



Transcript: Episode 2 – Leadership and the Pacific’s strong women with Dame Meg Taylor

News clip:

Jasmin Bauomy (host): What happens when women in the Pacific enter leadership positions?

Dame Meg Taylor (former Secretary General of the Pacific Islands Forum): Yes, there will be criticisms.

There'll be nights when you don't feel so good about the things that have happened, and you'll feel that you've been misunderstood. You've been blamed for things that have happened, that you were not responsible for, but that's all part of the job and there are a lot of strong women in the Pacific.

And I think that we don't get the opportunities, but we have to create the opportunities.

JB: Hello, and welcome to Future Keepers. I'm your host, Jasmin Bauomy and on this mini-series organizational leaders from across the Pacific region, tell us what they learned from past challenges and what they need to remain resilient now and in the future.

On this episode, we're hearing from Dame Meg Taylor, about what it means for women to be in leadership positions, as well as the challenges and opportunities that brings.

Dame Meg Taylor is from Papua New Guinea and my colleague Arieta Rika talk to her when she was still serving as Secretary General to the Pacific Islands Forum, which she was from 2014 up until roughly May this year. Meg has been a professional athlete and she's worked as a lawyer and a diplomat, and that does have an impact on the way she works and looks at the world.

MT: I think what athletics does is about discipline. But it's also about determination and applying your skills and developing your skills.

So that goes back to being a sports woman. And even now I still try to swim 30 laps of the Olympic pool when I have the energy.

I'd say diplomacy is probably one of my least honed skills. I'm pretty much, just saying things as I see them, and that gets me in a bit of trouble at times, but I think that being very clear about the things that are important for us here in the Pacific region and pushing as hard as we can to make sure that we are

heard. The latter part of my work is particularly when I was head of the Compliance Advisor Ombudsman at the World Bank Group.

And that was IFC and MIGA in terms of the issues of their investments, where communities were impacted. And then the complaints were filed to my office. It was an amazing place. And I was the first VP for the CAO set up the office, et cetera, but developing that whole structure and how it would respond to people. I think has had an indelible mark on my, on my life.

It's been important for me always to ensure that people are put forward at the forefront of anything that we do. And I think that's played very much into the way I've tried to work here at the Pacific Island Forum Secretariat, because the leaders in the end have to go back and be responsive to their own constituents into their countries and the decisions that they make both nationally and regionally.

JB: It's not only Meg's personal experiences that shaped the way she carries herself as a leader, but it's also her need to speak out, paired with her deep understanding and integration of some cultural markers of Pacific nations.

MT: I think that in the kind of role I have there's a great responsibility to be clear about speaking out when it's important to speak out, but also to use silence and we in the Pacific do that very powerfully and silence can be a very, very important tool. We shouldn't underestimate it because it's often misread that when we are silent is that we are just agreeing to something and we're not. We wait for situations to evolve.

We're much more patient in that fashion. We don't need a resolution. Bang, bang, bang. You know, everybody has a point of view and when we've got challenges ahead of us, we have to find a way forward and work behind the scenes to make those things happen. I speak out when I have to, but on key political issues, it's the leaders of the Pacific that speak out. And my job as well as my colleagues is to make sure that they're well informed about the issues that they do speak out on.

JB: Countries in Asia and the Pacific have started to recognize women's role as leaders and see them as agents of change. And according to the UN, governments, political bodies, businesses and corporations have moved towards gender parity in recent years.

However, progress remains slow. And so Meg has seen this development evolve over the past years and as early as 1975.

MT: In my own personal life, going back to the early days of self-government and independence in Papua New Guinea, we had a chief minister, Sir Michael Somare who just recently died and we've honored his, his legacy, but one of these legacies was, is that, in the early development of the eight point improvement plan, point 7 was very much around the role of women to be involved in social and economic affairs. And at a very early age young women like myself were appointed onto his staff. In 1975 he created a woman's advisor's office. You know, that was pioneering initiatives at a time when the global agenda was starting to open up for women. And then during his tenure as prime minister and into about two decades or so you'd see women in senior positions, as well as you would also find women in middle management.

JB: Looking back, one cannot help but consider what the situation is for women in the Pacific now. And so according to an ongoing study by the Asian Development Bank's Pacific Private Sector Development Initiative, today women hold 30% of senior management positions in organizations in the Pacific.

That's consistent with the global average. In the Cook Islands, Palau Samoa, Tonga and Vanuatu the proportion of women in senior management was over 30%, yet there are still challenges ahead.

MT: Across the Pacific where are we? We have a lot of young women, going through to tertiary education, coming out as very skilled professional people.

The question, the big challenge is how are they absorbed into senior leadership positions in their countries? Or are they in a path to personal development where they will assume senior positions. I think what I see from the job that I have is that we don't see women applying for senior positions.

And I think this has to be really encouraged to not be afraid of taking on these senior positions. Yes, there will be criticisms. There'll be nights when you don't feel so good about the things that have happened, and you'll feel that you've been misunderstood. You've been blamed for things that have happened, that you were not responsible for, but that's all part of the job and there are a lot of strong women in the Pacific.

And I think that we don't get the opportunities, but we have to create the opportunities.

And as, as you see positions that are advertised or there is opportunities in business, and I think this is the challenge in private sector. One of the biggest challenges in private sector is financial literacy.

If you going to have women in business, you want them to be very well educated in financial literacy so that they know what it means to be in business and how to create those businesses. And in creating the ideas, then they have access to finance.

JB: When it comes to finding new solutions, Meg says the pandemic has revealed some opportunities for women in the digital economy.

MT: It's true that our societies have top down leadership, but I've seen some great innovations are coming through, particularly with the lockdowns that we've had across the Pacific with COVID that the emphasis on digital economy is now starting to emerge in the countries that had hierarchy.

And I think the opportunity here then is that how are we going to have the digital economy actually work.

That can break different boundaries because you're not working in a system that is just dependent on or part of the traditional hierarchy. Because you're working on the internet and you're working virtually a lot of business is done like that.

And I think it can give an opportunity for women. However, what you need is you need cheaper access to internet. You also need to know the markets and you need to have facilitators that can help to make sure that women get an opportunity in that kind of work.

JB: And that was it for this episode of Future Keepers, Many thanks to Dame Meg Taylor for taking the time to talk. This podcast mini-series is a production of the International Finance Corporation, a member of the World Bank Group. IFC's work in the Pacific is supported by the governments of Australia and New Zealand.

And this episode was produced by Good Will Media productions and IFC's communications team. Many thanks to Arieta Rika for conducting the interview. And thank you for listening. I'm Jasmin Bauomy, and I'll talk to you again soon.

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