

Women's Leadership in the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) Scheme

Summary Paper



Photo credit: Pacific Australia Labour Mobility / DFAT

Background

About Women Leading and Influencing (WLI)

Australia Awards *Women Leading and Influencing* (WLI) is an Australian Government initiative that aims to develop the skills, confidence, and connections of leaders to drive positive change in the Pacific region. An on-Award (in-Australia) and reintegration (in-Pacific) enrichment program, WLI offers a range of developmental leadership offerings to Pacific scholars studying at Australian universities and institutions. The program builds on the preceding *Women's Leadership Initiative Pilot* (2017–2022) to enhance support for WLI alumni returning home, and the role of men supporting women as change agents.

Introduction

In November 2022, WLI hosted a virtual [Learning and Networking event](#) on women's leadership in the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme in partnership with the Pacific Labour Facility. Featuring a Q&A and expert panel discussion, the event explored the unique contribution of Pacific women in the scheme, strategies

to engage and maximise their participation in labour mobility, and the ways in which their participation increases women's confidence, agency, and economic success.

The Panel

- Facilitator: **Kristy Nowland**, Gender Equality, Disability and Social Inclusion Manager, Pacific Labour Facility
- **Kerry McCarthy**, Farmer and Worker Welfare Lead, Approved Employers of Australia
- **Mele Leapai**, Worker Support Coordinator, Pacific Labour Facility
- **Dulcie Pania**, QLD Regional Coordinator, Pacific Island Council of Queensland (PICQ)
- **Sione Vaka**, Country Liaison Officer, Pacific Labour Mobility, Tonga
- **Luisa Daroma'a**, Seasonal Worker (Solomon Islands), Rugby Farms

About the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme

The PALM scheme allows eligible Australian businesses to hire workers from participating Pacific islands and Timor-Leste when local workers are not available. Through the PALM scheme, eligible businesses recruit workers for seasonal jobs for up to nine months, or for longer-term roles of between one and four years in unskilled, low-skilled and semi-skilled positions. The scheme helps to fill labour gaps in rural and regional Australia while providing opportunities for Pacific and Timor-Leste workers to take up jobs in Australia, develop their skills, generate income to support their families and communities, and contribute to economic decision-making and the development of the Pacific.

Women's participation in PALM is increasing

Despite being a historically male-dominated program, the participation of women in the PALM scheme's long-term visa has been steadily increasing, from approximately 15 per cent during COVID-19, to 20 per cent and remaining steady; despite high-volume recruitments in male-dominant industry (horticulture, agriculture, and meat processing) during boarder closures and slow re-engagement from female-dominant industry (aged-care and hospitality and tourism).

Women's unique contributions

According to panellists, women provide unique contributions through their work and ultimately create benefits for themselves, their employers, and their home countries and communities.

Benefits to employers

- Women participants are hardworking and have demonstrable ability for leadership, timeliness, and motivating themselves and their colleagues.
- Women are more likely to stay engaged in their work and are far less likely to abscond.

“I see that women also take [on] leadership in supervising; doing men's work; then it gives us more opportunity to go back and stand as leaders and women; not depending, like in Solomon Islands, on men as the leaders. We women know how to lead in anything.”

- Luisa Daroma'a, Seasonal Worker

Benefits for participating women and the Pacific

- According to preliminary findings of women's participation in labour mobility from The World Bank, women gain leadership experience and build self-esteem, confidence, agency, knowledge, financial independence, and skills that they take home.
- Some women have increased control over budgets and household decision-making.
- Women gain experience working in a structured Australian employment setting.
- Participating women become role models for young girls in the Pacific who are then exposed to opportunities they can undertake in the future.

- Women build on “what they know” and maximise the value of remittances sent back to support families and communities in the Pacific. According to The World Bank, women also send back more money than men in remittances to Pacific countries.
- Women are “considered to be more focused on family needs and better financial decision-makers” with social goals such as supporting education.

“As time goes on, I feel confident that I can do something when I go back home in the future; building a home; taking care of my siblings. If I want to go back to school, I can do it.”

- Luisa Daroma'a, Seasonal Worker

“The younger girls in school are looking at these women as role models. These are women who have never completed formal schooling and often go to work with family in the market garden. And then, the biggest thing is to get married. It's life changing for them. They're changing the hopes and aspirations of young women throughout these remote villages.”

- Kerry McCarthy, Approved Employer

Research shows women participants more focused on social goal-setting

According to responses of men and women participants who took part in a PALM pre-departure survey about their personal goals when returning home:

- Men were more likely than women to have economic goals such as building or purchasing a house or making a financial investment.
- Women were slightly more likely than men to focus on social goals including supporting family, saving for the future, their children's education, and supporting the church and community.

Strategies to maximise women's participation and engagement

Advocating for employers to recruit women

Actively promoting the capabilities and effectiveness of women participating in the scheme, including in male-dominated fields like agriculture, horticulture and meat-processing, helps to ensure employers consider women for appropriately skill-matched work.

“I visited a farm and was surprised to see that in this group, all the workers were males and there was one female. The feedback from the farm was that the female is doing a much greater job than most of the males ... There are females out there who are strong in body and heart and can step out of their comfort zone and do better work as well.”

- Sione Vaka, Country Liaison Officer

Building knowledge of local service providers

Building women's (and men's) knowledge of and connection to local service providers and community organisations in the areas in which they are based increases community connection, self-confidence, health and wellbeing of workers. This includes local sporting

organisations, churches, and health facilities, including for sexual reproductive health which is often stigmatised.

“We were able to successfully deliver a [sexual and reproductive health] project tailored to the worker cohort ... Our workers are not vulnerable if they are equipped with the knowledge to make decisions that affect them...”

- Mele Leapai, Pacific Labour Facility

“[Community Connections] helps workers connect with the local communities where they are based... We connect them to the services, sporting activities, and churches... I truly would like to acknowledge the role of volunteers who take on the role of supporting workers wherever they are located.”

- Dulce Pania, Pacific Islands Council QLD

Upskilling workers in Australia

The PALM scheme aims to provide opportunities for seasonal workers to gain new skills and qualifications that will provide them with more opportunities and income while in Australia and when they return home. This includes English language skills as well as technical skills and qualifications relevant to their industry.

Addressing barriers to and enablers to participation

Working closely with stakeholders in the Pacific and Australia to identify and remove barriers and strengthen enablers for women will boost their participation and engagement.

Some barriers identified by panellists include:

- challenging or antisocial behaviours and ill-health,
- financial barriers,
- pervasive gender norms (and gender inequality more broadly) that prevent accessing economic opportunity, compared with men,
- negative competitive community attitudes that view women’s participation in the scheme as taking opportunity away from men,
- Supply and cost of housing available to safely accommodate women participating in the scheme.

“Approved employers are required to provide separate accommodation for male and female employees, and in today’s rental market that is very limiting. [This] obligation is

certainly weighing on the approved employers’ decision as to whether they can accommodate females or not.”

- Kerry McCarthy, Approved Employer

Enablers of women’s participation in the scheme which can be strengthened include:

- safe, trusting work environments in which workers can reach out to their employers for support,
- access to skill-building, work experience and education (including leadership training in-country before coming to Australia, financial literacy training),
- creating targeted places for Pacific women in Australia,
- increasing rural Pacific support for gender equality.

“A big influence on women coming through [the PALM scheme] is either the great, or lack of, support in regards to gender equality within that rural village setting. So, more promotion of gender equality throughout the Pacific more broadly will have an impact on those women feeling empowered to sign up to the program.”

- Kerry McCarthy, Approved Employer

Updating policies and processes to include women

Reviewing and updating policies, systems and processes used to recruit workers through a gender-inclusive lens can help to identify barriers and opportunities to engage women and people who identify as non-binary.

“One of the strategies we put in place was allowing the wives to join their husbands in Australia. Before, we only allowed one [parent] or the other to join the program to make sure someone is looking after the children back home...”

- Sione Vaka, Country Liaison Officer

Sector diversification to match skills to jobs

Actively diversifying the sectors and roles that are available through the scheme (including in aged-care, hospitality, and tourism) can also encourage women’s participation. This can also include actively matching women to jobs suited to their skills, for example women have shown to be highly dexterous at picking berries and skilled at working in pack houses.

Want to know more?

Becoming a PALM scheme worker

All workers can gain valuable skills, experience and income to take back to their families and communities. To participate, workers will need to check their eligibility by contacting their Labour Sending Unit (LSU) and be able to obtain a valid visa. Please visit this webpage to find the contact details for the team in your country, they can give you more information about this: <https://www.palmscheme.gov.au/how-apply>

Help for workers

For more information on how workers can access advice and information, visit our [Help for workers](#) page or this [Support for PALM scheme workers](#) fact sheet.

For more information on how employers can support worker welfare as well as links to important fact sheets relevant to workers in Australia, visit our [Worker Support](#) page.

Note: Participants who submitted further questions to panellists will receive a direct response.

Listen to the event recording



Listen to the panel discussion

<http://bit.ly/3Vmts3c>

Or scan the QR code



Find more information on Australia Awards *Women Leading and Influencing* and how you can get involved:



<https://www.wliprogram.org>



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