadership experience was relational. Within a month or two, I knew everyone in that office and I knew their situation. I knew their kids' names. I just tried to ensure that I was there to support them."* For her, the priorities are clear: *"You start with relationships, right? Relational first – then the work flows out of it."*

While some may view this relational approach as particularly feminine, Angela sees it as a matter of one's values rather than their gender: *"Leadership, for people of all genders, is about how you show up, how you navigate power, and whether you centre care and justice in the way you lead."* Reflecting on her experience in the international development sector, she recalls, *"I've seen people in leadership who don't reflect on their own power, who don't lead with the values that I associate with a consistent ethic*

of care. I've also seen leaders, regardless of gender, who check themselves, who lead with deep relational accountability." A high degree of self-awareness is thus a critical element in practising values-based leadership. "If you're a leader, and you're not analysing power in a room, in a relationship, in a dynamic – including your own role and the power that you hold – then that is problematic," states Angela.

Spending almost a decade in senior leadership roles, Angela has been intentional about modeling the ethics of care in her relationships outside of the workplace. As the main caregiver to her children and as a daughter looking out for aging parents, she approaches her responsibilities with the same thoughtfulness she brings to her professional role: *"Coming into a Director role, I told my employer, look, I've got two kids at home so probably won't be working long hours in the office, nor will I be answering calls during the weekend – because I have another unpaid job at home. One of my team members, another working mum, really appreciated that because she was going through the same thing. She knew that she was seen and heard, and that her reality was recognised."* She established clear criteria for choosing which organisations to work for: *"I think I was quite up front from the outset about my situation, and how important it was to have flexibility. And I think meeting people (employers) that were willing to accommodate that for me just solidified my gut sense – that this was the right place to be."*

Learning how to practise self-care has been an integral part of Angela's journey. She learned to disconnect from work despite the temptations of constant connectivity. She also seeks out other people to be a sounding board for her, when she needs a sense check or wants to process her thoughts and emotions. *"I'm an 'externaliser'. If something goes wrong for me, I can't keep it inside – I need to talk through it,"* she explains. In recent years, Angela has been working through the challenges of menopause: *"The changing hormone situation has been hard, because you feel a bit unstable and pretty wobbly for years. You can't control what's coursing through your body. But the good side of it is that you just don't care so much about the minutiae of things or other people's opinions as much."*

As I conclude my conversation with Angela, words like 'analytical', 'conscientious' and 'self-aware' come to my mind. In a sector that is over-populated by 'doers' who like to talk big, launch large-scale projects with fanfare and showcase impact with gusto, Angela is such a welcome variation. Her thoughtfulness and introspective nature opens up much-needed space to reflect on one's *raison d'être* as a development professional. As her intellectual rigour fuses with a compassionate heart for the oppressed and marginalised, she emits inspiration for the emerging women leaders of Aotearoa. Whether she is lecturing in the halls of academia or steering social organisations, Angela will undoubtedly continue to diffuse her ideals for social justice – grounded in values-based leadership.

Reflection Question

How do you analyse power
– including your own?



Julianne Rose

Enhancing organisational effectiveness through people-centred leadership

- Founder and Director, The Social Economy Group (Australia)
- Managing Director, Proof of Character (Australia)
- Previously Director, Government and Multilaterals, World Vision Australia
- B.A in Economics and Organisation Studies, B.Com in Finance from The University of Auckland (New Zealand)
- 46 years old

If I were to liken Julianne Rose to a cup of coffee, she would be a triple-shot espresso. Not because she is 'intense', in the negative sense of that word, but because she has an amazing ability to compress, brew and extract her complex thoughts – then land them really neatly into a satisfying cup (conclusion). She oozes strategic thinking and intelligence, whether she is in 'work mode' or 'just talking about life' mode (sample topic: the perils of parenting teenage sons). Her analytical brain is immediately apparent; less than five minutes into a conversation, you know that you are talking to someone who is exceptionally smart and articulate. Yet, the aspect of Julianne that leaves the richest aroma behind is the warmth of her heart.

Julianne is a leader in the Australian social impact space, who cares deeply about people who care about people. In addition to founding and leading The Social Economy Group (TSEG) – a social-purpose consultancy – for the past ten years, she recently began dedicating her professional time to improving psychological safety in workplaces. In 2022, she joined Proof of Character, a workplace psychology firm. An economist among clinical psychologists, she may seem the odd one out. Julianne is there on a mission, however. She has seen a recurring problem throughout her 20+ years in the for-purpose sector: do-good organisations not doing good to their people. *"What I can do well and where I can make a difference is in helping organisations – especially not-for-profits – to do their 'people bit' better, to break fewer people," she explains.*

Her approach involves identifying and analysing the root causes of organisational dysfunctions. A common culprit is the lack of strategic focus: *"By not knowing what is the main thing that organisations really want to and can change, and randomly scattering interventions around health, education, economic development, etc., many organisations end up trying to sustain all these random moving parts,"* she explains. This results in overstretched staff who bear the 'passion tax'¹. She also critiques the performance and reward frameworks in these organisations that perpetuate siloed ways of working and the prioritisation of tasks over people.

¹ 'Passion tax' refers to the high levels of discretionary, 'above and beyond' efforts that people put into their work – including large amounts of unpaid hours of work. Those who work in social sector organisations are highly likely to be engaged in this dynamic.

Julianne confesses that earlier on in her career she, too, was a performance-oriented leader: *"I had built my 'success' by delivering things in a standard way. And if people weren't going to do it my way, then I'd get disgruntled and push for results. But later on I realised, the results come more readily if you work with the people, first. The journey we have to be on when it comes to people leadership is: my success is not my success. My success is either my team's, or my organisation's success."* She credits a leader at the Australian international NGO (INGO), who teamed up with a human resources business partner to invest in coaching and capacity development for managers, so they could build shared accountability, break silos and strengthen people management. Julianne experienced a breakthrough with her initially underperforming team: *"Within 12 months, we were exceeding targets and had high levels of engagement. It wasn't a long and arduous process - we just needed to pay attention (to people)."*

Before diving into social purpose work, Julianne started her career as an economist in management consulting and banking. While her economics and finance degree was put to good use, she didn't feel that her work was 'speaking to some kind of purpose'. So she decided to take a gap year in China, teaching English and planting trees in the Gobi desert. Her connection to China stems from her childhood: *"I grew up in a household that was always interested in the world, despite being in semi-rural New Zealand. When China opened up to Western tourists, my dad jumped on a plane to China. He met up with horticulturists and botanists in Southern China. Soon afterwards, one of them came to live in our house ... then there were many more!"*

While her exposure to China came through her father, who even taught his family to pick up peanuts using chopsticks after his first China trip, Julianne believes that her mother's foundational values of helping others deeply influenced her career choices: *"She was like, of course you should be doing something to help people. Whether it's taking a box of fruit to the aged care home next door, or volunteering at a camp for people with disabilities - it was innate that helping others should be part of day-to-day living."*

After her stint in China, Julianne applied for work at various international development organisations but couldn't get a foot in the door. She entered the Australian domestic charity sector instead, as a national policy and programmes manager. Upon finishing that role she started looking for international roles again, but faced the same closed doors because her Australian community development experience was not seen as transferable. Eventually she secured a position at an INGO that focused on programme support, requiring her to wrestle with processes and systems. Despite earning a stellar reputation through this first role, she found career progression to be challenging: *"When I looked for internal moves after having done well in that role, it was a 'no, you can't move into anything else because you don't have a Master's in international development. So I made a bunch of sideways and diagonal moves over time. In the end I went into more programme and technical functions - but it was through a very, very indirect path."*

Forging the path of non-linear progression within the same INGO, Julianne went up the career ladder until her role was just one step away from the C-suite office. Reflecting on the enabling factors that helped her reach that point, she highlights the strengths that generalists bring into management functions: *"I was willing to take on whatever, not getting too pigeonholed. Keeping the 'breadth' (of experience and expertise) was what probably enabled me to get in relatively early into leadership positions."* Additionally, her ability to bring clarity in the midst of complexity has been a valuable leadership trait: *"People working on (social) development are all about 'complexity'. But not many people perform well in complexity and ambiguity. So rather than expecting that you can get every single person in your team to grapple with the entire (complex) system, what is the absolute clarity you can give people as to what matters? If you can present this clearly, then people will chase after that."*

However, reaching a near-top role in the same organisation meant that Julianne had limited options for her next career move: *"I didn't have enough 'fire in my belly' to keep running where I was running. So it was either I try to get into a CEO or COO-like position in a smaller organisation.. or go out and do something independently."* Thus, The Social Economy Group was born. Ten years into being her own boss, Julianne now doubts that she would return to traditional employment: *"It's not even a question of whether someone else would employ me. The question is: would I want to be employed, having had all that flexibility and freedom?"*

After a decade of diagnosing and advising for-purpose organisations to function better, Julianne has come full circle. Nowadays she finds herself increasingly focused on actors and systems within Australia: *"I should not be supplanting the role of local and national actors in 'developing countries'. I can work alongside them, if they want to engage me because I genuinely hold knowledge that they cannot get locally. But otherwise - I have no real validity in another country. Whereas, in Australia - for instance, in the state of Victoria - I have direct responsibility and impact."* Her genuine desire to be effective and to invest her time and energy where she can see direct results exemplifies the principle of 'work smarter, not harder.'

What I find most admirable about Julianne is that her intellect is in the service of her compassion; a standard that all do-gooders should aspire to. The social purpose sector is filled with organisations and individuals who 'mean well,' but tend to disproportionately value good intentions over actual results. Julianne's razor-sharp focus and determination to base social interventions on a thorough analysis of both the micro (individual) and macro (systemic) factors are exemplary. The emerging generation of social impact leaders would do well to emulate her approach, as well as her conviction that organisations - especially those with a social purpose - should care well for their people.

Reflection Question

**Where have you faced
'closed doors' in your career
journey? How were you able
to push forward?**

Aradhana Gurung

Leading collaborative innovation with curiosity, empathy and courage

- Co-Founder and CEO of Impact447 (Nepal)
- Previously Country Representative for Nepal, Viamo
- Previously Lead Manager of Nepal Innovation Lab, World Vision International
- Previously Country Director and Director of Partnerships, All Hands and Hearts (Previously All Hands Volunteers) (Nepal)
- Previously held roles at UNFPA and UN OCHA
- B.A. in International Communications, The American University in Paris (France)
- 44 years old



Aradhana, known to friends affectionately as 'Aru', is equal parts genius and girl next door. Speaking with me from her hotel room in Sri Lanka during a work stint, Aru effortlessly exudes intellect and sharp wit throughout the conversation – like a chess player seeing multiple moves ahead. At the same time, her demeanour is completely informal and unassuming; I feel like I'm just casually catching up with a childhood friend.

She tells me how *Impact447*, the innovation and design-thinking firm she co-founded in 2023, has been taking her places – quite literally. A locally-grown innovation consultancy in Nepal might sound like a wonder, and perhaps it is. But to those involved in the humanitarian scene in Kathmandu, who know the 5' 2" mastermind behind many acclaimed innovation initiatives (hint: her name starts with 'A'), this would be a natural progression. *"I've always been a 'let's get together', 'let's co-create solutions' kind of person,"* Aru says. *"I'm not gonna come up with a prescription for things! It's about going on that journey together to solve problems, as partners."*

The business she leads is truly 'glocal' (blending the global with the local) – much like Aru herself. Her life has been shaped and re-shaped by multiple ethnicities, identities, cultures and geographies. Born in Hong Kong to Nepali parents who served in the British Army, she was moved from pillar to post throughout her childhood: *"I grew up on military bases, moved every year, changed schools a lot... and was often the only child of colour in my class. So I had to reinvent myself consistently."* She describes being a third-culture individual¹ as an absolute blessing, but also one of the greatest challenges in her life. Aru recalls the subtle nuances of racism and discrimination she faced growing up cross-culturally, which remained undetected and unnamed until much later in life.

¹ 'Third culture individuals' (or 'third culture kids') refer to people who were raised in a culture other than their parents', or outside of their country of nationality, especially during a significant portion of their developmental years (i.e. childhood). See: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/wordplay/third-culture-kid>.

Transition into adulthood opened new horizons for Aru. Attending University in Paris, she dreamed of becoming a fiction writer. Hoping to fund her travels around Europe, she stumbled upon translation consultancies with United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) and various United Nations (UN) agencies, thanks to her language skills: she was fluent in English, Hindi, Nepali and French. *"I never wanted to work for the UN. I just kind of fell into it. I wanted to write movie scripts, drink wine and.. live on a boat,"* she says, with a smile.

But work for the UN, she did. Aru moved back to Nepal after graduation and found herself somehow at the centre of a South Asian campaign to establish an entity dedicated to gender equality at the UN². She then worked with the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) in Nepal, collaborating with the entire UN Country Team to pioneer a national youth agenda. Following the successful launch and adoption of youth engagement approaches and tools in Nepal, Aru was invited to help other UN Country Teams in countries as far away as Mexico, to replicate and scale up the Nepal experience. Aru credits her inquisitive nature as the secret sauce to introducing innovation into a notoriously bureaucratic, slow-moving system: *"I've always been the 'but, why?' child. I always had so many questions. The teachers used to get so annoyed with me, and I'd get told off at school. That has put me off academics... but I loved problem solving. And pitching ideas – showing people why and how my ideas could help solve their challenges."*

For one with such a strong bias towards action, the 2015 Nepal Earthquake was a rude awakening. Aru felt straitjacketed by inter-governmental protocols: *"I had helped my office raise millions of dollars to support youth in emergencies. But we couldn't do anything with that money – because the government didn't have a response plan. It was already 4-5 months after the earthquake, we had IDP camps all over Kathmandu... and I couldn't do anything."* Frustrated, she decided to leave UNFPA and join a volunteer organisation actively building homes for the displaced.

Subsequently Aru became the Lead Manager of the Nepal Innovation Lab, established by an international NGO (INGO) to design and create solutions for humanitarian challenges. Unsurprisingly, she won global recognition as a dynamic innovation leader. Still, she reached a dead-end after several years: *"I hit the glass ceiling because I wasn't of a certain faith⁴,"* she shares. Her search for new opportunities led her to a tech-based social enterprise, where she took on the role of Country Representative for Nepal right in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. She spearheaded the realignment of the company's digital interventions in an emergency response project to adapt to the changes unleashed by the pandemic. While she found some satisfaction in witnessing the growth of the country programme, the lack of space for genuine co-creation with partners weighed heavily on her mind. This prompted her brave decision to co-found and lead *Impact447* as Chief Executive Officer (CEO).

² This eventuated in the creation of UN Women in 2010

³ IDP is the acronym for internally displaced persons

⁴ Many faith-based organisations have recruitment policies restricting the hire of people who do not share the faith upheld by the organisation into senior leadership roles

Stepping up to embrace the risks of an independent venture was not just about pursuing unlimited creativity. Aru was acutely aware of how very few South Asian women have a place at the proverbial table: *"I don't enjoy being in the front. But I've trained myself over the years... and worked myself up to a level of leadership... because representation is so important, especially for our daughters."* She also highlights the visible absence of women with caregiving responsibilities in the innovation scene: *"I can't think of an instance where an idea came from a middle-aged woman. It's mostly men. And if it comes from women, they are usually much younger - without the responsibilities of family life."* Aru observes that caregiving women often lack the time and space for creativity and are rarely celebrated for their professional achievements. *"In South Asia, the context I live in - there's not a single thing a woman can do that is celebrated without a 'but'. It's like, oh - she's such a good manager at work, but at the cost of leaving her partner or family neglected, right?"*

These societal guilt trips make it extremely difficult for professional women to engage in critical self-assessment, which is essential for their growth, according to Aru. *"It is so important for me to critically assess my own ideas and work, and I help those I work with do this... but this can be really hard for women, because society makes it so easy for us (women) to gaslight ourselves. We need a special grace, and space, to not turn self-criticism or self-assessment into gaslighting."*

Finding time and space for reflection of any kind may seem impossible for someone like Aru, whose mind races at light speed and has a long list of people and organisations wanting to work with her. However, she regularly blocks out time to 'do nothing': *"It's hard to shut my brain down, and I feel so guilty... because in the Asian context, we're always told to be doing something to prove our worth. We're always hustling."* Yet intentionally 'doing nothing' has led to remarkable improvements in her creativity, wellbeing and the quality of work.

Spending time with Aru brings to my mind the way certain energy forms, like light and sound, move in wavelengths that are defined by peaks and troughs. The energy that Aru releases - the very force that drives transformation - travels far and wide, whether she is sprinting at the peaks or taking time to breathe in the troughs. Her innovations are already creating ripples of impact for people, communities and nations in Asia and beyond. Moreover, her courageous journey is sure to pave the way for a new generation of 'solutionaries' to emerge and thrive.

**How can
more women with
caregiving responsibilities
thrive in innovation
roles (or organisations)?**

**Reflection
Question**



Mia Marina

Breaking gender and cultural barriers by boldly challenging power

- Senior Director, Programs (Asia Pacific), Habitat for Humanity International
- Previously Chairperson of Yayasan Integritas Justitia Indonesia (International Justice Mission Foundation Indonesia) and Executive Director, International Justice Mission Indonesia
- Previously Regional Director, Strategy, Impact and Resource Mobilisation, World Vision International South Asia Pacific Regional Office
- M.A. in Tri-Sector Collaboration, Singapore Management University
- M.A. in International Relations, University of Indonesia
- B.E. in Universitas Katolik Parahyangan (Indonesia)
- 49 years old

Mia cheerfully greets me across the laptop screen from her Bali home, which is beautifully flooded with the morning light. Her easy-going demeanor makes it somewhat difficult for me to remember that this is a bold leader who is well-known and respected for challenging the status quo in every organisation she has worked in and led. Before becoming an independent consultant in 2023¹ to spend more time supporting her neurodivergent son, Mia held governance and senior leadership roles with the International Justice Mission in Indonesia. Prior to that, she was a Regional Director at World Vision International, following a decade of humanitarian action that took her all across Asia and the Pacific. However, she had not always envisioned herself on this kind of career path.

Once an engineering graduate who couldn't wait to roll up her sleeves and work outdoors at project sites, Mia faced rejection after rejection when interviewing for engineering roles: *"Every time I asked, can I be on the project site? They all rejected me – they always said, no, the woman is always at the table in the office."*

So she took on non-engineering jobs in the private sector, thinking she might as well get paid more if she had to work in an office. Several years into her office life, Indonesia went into upheaval: The 1999 Independence Referendum for Timor-Leste (East Timor) created shockwaves across the nation and the world. Aid agencies rushed to recruit more workers in response to the unfolding crisis; Mia sent in her application. She then spent the next decade in humanitarian Rapid Response Teams, being deployed to manage emergencies across Asia, the Pacific, Africa and the Middle East.

Mia describes her first domestic deployment to Tobelo, in North Maluku (Indonesia), as her thrust into leadership. Despite being an inexperienced twenty-something single woman, she was one of the only two humanitarian staff who decided to stay on in Tobelo following a traumatic civil conflict.

¹ At the time of this interview (2024), Mia was working as an independent consultant in Bali

"It was a baptism of fire. They (organisation) were going to close down the operation if no one wanted to stay. I had already been there for almost two months and had a connection with the communities – and this was the kind of work I was really looking forward to. So I went back – and the two of us had to do everything by ourselves, including managing the local staff." Mia mentions that she felt 'really alive', connecting with communities and seeing firsthand how change happens.

The humanitarian world, however, was – and still is – a 'macho' sector. Mia struggled to be treated and respected as an equal. During an international deployment to a South Asian country, she was asked by the local Director to prepare tea for him and other male staff. She noticed that the local women in this team were asked to do the same. Moreover, Mia was prohibited from going out to work at field project sites, despite this being the reason for her deployment. Frustrated by the discrimination and restrictions imposed against women, she prepared to resign, until an international senior leader (male) intervened and enabled her to go out. Once out in the field, Mia ended up being the only female staff in the project site alongside 200 men! Yet, she was not given a separate tent or toilet. Eventually, Mia advocated for women local staff to be deployed to support field operations and was able to set up separate facilities for women.

During a later deployment in another Asian nation, she was asked why her husband had 'followed her' to the country and why he was the one caring for the children: *"They would ask, why is he (Mia's husband) allowing the woman to run around? We had neighbours coming to our house just to watch what my husband was doing."* Ever the unconventional character in the humanitarian ensemble, she did not hesitate to confront the various manifestations of misogyny and toxicity in such environments. Her directness often made male colleagues uncomfortable, but Mia did not feel the need to 'dial it down'. Women were so accustomed to dealing with such feelings of discomfort – so why shouldn't the men?

In addition to challenging gender barriers, Mia had to confront the international-local divide in the humanitarian sector. Response projects were typically led by male expatriates, leaving little room for Asians – especially Asian women. Even recently, she has had to challenge the culture and practices of 'white, male-dominated' organisations. She notes that too many humanitarian and development organisations still focus heavily on male leadership. Their recruitment practices often make it difficult for women and non-native English speakers to succeed. Furthermore, women in these organisations lack opportunities to grow into leadership roles, with existing development or retention strategies being tokenistic: *"It's a waste of time. What is the point of having a platform just to 'gather' women leaders, without having specific action plans to develop them and bring them into higher levels of leadership?"*

When asked how she was able to forge such an unconventional path as an Indonesian woman of her generation, Mia speaks of the unusually egalitarian family she grew up in. Her parents, coming from diverse backgrounds, modeled gender equity long before it became part of the social discourse: *"Imagine in the 1970s and 80s, my dad washing the dishes and doing the laundry."*

Her mother believed that Mia should pursue studies in STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics), a field that remains heavily male-dominated. Her parents also instilled a leadership mindset in their children from a young age and valued service to the community. Mia's time in school was taken up by all types of leadership responsibilities - at the girls scouts, in high school councils and University student councils. *"I was a tomboy - I usually hung out with the guys. Even when I preferred some men to lead these groups, the guys would ask me to be the leader,"* she recalls.

She also credits her marriage to an 'equitable Indonesian man' as a key factor that enables her leadership journey. Despite constantly being questioned about taking on more caregiving responsibilities than most other men, Mia's husband has remained a steadfast supporter and confidante. In addition, the couple's mixed-race, mixed-religious family background informs their pursuit of inclusion and equity. Raising a neurodivergent son and navigating the harsh realities of environments that lack inclusive support has further strengthened Mia's resolve to speak out against systems of exclusion and injustice.

Mia encourages aspiring women leaders with these words, *"You can do whatever you want. Even if anyone says that is not for you, if you desire it, then you have to go for it. Don't feel bad!"* She spends time mentoring young women through a Singapore Management University initiative (her *alma mater*). Her active involvement in mentoring reflects her belief in passing on the values of equality and empowerment to the next generation of women leaders.

Wrapping up my conversation with Mia, I find myself deeply impressed by the matter-of-fact tone with which she describes her confrontations with people and organisations that limit space for women leaders, and local leaders. 'Speaking truth to power' is easier said than done. Too many women leaders choose to silently harbour discontent against structures and systems of discrimination, rather than exposing and confronting them; bravery comes at a cost. If the cost of speaking out has ever pained Mia, I see no traces of woundedness or a victim mentality in her. I see a woman who has been true to herself and unapologetic in pursuing her mission, and in doing so, she has paved a wider path for other Asian women. I'm quite certain that Mia will continue to challenge injustice and break barriers wherever she goes - even when she's ninety!

**What holds you back
from speaking truth
to power?**

**Reflection
Question**

Mona Chettri

Pioneering local representation in research and knowledge production

- Co-Founder, Reading Himalaya (India)
- Ph.D. in South Asia Research, School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London (United Kingdom)
- Postdoctoral Researcher, The University of Western Australia
- Postdoctoral Research Fellow, Aarhus University (Denmark)
- M.A. in Development Studies, University of New South Wales (Australia)
- B.A. in Sociology, Lady ShriRam College, University of Delhi (India)
- 40 years old



My conversation with Mona begins with her upbeat presence appearing on my Zoom screen. She's clad in a cozy jumper, reflecting the change of seasons in her hometown of Sikkim, nestled in the beautiful Eastern Himalayas. Mona, an academic turned research consulting group co-founder, divides her time between South Asia, her region of origin, and Tasmania (Australia), where she settled following several post-doctoral research stints. At 40 years of age, she has already firmly established herself as a social science researcher, published author and an advocate for local scholarship and knowledge production. In 2023 she co-founded *Reading Himalaya*, an independent research and policy consultancy dedicated to the study of Himalayan society and environment. Her belief is that local researchers should be 'equal participants in knowledge production in and on the region'¹.

Mona's journey began in Sikkim, a small but culturally rich state in the Eastern Himalayas of northeastern India. Influenced by a family that valued education and service to the community, she ventured into the world of higher studies both in India (Delhi, Bombay) and overseas (Sydney, London), eventually attaining a Ph.D. in South Asia Research. Her path has not always been smooth; while education is valued in principle, the patriarchal culture and customs of her Indian locale do not encourage women to go beyond a certain level of achievement. Then there is the world of academia – hierarchical, with its own norms, networks and politics – in which Mona never truly felt comfortable. Additionally, for years Mona felt stifled by the limited freedom to pursue projects that could generate impact for the community.

A significant agenda close to her heart was to address the scarcity of local scholars in research. She recalls often being the only researcher from Sikkim in academic workshops or conferences concerning her own region. *"I think I'm deeply motivated by representation, not just of women, but also of the region and the scholars... there are multiple levels of representation that I'm hoping to address,"* she shares.

¹ From <https://www.readinghimalaya.com>

Mona's determination to elevate under-represented voices in research and knowledge production is not mere rhetoric. Even in her doctoral and postdoctoral phases, Mona was actively involved in mentoring young researchers in Sikkim and the wider Eastern Himalaya region, publishing their work. She is the series editor of the *Eastern Himalaya Series*, a publication platform exclusively for post-graduate scholars from the region. Creating a body of recognised, published work is especially vital for emerging scholars in her region, particularly for women. Mona co-edits the Series in collaboration with emerging academics from the region, which is published locally in Sikkim in order to make research accessible and affordable. For many local scholars, it is difficult to gain experience and exposure in academic publishing and the Series creates opportunities and space for them.

While building up her own research portfolio, Mona spends time strengthening the local research community – even mobilising funding on her own to host workshops for local scholars. Her experiences of fostering inclusive spaces for young researchers to thrive and creating collaborative relationships stand in stark contrast to her own experiences in academia: *"In academia, which is built around the notion of the greater good, more often than not you lead for yourself. You're motivated for yourself. You work hard, you publish, you teach – and you do it for yourself. But with what I'm trying to do, you lead with other people, and for other people. That's the most crucial difference I find between these two things (academia vs. current research consulting)."*

Recently, she took on the task of editing the writings of women from the Eastern Himalayas – showcasing not just academic work, but also creative writings of women across different languages, age groups, educational and socio-economic backgrounds. The digital age, with its free-flow of information and knowledge, has led to greater opportunities for emerging scholars and creatives, according to Mona. Still, there are very few women entering academia – and even fewer positions available for emerging women academics. Providing alternative pathways for local scholars to develop a career in research has been another motivator for Mona when she co-founded *Reading Himalaya*. Her intent does translate into reality: Mona is currently engaging a local researcher for her current research project on gender-based violence (GBV) and inequality in Sikkim (India). In addition to being paid for the work, the researcher will receive on-the-job training on qualitative data collection on sensitive topics, data analysis and academic writing. *"Although a small step, it feels like a step in the right direction,"* says Mona.

Despite Mona's own stellar credentials, she still finds it challenging to be taken seriously by male colleagues and stakeholders such as government officials: *"It's still very male dominated and people don't tend to take you seriously, especially if you look like me (a young-looking, petite woman) – and with my piercings and tattoos. There's so much sexism and the only way I can think of countering this right now is through consistent, high quality work. Also, not laughing too much, sadly – learning to change your demeanor, your body language, what you wear, all of these things. However, despite these superficial changes, I think it's important to be yourself, and I am hopeful there will be more acceptance for diverse outlooks and ways of being in the future. Even so, when I'm talking to male bureaucrats or politicians, I find it weird – like I'm talking to*

someone and they won't look at me and speak – they'll look at my male colleague."

Even the work of *Reading Himalaya* and what Mona does with her fellow researchers – all women – are often met with sexist cynicism: *"What women do is not taken very seriously, especially if it's not like a 'real paying job' (full-time employment). What we do is often seen as something women are doing 'on the side', to pass the time. It's not 'a real paying job' because there are breaks in-between our employment (consulting assignments)."*

Amidst feelings of frustration against the attitudes of men, Mona recognises another significant challenge: the limitations women impose on themselves. Despite decades of efforts made to progress women's rights, social perceptions of what women can achieve remain stifling and limited in her South Asian context. The dearth of role models from the region compounds this issue: while women abound in the teaching field and administrative roles, there are few female trailblazers in entrepreneurship, politics or academia. The lack of representation looms large over women's aspirations, making it difficult for women like Mona to deal with their own fears of leading 'from the front': *"I love talking to people, but I don't want to be the centre of attention. I'll be the worker bee, I'll work in the background. So for me to step out of my own comfort zone has been... I would think of it as growth. It's also a necessity."*

Further to overcoming the fear of stepping up and stepping out, Mona is also navigating unique leadership challenges that come from managing a women-led, non-hierarchical organisation composed of peers. While she and her colleagues are equal partners in their horizontal set-up, the reality does not always match this ideal. In such moments, Mona has had to take initiative to exercise leadership in the absence of positional authority – a delicate dance. There are moments when she feels quite alone, in the process: *"There's no blueprint for what I'm trying to do. I don't have anyone to talk to in the region who is doing this – I'm learning as I go."*

Pioneering local representation in research as a female entrepreneur and academic remains a daunting task. But the energy Mona brings into the conversation reveals her drive and determination – akin to a mountaineer committed to the ascent, despite the fog and winds ahead. While she speaks about the future with an air of uncertainty, her journey to date suggests that she is more than ready to venture boldly into uncharted territory. As our conversation draws to a close, I'm left with a strong sense of hope for Mona's journey. She already stands out as a rare role model for aspiring scholars and women in the Eastern Himalayas. In the swirling landscapes of the Himalayas, her voice, grounded in authenticity, calls for equity and inclusion – an invitation for the underrepresented to partake in the rich tapestry of knowledge production that is local in origin, but global in its resonance.

Reflection Question

How do you
deal with explicit and overt
sexist behaviour from
male counterparts?



Priyathi Fernando

Equitably leading organisations and people to challenge inequality and injustice

- Executive Director of an international studies and research organisation in Sri Lanka
- Previously Executive Director, International Women's Rights Action Watch Asia Pacific (IWRAP-AP) (Malaysia)
- Previously Executive Director, Centre for Poverty Analysis (Sri Lanka)
- M.A. in Communications, University of Leicester (United Kingdom)
- B.A. in Sociology, University of Peradeniya (Sri Lanka)
- 71 years old

Waiting for Priyanthi to appear on the Zoom screen as she wrestles the choppy internet connection in Colombo, Sri Lanka, I can't help but recall the first time I met her in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. It was at the International Women's Rights Action Watch Asia Pacific (IWRAP-AP) office, where she served as Executive Director at the time. 'Pri', as her colleagues called her, was the coolest 'feminist boss' I'd ever seen, sporting short, silver-grey hair dyed in subtle shades of pink and purple. The energy and youthfulness captured in her hair mirrored her spirited personality, yet did not detract from the wisdom and wit she embodied from nearly seventy years of life and five decades of professional experience.

Adoring labels such as 'the best boss I've ever worked with' or 'an inspirational leader' have followed Priyanthi around the numerous organisations and teams she has led. Her participatory and egalitarian style of leadership is a rarity, seldom practised by the leaders of her own generation – the first post-independence generation of Sri Lanka. Despite gaining autonomy from the British Empire, this generation was shaped by persisting colonial norms – as well as the deeply ingrained respect for authority and hierarchy characteristic of Asian societies. Priyanthi, undoubtedly, has been the outlier. *"I've been very irreverent – I still am," she says. "I didn't like hierarchical structures... I didn't realise until much later that I was a feminist. But I did a lot of things that were probably quite feminist. Feminism is about breaking down hierarchies and deconstructing power.. and deconstructing power is something I've always done."*

Knowing her track record as a provocateur and disruptor, it may come as a surprise that Priyanthi comes from a privileged, upper-middle class background. Her grandfather was knighted by the Queen; her father was a central banker; her aunts were professional, working women – one of whom is widely known as the first female diplomat of Sri Lanka. Her mother was actively involved in the *Lanka Mahila Samiti*, a women's voluntary organisation that was founded in the 1930s. While she did not lack anything in her childhood and youth, Priyanthi was acutely aware that her future would not be served to her on a silver platter: *"While we had privilege, my father was a closeted socialist.. he was always mindful of instilling into me that my privilege needed to be used responsibly, and that the comfort I had would not last. I would need to go and work, make my own money and not be dependent."*

Priyanthi set off to University, knowing that she would need qualifications to stand on her own two feet. It was there that she transitioned from the comfortable middle class bubble into a more egalitarian environment populated by students from across the country and diverse backgrounds. Her first job at a social research institute further opened her eyes to see structural inequalities in the workplace: *"The institute's reputation was based on field research - but the field researchers were so undervalued in the system. But those who came in with a foreign degree - from Princeton, or Berkeley, or wherever - they got up really high on the scale. I remember having a big argument with the director about this. I don't know where those ideas came into my head from, but I knew this was not right."*

Priyanthi had a clear vision of what her own style of leadership would look like if she were to lead such organisations. However, her pathway to leadership was anything but linear. She went from researching social issues in Sri Lanka to 'selling garbage bins' in Australia. Her husband received a partial scholarship to study there, which meant that Priyanthi had to work. And work she did: as a receptionist, a secretary (in the garbage bin company), cleaning offices and even operating forklifts. *"I tend to get very involved in my work, so I didn't want to get an intellectually stimulating job,"* she mentions. *"By the way, when I want to shock people I say, in Australia I used to sell garbage bins!"*

Upon returning to Sri Lanka, she re-entered the social research sector, starting at the *Lanka Mahila Samiti* where her mother had once volunteered. Priyanthi dedicated herself to fieldwork for a microfinance programme: *"I think out of 20 work days in a month, I spent half of that outside of my home."* Immersed in the lives of a variety of women in rural communities, she had a realisation. *"I realised I wasn't really smarter or better than any of them. It's just that I had so many chances that they never had."* This experience also cultivated in her a sense of empathy - not 'cheap' empathy, but the kind that acknowledges that there are experiences one could never truly understand without having walked in another's shoes. She came to embrace the feminist principle of 'nothing for us without us'.

Priyanthi subsequently took on senior leadership roles in Sri Lankan social research organisations such as ITDG Practical Action and the Centre for Poverty Analysis, but with an almost decade-long stint in London in-between, as the Executive Secretary for the International Forum for Rural Transport and Development. *"It was a very different dynamic in the UK.. it was more about exerting my 'Global South-ness'. I used to go to meetings with the British government wearing a sari, in a leather jacket and boots! I wanted to be in their faces as a 'Global South' person, but not really acting like one - because I spoke perfect English."* She recalls the blatant colonial and hierarchical attitudes displayed by her British counterparts; yet, she never felt the need to kowtow. *"That's also (due to) privilege. I have always been part of 'the elite' in Sri Lanka, educated in English. So there's no need for me to seek favour from anyone else,"* she explains. While there is truth in her honest reflection, the existence of countless national elites in ex-colonies who have bowed to 'servants of the Empire' would suggest otherwise; Priyanthi Fernando is a woman whose convictions guide her conduct.

Her commitment to equity and egalitarianism were expressed in her leadership of various organisations in Sri Lanka. She championed what is now known as family friendly workplace arrangements, which were unheard of in South Asia during the 1980s

and 1990s. When one of her researchers, a breastfeeding mother, was concerned about going on a field research trip without her infant, Priyanthi arranged for the organization to cover the costs of bringing the child along with her nanny. Similarly, she encouraged male employees to pick up their children from school and bring them to the office, rather than taking them home, which would involve longer commutes. *"The office in the afternoon was filled with children, who called me 'aunty Pri'.. doing their homework and playing. I didn't articulate this as work-life balance or anything like that, back then. I was just trying to help people, who have multiple responsibilities, to be able to manage them."*

Admired as she was in these workplaces, Priyanthi wonders whether her style of leadership had inadvertently created challenges for her former teams, after her departure: *"I'm not sure that I'm very good for the sustainability of organizations because people who come after me don't always follow the same path.. there are some people there (organisations I previously led) who are clinging on to a participatory ethos - that no new director coming in has been able to replicate."*

Moving on, however, led to opportunities for learning and growth for Priyanthi. She credits her time at the International Women's Rights Action Watch Asia Pacific (IWRAP-AP) with igniting the flames of her activism and advocacy for 'the marginalised of the marginalised': *"It challenged even some of my own 'baggage' - being in such an inclusive organisation. I had never worked so intensively on sex workers' rights or with queer people.. and even dealing with the challenges of 'blackness' in Malaysia,"* she recalls. Despite intending to retire from work after 8 years with IWRAP-AP, in 2024 Priyanthi began her newest role at an international studies centre in her hometown, Colombo. She shares this anecdote with a grin: *"I remember when I was offered a private pension scheme in the UK. The salesman asked me, when do you expect to retire? And I said: Retire? I'm not going to retire! So he said: Why then do you want a pension scheme? I told him - I'm going to drop dead, still working. I'm not retiring!"*

I find myself believing her. Priyanthi has way too much social justice passion in her system to be sitting idly at a pristine Sri Lankan beach sipping coconuts, or to put her feet up somewhere on the lush hills of Ceylon's tea plantations; not for long! In a world where ceasing to work at 65 is considered the norm and forty-somethings fantasise about early retirement, this relentless leader is worthy of admiration. Her journey of learning and leading, extending into her 70s, demonstrates that there can be longevity in one's fight against injustice - and that is good news for the world.

Reflection Question

**What would longevity
of leadership look like,
for you? How can you
prepare yourself for it?**

Sumi Dhanarajan

Leading transformative initiatives for sustainable futures in Asia

- Managing Director, Southeast Asia at Forum for the Future (Singapore)
- Previously Associate Director (APAC) at Forum for the Future
- Formerly Research Associate at Centre for Asian Legal Studies, National University of Singapore
- Previously Senior Policy Advisor & Team Lead at Oxfam Great Britain (United Kingdom)
- M.A. in Understanding and Securing Human Rights, University of London (UK)
- LL.M in Asian Legal Studies, National University of Singapore
- LL.B. from Durham University (UK)
- 53 years old



To converse with Sumi Dhanarajan is to interact with gentleness personified: the warmth of her smile and her graceful manner of speaking instantly puts you at ease. She carries none of the sharpness or ‘stress vibes’ that I’ve come to associate with senior leaders in Singapore, whose lives are constantly on fast forward mode. In fact, if I didn’t already know her and was asked to guess Sumi’s occupation, my answer would have been: counsellor. Or perhaps, teacher; the encouraging, nurturing type.

In reality, Sumi is a systems change leader – who navigates the complex and ever-moving web of relationships, interests and political will (or lack thereof) in the sustainability sector. As Managing Director for Southeast Asia at Forum for the Future, an international sustainability organisation, she spends a considerable amount of time collaborating with public, private and third (social) sector actors to co-create solutions for complex social and environmental challenges. It is an ambitious endeavour, especially in a world that prefers easy, quick-fix solutions¹. But Sumi is equipped with powerful tools: careful observation, deep thinking and collaborative facilitation – skills which enable her to see the ‘whole’ as being ‘more than the sum of its parts’ (to quote Aristotle).

Perhaps her innate ability to understand that things are not simply what they appear to be comes from her unique origins. Sumi grew up in 1970s Penang, Malaysia, in multicultural home: her father is Indian, and her mother, Chinese. In a society that labelled and categorised identities using the simplistic – and colonial – grid of race and religion, she struggled to make sense of her unconventional identity. *“I was always seen as ‘unique’, to put it nicely, but the other side of it is that I was never quite accepted by either identity, by either ethnic group,”* she recalls.

Her experiences of navigating the complex nuances of race, ethnicity and identity throughout her childhood and youth led to a strong interest in social justice. At University Sumi chose law as her main subject and spent the early years of her career in

¹ In the words of H.L. Mencken: “For every complex problem, there is an answer that is clear, simple and wrong.”

in legal advisory roles. Her first job, at the age of 22, was setting up the human rights desk of the Malaysian Bar Council. Then she joined the Hong Kong Democratic Party's Secretariat for Legislative Councillors – all 17 of whom were men. Despite being a young, twenty-something woman working in a male-dominated sector, her experiences there were highly positive. She recalls working on numerous pieces of legislation with Councillors during the countdown to the handover of Hong Kong to China: *"We knew we had really important work to do, in a limited amount of time (before the handover). They had no qualms about sitting together with me, a 26-year-old, non-Chinese presenting woman. The focus was on the work – there was this real, flat parity."* She also adds, *"So I've seen and worked with good men. Knowing what that looks like, I can then recognise and call out when that behaviour is not present."* Ironically, she did experience discriminatory behaviour from female leaders when she was a young professional. One told Sumi not to wear trousers to work, during her Malaysian Bar Council days. Unsurprisingly, she refused: *"I said, I'm riding the bus for an hour to work every day, standing most of the way. I'm not wearing a skirt!"* She has also, on occasion, experienced competitiveness amongst women in the workplace: *"Perhaps, as we try and make it in a man's world."*

However, on the whole, Sumi describes herself as fortunate to have walked with amazing, nurturing women throughout her professional life: *"I've always had a female mentor, who tends to be – funnily enough – someone who is 12 years older than me. Somehow that's the magic number. And they were mostly my line managers. It's been so helpful having these mentors who've lived through my phases of life already, who could tell me – this is what you can expect. And not being shy about showing them everything – warts and all! Just feeling very, very looked after and cared for – and believed in."*

After a decade in the United Kingdom, where she co-founded and eventually led Oxfam Great Britain's Private Sector team, Sumi returned to Southeast Asia as Programme Lead ('Public Roles of the Private Sector') at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore. She subsequently joined Forum for the Future, initially as the Associate Director (Southeast Asia), and then rose to Managing Director in 2023.

Having been engaged in sustainability efforts since the late 1990s and into the early 2000s when it was primarily viewed as a 'cause' or the early stages of a 'movement' advocating for change, returning to Singapore was an adjustment for Sumi. There, the sustainability landscape was more industry-oriented, focused heavily on compliance, reporting and reputation management, and largely serviced by consultants. *"I think the work on ensuring the corporate sector holds responsibility for its environmental impacts, and its social and human rights impacts, needs to remain movement-led and focused on honouring the rights of future generations. It also needs to equitably include all actors in the system – not just those with power – say within finance or business or regulators,"* she shares.

Underpinning Sumi's commitment to building a just and regenerative world is the value

she places on the wellbeing of people. *"I do think there is a maternalistic element to my leadership style and I think that has a shadow-side. I probably over-worry about people's wellbeing – colleagues and partners – and that might skew priorities sometimes,"* she shares. Fortunately, there is a mutuality to the care she exercises at the workplace: *"At times my colleagues would tell me about issues a bit too late, and I ask them – why didn't you let me know before? And they say, because we know you've got so much on your plate, and we worry that we're putting more on it. So in a recent call I asked them, have I demonstrated a lack of resilience to you? And they go – no, it's because we care for you."*

Sumi finds that the key to her own well-being is maintaining the right perspective. Dealing with the demands of leadership can indeed be pressurising, but Sumi reminds herself regularly that her life is bigger than work – that work is but one part of it: *"The work is not the job, right? The work is the work. I can't imagine not doing the work – but if you were to put my feet to the fire and ask what's the most important thing to me in my life, I would without a doubt say: my family. And that keeps me in check."*

Sumi's holistic perspective on life, work, and family is fitting for a systems thinker who sees the bigger picture and understands how various elements interact and influence one another. She knows that the playing field of life is much too complex and intricate to reduce it down to one 'main thing'. The elaborate web of her own identity, life experiences, relationships and the choices she made have created her present, but there are vast possibilities and multiple futures that she can shape. With her ability to think in terms of both systems and futures, it would be no surprise to see her venturing into entirely new fields – to tackle other manifestations of injustice. No existing archetype of 'the Asian woman leader' looks like Sumi; she has created her own unique model for leading. Sumi truly is a prototype leader, and her evolution promises to be even more inspiring.

Reflection Question

How does our identity
influence the way
we see the world,
and how we frame
the challenges we
observe in it?



Anna Song

Leveraging the power of observation for policymaking in a climate-centred economy

- Founder, Paran Climate (South Korea)
- Previously Steel Lead/Methane Industry, Solutions for Our Climate (South Korea)
- Previously Senior Strategist (Policy and Government), The Sunrise Project (Australia)
- Previously held Senior Advisor and Senior Policy Officer roles at Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning; Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions and Department of Premier and Cabinet (Victoria, Australia)
- Master of Public and International Law, Melbourne Law School, University of Melbourne (Australia)
- B.A. in Politics, University of Melbourne
- 42 years old

Anna Song is a layered character, whose perspectives emerge from outside mainstream ways of being and thinking. *"I've gotten used to hearing people tell me, oh you're so interesting! I find that annoying at times,"* she confesses. *"But I think the more compounded one's life experience is, you can see a lot of things that others don't - that they are not 'trained' to see."* She explains how it takes much longer for her to do sense-making. Rather than jumping to conclusions, she takes time to observe, digest and understand the issues at hand. This is the case even when it comes to analysing herself: *"I am an in-betweeners; an observer. I don't feel like I am a 'changemaker' - people would associate changemakers with taking centre stage. I'm an observer - constantly on the outside looking in."*

This peculiar state of 'un-belonging' is rooted in Anna's past. She unravels the story of her bi-cultural upbringing, switching freely between English (with an unmistakable Australian accent) and Korean (sans 'foreigner accent') as we speak. She was born in South Korea and raised in its patriarchal culture, until her family made an unexpected move to New Zealand when she was ten years old. *"There were issues my parents could not resolve in Korea which had some very serious implications. So to me, migration was an escape. It was fleeing. It was shame."* In an effort to understand a society foreign to her, Anna adopted 'observership' as a means of survival. She struggled to navigate the complexities of differing cultures, histories and contexts.

One cultural difference that left a strong impression on young Anna was the way women were viewed in New Zealand. There was widespread acceptance of women holding roles in society, and even taking on leadership positions: *"I saw a lot less resistance about women being strong - and making decisions."* Her perspective broadened further when she spent a year abroad in Oregon (USA) as an exchange student: *"When I was sixteen, I went on exchange with an organisation that believed that young people forming friendships across the world could achieve peace. I had a mentor who took me to all these places.. to listen to holocaust survivor testimonies.. even to the Martin Luther King Jr. commemoration ceremony. All of these shaped me*

into thinking that I had agency, that I didn't have to live passively in a world that was created for me."

This newfound outlook, combined with her keen powers of observation, served Anna well in the early years of her public policy career. Eager to live and work independently, Anna had moved to Melbourne, Australia, for University – after which she found roles in state government offices. Her career choice was driven by a harrowing experience from her student days when she advocated for the rights of 'comfort women'¹. She had worked closely with Korean survivors to campaign for parliaments around the world to pass resolutions demanding accountability from the Japanese government. A significant moment for her was translating for the Korean survivors at a U.S. congressional hearing in 2007, which led to the passing of House Resolution 121².

Later that year, Anna worked behind the scenes to put a similar resolution on the agenda of the Australian Senate. A motion on the issue was made in September 2007; however, on the following day, the Opposition Party passed a surprise motion – which³ commended the Japanese government for its efforts. *"It was the only motion – out of over 10 different parliaments around the world – that was supportive of the Japanese government on this issue. The feeling of failure that followed – it was visceral for me,"* recalls Anna. *"I felt personally responsible for it. These survivors were women in their late 80s, going to meetings with politicians of every party, telling their stories. So that was a big spiraling moment for me. As a result of that experience, I told myself – I have to learn how power works in Australia."*

Anna began her career in the Department of Premier and Cabinet (Victoria), then served as Aide to the Governor of Victoria. She spent several more years in the state government covering a range of sectors including employment, investment, trade policy and diversity and inclusion. Through her work, she acquired a thorough understanding of electoral politics and its influences on policy making. As a policy advisor, she benefited from coaching by senior officials, one of whom remarked during a performance review: *"You don't ever act like you are the smartest person – and that's a very positive trait."* In chambers overflowing with ego and elitism, Anna's inquisitive and collaborative approach stood out.

What marked the beginning of the end for her smooth-sailing government career were the Australian bushfires of 2019 and 2020. This experience led her out of government, into the climate change sector: *"I was working on forestry policy, managing a 30-year plan of state forests and a 100-year vision for forests with Aboriginal leaders. Then the bushfires started, and a third of it (forests) just burned to the ground. It was a wake-up call, realising that if we can't address climate change, we are going to die."* Soon came another mega-event: COVID-19. As the whole world reeled, Anna entered a period of transition. During lockdown, she received a message from Korea that her grandfather had been diagnosed with cancer. She packed her bags and flew back to the country she left behind, nearly 30 years ago.

¹ 'Comfort women' is a term referring to women and girls (mostly in Asia) who were forced into sexual slavery by the Imperial Japanese Armed Forces, before and during the Second World War. A majority of the comfort women were from Korea, which was colonised by Japan during 1910– 1945.

² See: <https://www.congress.gov/bills/110th-congress/house-resolution/121>

³ Motion 920 of the Australian Senate. See:

<https://www.archive814.or.kr/record/recordDetailView.do?recordId=947&recordDetailType=formDetail>

The subsequent months she spent in Korea were incredibly impactful. In addition to reconnecting with her extended family, there was something about returning to 'the motherland' that evoked unfamiliar – or forgotten – sensations of stability: *"I felt really grounded that I was able to be on the land I was born, walking its earth, eating the food harvested from its soil – in a cuisine that has developed over thousands of years to nurture people like me. It all had a very significant meaning."* It then occurred to Anna that working and living in Korea could be an option for her – something she had never previously considered.

Now in her third year of life in Korea and well past the 'honeymoon phase', Anna finds herself an 'outsider looking in', once again; this time in a country where she fits in perfectly, at least on the surface. Adjusting to the highly nuanced (read: complicated) Korean workplace culture has been a turbulent experience for her: *"It's very different from what I learned and practiced in Australia.. At times I feel so culturally inadequate. I remember a Korean-Australian friend telling me: you are one of the most Australian (Westernised) Koreans I've ever known – the Korean-Koreans are going to have such a hard time working with you! She was absolutely right."*

Anna also finds it disorienting to be reimmersed in the hierarchical Korean family culture as the youngest female child and sibling. An educated woman and seasoned professional, she is accustomed to feeling empowered; yet none of her accomplishments hold weight in the Korean family pecking order. It is a reality common to many Asian women: *"I remember hearing this talk by Indra Nooyi, the ex-Chief Executive Officer of PepsiCo – who is Indian. When she came home after being named President, her mother told her – when you step into the house, you're a wife and mother first, so leave that crown in the garage. That has really stuck with me."*

Despite experiencing reverse cultural dysphoria, Anna is determined to keep moving forward. In 2024, she founded *Paran Climate*, a South Korean consulting business specialising in climate change-related research, strategy and government relations work. She intends to catalyse cross-sectoral relationships and capacities to accelerate Asia's transition into the 'climate economy.' Despite this brave accomplishment, Anna still hesitates to call herself a leader – likely because she doesn't fit squarely into conventional characterisations of leadership. Yet I foresee her growing influence. I can see her canvassing people, organisations, nations and cultures towards a climate-change-free future. In a few years, she may end up embracing the title of 'changemaker,' after all.

Reflection Question

**What does
harnessing your
intersectional experiences
and perspectives look like,
in day-to-day leadership?**



Reflections

Reflections

As spelled out clearly in the Introduction section, this report is not the product of a social science research exercise; rather, it is the culmination of a collective storytelling project involving the author and the featured women leaders.

We live in hyper-modernised societies where content is frequently dissociated from the creators and communicators of content. As a result, one can easily default to the habit of dissociating stories (content) from those who tell them¹ (creators and communicators). Although *The Journey of Women Leaders* did intend to share beneficial information (content) from the lived experiences of women leaders to inspire and benefit the readers, a more central motivation – at least of the author (communicator) – has been to spotlight the women leaders themselves (creators). After all, these women are the ones writing, directing and acting out the script of their life journeys. Therefore, when it comes to this project, these women leaders themselves are very much the ‘main thing’; not just their stories. The author’s hope is that the unique personhood of each featured leader, and the power and inspiration found in their lived experiences, can remain at the front and centre of this report – as well as any engagements (online or offline) that may occur after this report is released.

The Power of Storytelling

One of the pleasant surprises arising from this project has been the feedback we received from many of the interviewed women leaders, who shared that the two-hour conversation gave them dedicated time and space to reflect on and articulate their leadership journeys. They mentioned that telling their stories to another person gave them an opportunity to frame their experiences and intentionally note the things worthy of empathy, affirmation and celebration, and to identify ‘homework’ for their current and coming seasons.

There is something about storytelling, or ‘good storytelling’¹ (to qualify the kind of storytelling that we should practice), that empowers the storyteller and transforms the listener. The Project Lead certainly came out of this process – after listening deeply to the women leaders – with an expanded understanding and appreciation of what leading as a woman means. On the other hand, many of the interviewed women leaders have also come out of the process carrying something new: to some, it was the realisation that their stories are worthy of being shared widely with others – knowing that their stories are powerful and influential. To others, it was the relief coming from knowing that they were not alone in their challenges and struggles; that there are other women leaders in ‘the arena’ alongside them, bravely challenging hostile systems and cultures. To some others, it was gaining a level of objectivity regarding themselves, their values, their experiences and their choices; in other words, letting someone else call out and affirm their brilliance and bravery.

This project has taught the author that storytelling by and amongst women leaders has great potential to become an effective intervention or methodology for supporting women in leadership. Storytelling is a powerful tool for women leaders as it helps them reflect on their journeys, share personal and professional challenges, and cultivate a deeper understanding of

¹ See this excellent publication to understand what ‘good storytelling’ looks like: <https://centreforpublicimpact.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/storytelling-for-systems-change-report.pdf>

their leadership values and approaches – identifying where they come from, and what drives them. The Mangrove Collective's desire to leverage this happy discovery, and disseminate its positive potential to a wider group of women leaders, has led to the development of *The Journey of Women Leaders Workshop*: this material is presented as an Annex to the report.

Life Course Approach to Women's Leadership

Another insight emerged in a moment of clarity, while listening to the stories and connecting the dots (themes) within and across multiple stories: women's leadership is continually shaped and reshaped throughout their life stages. Leadership formation for women begins early in life, long before women assume formal leadership roles at school or enter the workforce. The stories from women leaders presented in this report reveal that their inclination or reluctance to lead, and their leadership styles (i.e. preferring relational influence over positional authority), are rooted in their upbringing. These are significantly shaped through family dynamics and socio-cultural contexts experienced during childhood and adolescence.

The leadership traits of these women leaders and the types of challenges they faced also seemed to correlate with specific life and career stages. For instance, feelings of insecurity and the 'imposter syndrome' were most pronounced in early career phases, and during transitions from mid-career to senior leadership roles. Pregnancy, childbirth and parenting prompted many women leaders to leave rigid, institutional employment structures to explore alternative and creative leadership paths, such as starting their own organisations and businesses. The relational nature of women's leadership often grew stronger as their family lives progressed, although women leaders without spouses or children also practised the 'ethics of care'.

Severe mental health challenges were experienced by women leaders when they were juggling caregiving responsibilities (especially parenting) and career advancement in senior roles. Furthermore, women leaders in senior positions were often in peri-menopausal and menopausal stages, facing a multitude of physiological and psychological challenges, unlike their male peers. Increased boldness and diminished concern for the opinion of others seemed to also occur around this phase of life, with some women stating that 'turning forty' or perimenopause were pivotal experiences. For some women leaders, aging and increased seniority sharpened their focus and ability to prioritise.

Of course, the significance of life stages in understanding the growth, development and wellbeing of humans is not a new discovery. Existing social and scientific studies highlight the differences in life stages for women and men, influenced by biology (including hormones) and socio-cultural factors. Women's life stages are commonly defined according to their reproductive cycle, with menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth and menopause as key stage-defining events. For men, however, their life stages are more straightforwardly defined by age and the corresponding physical and emotional/psychological traits².

It is no secret that women's life stages directly impact their experiences at work and career progression – or lack thereof. The 'motherhood penalty' is well-documented: pregnancy, childbirth and parenting often lead women to reduce work hours, earn less, miss promotion opportunities, or exit the workforce altogether. Women also tend to marry and/or have children earlier than men, taking on multiple adult responsibilities sooner than men³ (e.g.

² See: <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC2990527/>

³ See: <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC11047346/>;

<https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2020/06/cost-of-motherhood-on-womens-employment-and-earnings.html>

combining work, parenting and/or studies). If the above is 'old news,' one must ask the following questions, in the context of this conversation on women's leadership:

- What literature – or practice – exists on applying a 'life course approach' to women's leadership?
- What interventions exist to support women leaders according to their life stages? Are they 'customised' to the specifications or needs and challenges (both personal and professional) that they face in each phase?
- Where do existing women's leadership development interventions fall short, if we approach women's leadership development from the life course angle? Where are the obvious gaps?
- What opportunities remain unexplored and untapped for strengthening women's leadership, if we apply a life course approach to women's leadership? (*Example: Women tend to live longer than men. How do we promote and normalise seeing active senior women leaders at work, in their 60s, 70s and beyond?*)

While this report surfaces these questions, it will not attempt to answer them. However, The Mangrove Collective looks forward to initiating and participating in future discussions generated by the questions above.

The Required Journey – from Caves into Circles

A final reflection from this project is that most women leaders grapple with feelings of isolation and loneliness, especially as they climb to more senior roles. Leadership may be a lonely journey for all, regardless of gender; but the challenge is much more pronounced for women leaders. To begin with, there are fewer women at the top, compared to men. Then there is the issue of the 'queen bee syndrome' among women leaders, which can be symptomatic of the pressures women face in male-dominated systems and organisations. For those pioneering in building a new organisation from the ground up, there are even fewer women leaders who have traveled that path.

As a remedy for isolation, many women leaders emphasised the importance of forming trusting and supportive relationships with other women – whether mentors or peers. While one-on-one coaching and mentoring are valuable, especially for attaining specific professional goals, many women featured in this report have spoken about the profound value of gathering with other women leaders. There is something uniquely powerful about women leaders coming together in peer groups to share laughter, tears, cynicism, optimism, challenges and solutions – within a safe, trust-based environment. The enduring popularity of the 'Lean In Circles', inspired by Sheryl Sandberg's bestselling book (*"Lean In"*), demonstrates the positive effect of women gathering in small groups for mutual support and inspiration.

The biggest obstacle women leaders face when it comes to gathering is busyness: juggling the demands of leadership, family life and personal wellbeing. Amidst this busy pace, especially during the mid-life years, committing extra time and energy to get together with other women leaders can feel overwhelming; it's one more item to manage on one's ever-growing to-do list. However, it is becoming increasingly important for women leaders to come out of their caves of isolation, into circles of support and fellowship with other women leaders. While peer circles of women in similar age groups and life stages will naturally 'jell' better together, there can also be immense value in gathering inter-generational groups of women.

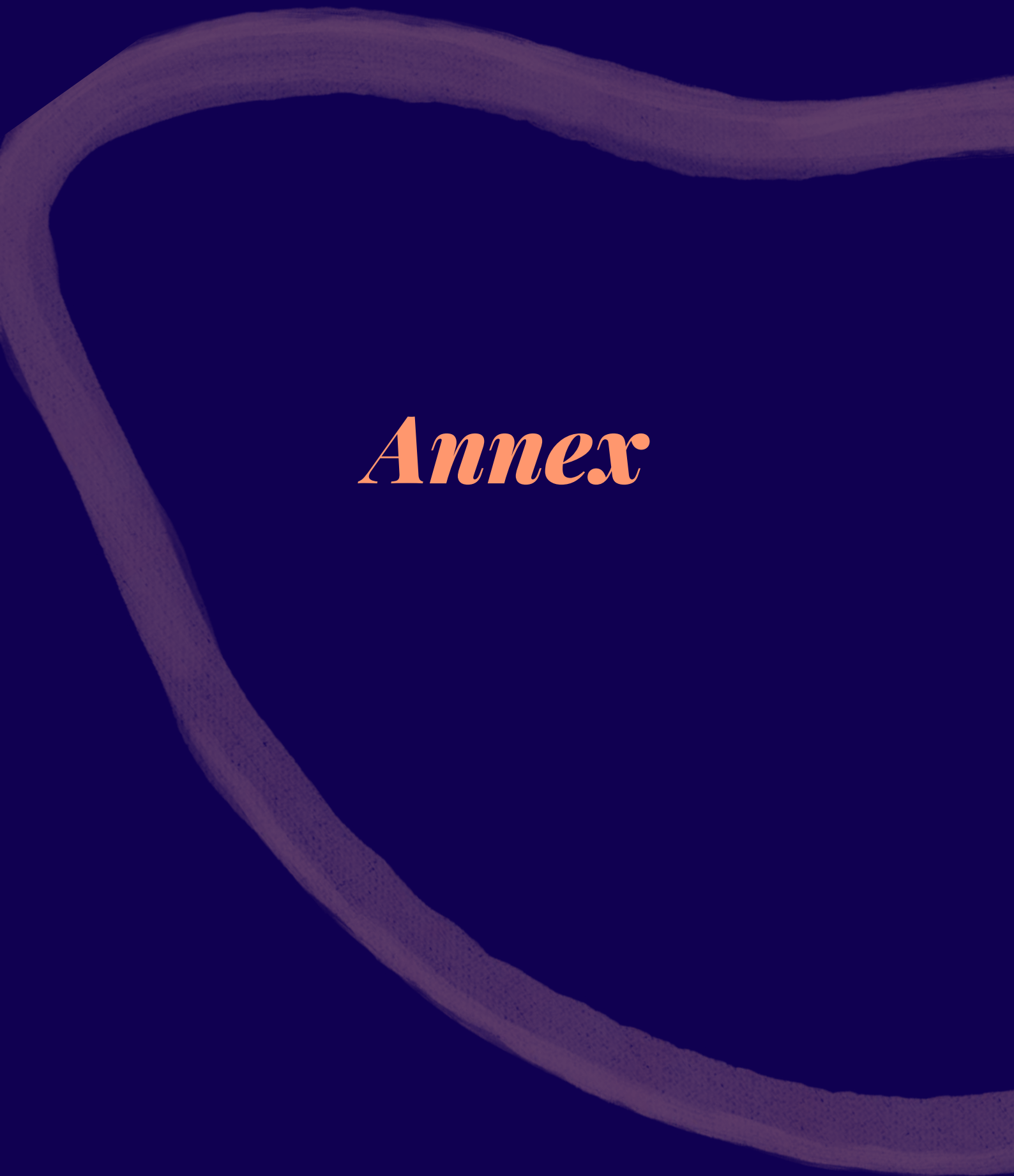
Going a bit further, our pitch to organisations (employers) would be this: organisations that care care about women leaders should present options and incentives for women leaders to gather, as part of their leadership development and support packages for women. This may involve providing discretionary and paid time off, so women can find time within their work hours to connect with other women leaders (external) – rather than after work hours when they need to rush home. Additionally, offering administrative and financial support to help women leaders establish and facilitate regular gatherings could be highly beneficial. Currently, organisations and women leaders themselves are oversubscribed to interventions of a ‘one-off’ nature: conferences, courses, networking events. While these are helpful, we believe that regular gatherings of women leaders can lead to their consistent and sustained growth, development and enhanced wellbeing. On that note: The Mangrove Collective is open to collaborating with organisations and women leaders, to co-create services and platforms that can help establish and expand women leaders’ circles as accessible and effective interventions for women leaders, in Asia and the Pacific.

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Annex

The Journey of Women Leaders Workshop

(The Journey Workshop)



Preparation and Facilitation Guide

Notice

The Mangrove Collective is providing this Workshop Guide as an Annex to the final report of *The Journey of Women Leaders in Asia and the Pacific*, as a free resource. It is our desire that this material is utilised to strengthen and affirm many women leaders around the world, by creating the time and space for them to reflect on their journeys and to tell their stories. This Workshop was developed with women leaders in the international humanitarian, development and social impact sectors in mind; however, its design is largely context-neutral and can be adapted for use in any sector of work, in any country, in any culture, etc.

If you would like to use these materials to run your own *The Journey of Women Leaders © Workshop* (or, *The Journey © Workshop*), please go ahead! However, **we ask that you first obtain our consent** as a token of appreciation and professional respect. We do need to inform you that *The Journey of Women Leaders © Workshop*, including all materials and content provided (including this Workshop Guide), is protected by intellectual property laws. Therefore, the unauthorised reproduction, distribution, or use of any materials or content without explicit permission from The Mangrove Collective is strictly prohibited.

If you are running your own workshop based on our material, we ask that you introduce it as '*The Journey of Women Leaders © Workshop*, developed by The Mangrove Collective', or 'The Mangrove Collective's *The Journey of Women Leaders © Workshop*'. The same requirement applies when you use the abbreviated title of the workshop (e.g. '*The Journey © Workshop* by The Mangrove Collective').

Please do **get in touch with us** for permissions and/or inquiries, or if you would like The Mangrove Collective to actually run the workshop for your organisations, teams or groups for a fee. This can be done both online and offline; we strongly recommend the former!

Please write to: eunchim@themangrovecollective.com

Workshop Description

SUGGESTED FORMAT

- Face-to-face / in-person (but also can be adapted into an online workshop)
- Small groups format, with 4 – 6 participants per group; each group must have even numbers; there can be multiple groups
- Full day workshop with 2 morning and 3 afternoon sessions, including lunch and coffee/tea breaks



OBJECTIVES



- For participants (women leaders), at various phases of life and leadership, to reflect on their journeys and share it with others (participants) through storytelling
- For participants to identify the factors that shape their leadership values and approach, and to provide input to affirm others (fellow participants) as they share theirs
- To share common personal and professional challenges (within groups) and offer wisdom and solutions to one another

ANTICIPATED RESULTS

- An appreciation of participants' own journeys and a clearer understanding and articulation of their leadership values, approaches and strengths
- Personal as well as group catharsis and healing through storytelling and being heard/seen
- Gleaning of collective wisdom from groups of women leaders on how to maximise the enabling factors for women leaders to be well, and to thrive
- Organic formation of peer support and/or mentoring groups - amongst workshop participants



WORKSHOP INTRODUCTION STATEMENT

"The Journey of Women Leaders workshop is an empowering full-day workshop designed for women leaders at all stages of their journeys. In a small group format of 4-6 participants, you will explore storytelling as a tool for reflection, share personal and professional challenges, and cultivate a deeper understanding of your leadership values and approach - while providing mutual affirmation and support. Experience a transformative day filled with insightful discussions, collective wisdom, and the formation of lasting peer support networks, all aimed at helping you thrive as a leader."

Workshop Sessions

SESSION 1: Gathering + Welcome to My Space

Duration: 1 hour



OBJECTIVE

- Participants warm up to the occasion and articulate what they would like to experience/glean from the workshop (*Plenary session*)
- Participants are introduced to their group members, and give/accept permission to come into their 'space', to share their lives and hear their stories (*Small Groups*)

ACTIVITIES

- Opening
- Introductions: Facilitators and participants
- Expectation-setting (participants): "*I am hoping to....*"
- Ceremonies: "*I invite you into my space*" (*accompanied by symbolic acts of extending and accepting invitations*)

NOTES

- Give participants maximum time to mingle and speak
- The 'inviting you in' ceremonies could be chosen based on cultural and other contexts (*unless workshop participants come from various or mixed ethnicities, nationalities, cultures, etc.*)

SESSION 2: Tell Me Your Story

Duration: 2 hours



OBJECTIVE

- In pairs within assigned small groups, participants share the stories of their life and leadership journeys – with one as interviewee and the other as interviewer

ACTIVITIES

- Review interview guidance questions/notes (10 mins)
- 1st interview: Participant A interviews B (50 mins)
- Short break (10 mins)
- 2nd interview: Participant B interviews A (50 mins)

NOTES

- Participants use the mementos and/or photos they brought when telling their stories
- The interviewer practices deep listening skills
- The interviewee finds opportunities to express and articulate her journey to someone
- The interviewee gives feedback to the interviewer, and vice versa

SESSION 3: Journeying Together

Duration: 2 hours



OBJECTIVE

- Each small group member tells the story of the person they interviewed, to the rest of the small group (*10 mins each*)

ACTIVITIES

- 1st story (*10 mins*)
- Responses, affirmations, Q&As from small group
- 2nd story (*10 mins*)
- Responses, affirmations, Q&As
- 3rd story (*10 mins*)
- Responses, affirmations, Q&As
- 4th story (*10 mins*)
- Responses, affirmations, Q&As
- 5th story (*10 mins*)
- Responses, affirmations, Q&As
- 6th story (*10 mins*)
- Responses, affirmation, Q&As

NOTES

- The person whose story is being told has the opportunity to hear their story being told (objectively)
- The listeners in the group get to affirm the person whose story is being told
- Listeners take notes of themes they'd like to return to, in the next session (i.e. enabling factors vs. challenges, highs and lows, etc.)
- If the group is smaller, this session will take less than 2 hr

SESSION 4: Collective Wisdom

Duration: 2 hours



OBJECTIVE

- Participants share wisdom with one another in response to the challenges for women in leadership, and share resources that can strengthen/enable them

ACTIVITIES

- Participants share enabling factors and challenges from the stories they have shared/heard
- Participant share/offer wisdom on pertinent topics
- Participants share about resources that women leaders can utilise

NOTES

- Rather than becoming a theoretical discussion, the session should produce practical help / resources for participants
- There may be room for participants to produce their personal action plans for thriving

SESSION 5: Coming Together + Celebrations!

Duration: 45 minutes



OBJECTIVE

- Create a mosaic (figuratively – or literally!) of significant moments from the sessions, capturing the collective experience of participants
- Participants encapsulate the day's experience or key takeaways into a message to themselves

ACTIVITIES

- Plenary session: Sharing themes/keywords from sessions
- Plenary session: Testimonials/sharing from participants (volunteers) on significant moments or learnings
- Crafting a message to myself (Write it on a polaroid photo or postcard, or write it and post it on your Instagram/social media)
- Take group we-fies!
- Whole group photo with all participants and facilitators
- End with a celebratory act

NOTES

- Ask for consent if recording testimonials/sharing
- Ask for consent to take photos and use them for social media posts after the event
- Register interest of those who may be interested in becoming facilitators for future workshops

SAMPLE SCHEDULE

(1-day event)

Morning

SESSION 1



SESSION 2



Lunch Break

SESSION 3



Brain Break

SESSION 4

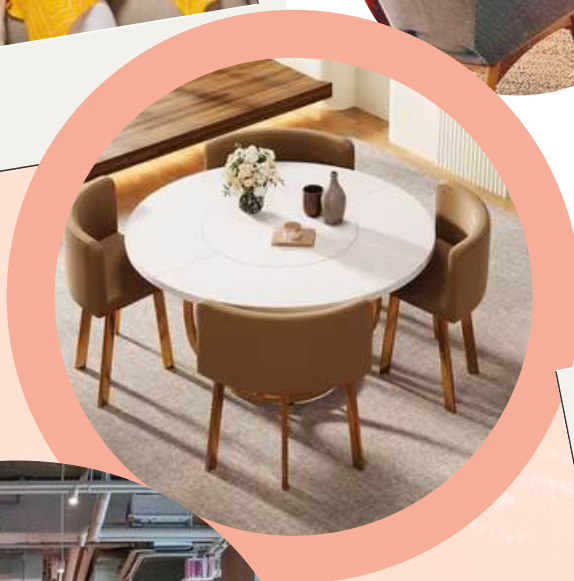


SESSION 5



Afternoon

Inspiration Board



Workshop Guidance

PRE-WORKSHOP

- Registration: Ensure that there are even numbers of participants (total), in multiples of 4 (i.e. 4, 8, 12, 16, 20...)
- In your registration form, ensure that you can identify the ages and backgrounds of participants; when forming small groups, try to have a mix of age groups and backgrounds – avoid making them too homogenous
- Send out participant information email, with information on time, date and venue; ask participants to bring 3-4 mementos or photos that represent their leadership journey
- Secure 1 Workshop Lead + 1 facilitator per small group (ideally; or 1 facilitator for 2 groups, max) to guide and observe the participants throughout the day
- Identify a venue that is conducive for gathering women and making them feel comfortable and at ease. A space that looks less stiff/cold/rectangular with lighting, good ventilation and some natural plants/flowers would work well.
- Arrange catering for meals and coffee/tea breaks
- Procure and print materials



SET-UP ON WORKSHOP DAY

- Set up tables and chairs around the venue, 1 per small group.
- If possible, using less official/work-like furniture (i.e. round tables, bean bags, sofas, etc.) will be more conducive
- Each small group table should have notepads, note-taking templates for stories (4-6 per participant), 'Message to myself' postcards, pens, post-its, a polaroid camera with film (if possible/desirable), snacks, water jugs and cups, tissue box, etc.
- Have music and audio ready to create good ambience (a mix of relaxing + vibrant tones)
- Registration table with name tags for participants



RUNNING THE WORKSHOP: SESSION GUIDANCE

SESSION 1 “Gathering + Welcome to My Space”

- Introduce Workshop and Objectives (10 mins)
- Introduce Workshop Lead, facilitators and participants (participants introduce themselves within their small groups) (10 mins)
- Workshop Leader asks participants for consent for photographing them during the workshop (**Ask those who do not wish to be photographed to notify their group facilitator*)
- Expectation setting: Ask participants to share in their small groups (“Through the Journey Workshop, I am hoping to -----.”) (10 mins)
- Entering each other’s spaces: Ceremonies in small groups (20 mins)



SESSION 2 “Tell Me Your Story”

- Brief intro and scene-setting from group facilitator (5 mins). Should touch upon:
 - Importance of confidentiality – what is shared in the group stays in the group
 - Attributes of deep listening
 - Effective interviewing guidance
 - What to do if emotions run high (regulation tips)
- Pairing up within small groups – use any method to create pairs. Designate participant A and B in each pair.
- Review of interview questions (to attach) (5 mins)
- Interview 1 – participant A is interviewed by B (50 mins)
- Short break (10 mins)
- Interview 2 – participant B is interviewed by A (50 mins)

SESSION 3 “Journeying Together”

- Facilitator briefs small group on how this session will unfold (5 mins)
- Facilitator circulates templates for note-taking (1 per story, 4-6 per participant depending on total no. of small group) and briefly explains it
- Story #1, followed by responses, affirmations and Q&A (20 mins)
- Story #2, followed by responses, affirmations and Q&A (20 mins)
- Story #3, followed by responses, affirmations and Q&A (20 mins)
- Story #4, followed by responses, affirmations and Q&A (20 mins)
- Story #5, followed by responses, affirmations and Q&A (20 mins)
- Story #6, followed by responses, affirmations and Q&A (20 mins)
- Facilitator keeps participants on track for the time allocated per story (10 mins)
- Facilitator helps participants to share responses, affirmations or questions if the group dynamic is subdued



SESSION 4 “Sharing Wisdom”

- Facilitator briefs small group on how this session will unfold (5 mins)
- Facilitator asks group members to share highlights and key themes from the notes they took during the previous session, while listening to the stories of others (30 mins)
- Small group agrees on 2 challenges and 2 enabling factors for women leaders that they would like to focus on (5 mins)
- Discussions and sharing time (20 mins)



SESSION 5 “Coming Together + Celebration!”

- All participants return to plenary
- Workshop Leader asks a few participants to voluntarily share the key themes for women leaders that they discussed today, and some related insights (3-4 participants, 10-15 mins)
- Workshop Leader asks participants to share their testimonials about significant moments or learnings, or key takeaways from the workshop (2-3 participants, 10-15 minutes)
- Workshop Leader asks participants to take time to craft a message to themselves. They can take a polaroid photo of themselves (if available) or take a postcard; after they write the messages, they can post it on their social media accounts with ‘#JourneyWorkshop’.
- Workshop Leader asks each small group to take group we-fies and post on their social media accounts with ‘#JourneyWorkshop’
- Ask participants to send their group photos to the workshop organiser before leaving
- Ask participants to take 5 minutes to fill out workshop feedback form (Scan QR code or provide internet link)
- Announce that if there are any participants who may be interested in running or becoming facilitators for future workshops, they should get in touch with the workshop team
- Workshop Leader asks entire group to come together for a group photo
- Workshop Leader asks entire group to participate in a celebratory act (whichever is appropriate and fun) to conclude the workshop



POST-WORKSHOP

- Compile photos and testimonials from workshop
- Analyse workshop feedback - for future improvements



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