



Building women's leadership: Evaluation of the contribution of Australia Awards Scholarships

Key Findings

- » Scholarships give women the professional skills which help them advance in their careers despite persistent gender barriers.
- » Scholarships enable women to develop the personal attributes, vision and broad range of skills needed for leadership.
- » Women's leadership outcomes from scholarships could be improved by increasing women's access to scholarships and through more strategic use of different types of Australia Award and post award activities.

Since the 1950's Australia has provided scholarships for men and women from developing countries to study at Australian tertiary institutions to 'develop leadership potential'. Recipients are expected to 'make a significant contribution to their home countries as leaders in their field', and be part of an 'engaged and influential global network of leaders, advocates and change-makers'.



Australia Awards alumni at a reintegration workshop in Aceh, Indonesia.
Photo: Andi Azka

The Office of Development Effectiveness evaluated the contribution that scholarships make to women's leadership. The evaluation included interviews, a document review, and a global analysis of tracer studies in which scholars are asked about experiences and outcomes after completion of their scholarship. Actions needed to improve women's leadership outcomes from scholarships were identified.

'I couldn't have imagined how I would advance my career if it hadn't been for the Australia Award.'

High profile alumna, public sector, Indonesia.

Why prioritise women's leadership? Globally women's participation in leadership lags behind that of men in political, social, and economic spheres. Arguments for increasing the number of women in leadership positions generally fall into three typologies: **1. Rights** — women have equal human rights to men and therefore to opportunities in social, political, and professional life; **2. Effectiveness** — the issues facing society are complex and therefore require a diverse range of inputs for effective solutions; and **3. Representation** — women are more likely to consider the broad range of needs and interests present in societies.

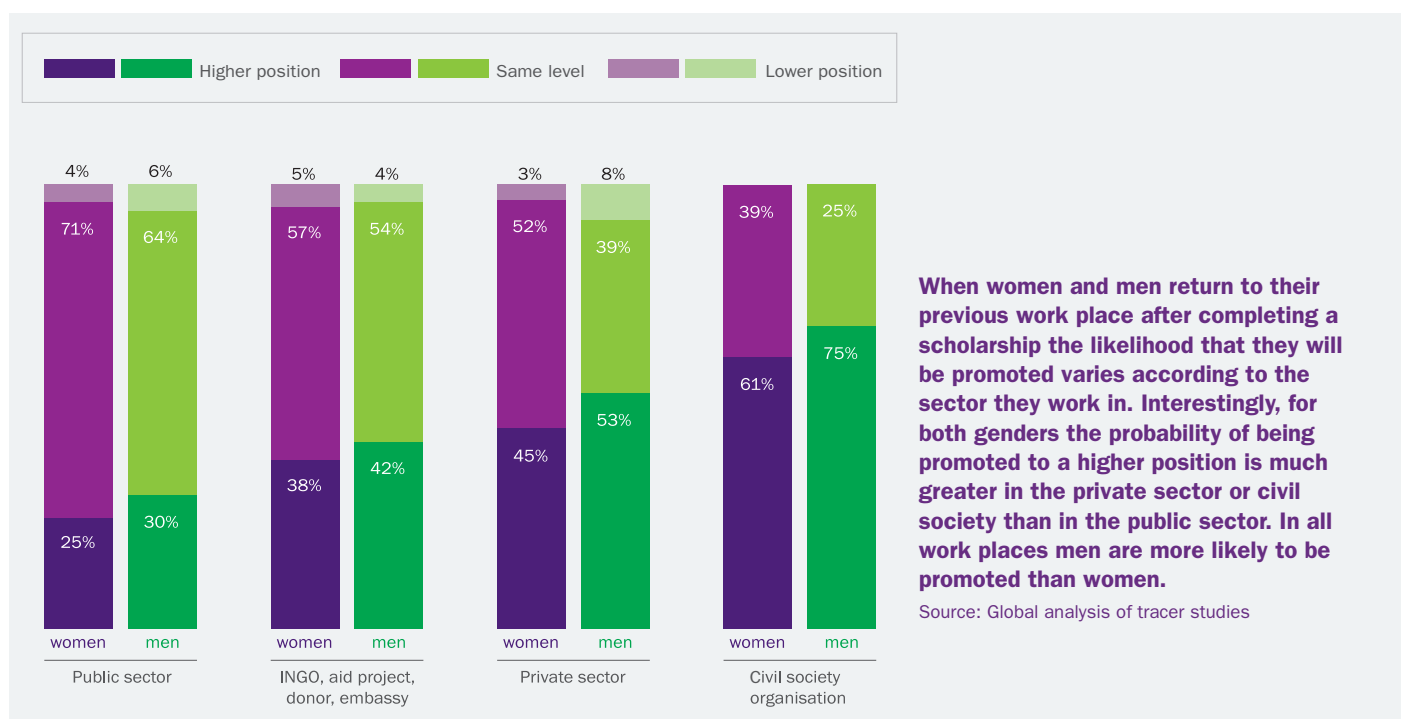
Scholarships facilitate women's career progression

Professional advancement helps women reach positions where they can learn and practice skills necessary for leadership. The evaluation found that Australia Awards Scholarships make a clear contribution to women's professional advancement. Scholarships are a disproportionately important mechanism for women to advance because in many countries the prevalence of discriminatory norms and attitudes limit women's academic and professional opportunities. Women reported that the combination of higher technical skills, the prestige accompanying an overseas tertiary qualification, and often increased proficiency in English, gave them an advantage over other job applicants and helped them to skip rungs on the professional ladder.

'The first [step towards leadership] was actually receiving the Australian Scholarship because for many of us in the country without a western education, the starting point in your career would be considerably lower. So with the Australian education or qualification you already start at a level above the majority in the country.' Alumna, private sector, Lao PDR.

The evaluation found that:

- » Most women are employed after returning home.
- » Just over three quarters of women report having greater operational or technical responsibility, and just over half report having greater financial responsibility within the first three years of return from a scholarship.
- » Most women move into higher positions after their scholarships.
- » Almost all women and their supervisors felt that scholarships contributed to a great or medium extent to professional advancement.



Scholarships help women become leaders

The evaluation found that as well as enabling women to advance professionally, scholarships helped women develop the personal attributes, vision and broad range of skills needed for leadership. The scholarship experience of living in Australia for an extended time was frequently cited as being transformative by catalysing development of attributes including independence, confidence, self-belief and open-mindedness. These attributes help women see themselves as leaders, a critical prerequisite for leadership.

'There is a difference for women who study in (their home) country. They are less outspoken and less confident and don't feel fully confident to express their opinion. Women who have studied overseas are very confident...they are independent.'

Supervisor of alumna, public sector, Lao PDR.

Scholarships were found to be transformative for women from countries or provincial settings where women experience particularly restrictive and discriminatory social and cultural norms. Studying in a developed country provides an opportunity to see how systems can work which helps develop a vision for change that is integral to effective leadership.

'[I saw] how well arranged the infrastructure in Australia was in terms of public transportation, water systems, and roads. It gave me ideas of how to design urban settlements, and how to make the proper plans to manage infrastructure.'

High-profile alumna, public sector, Indonesia

Women also reported that overseas study taught them how to work in more effective ways. Examples given included working faster, evidence-based decision making, valuing research and working as an equal with decision makers.

'... one thing that I gained in Australia is the fact that you need to do your research, before you make any changes or voice your opinion ...' Alumna, civil society, Samoa.

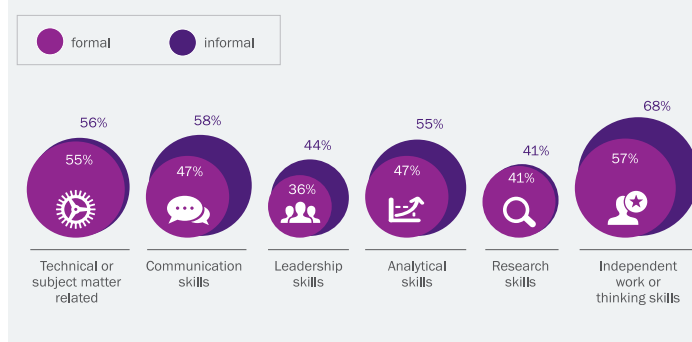
Notably there were also some changed attitudes and observed behaviours amongst male alumni around women's leadership and workplace roles.

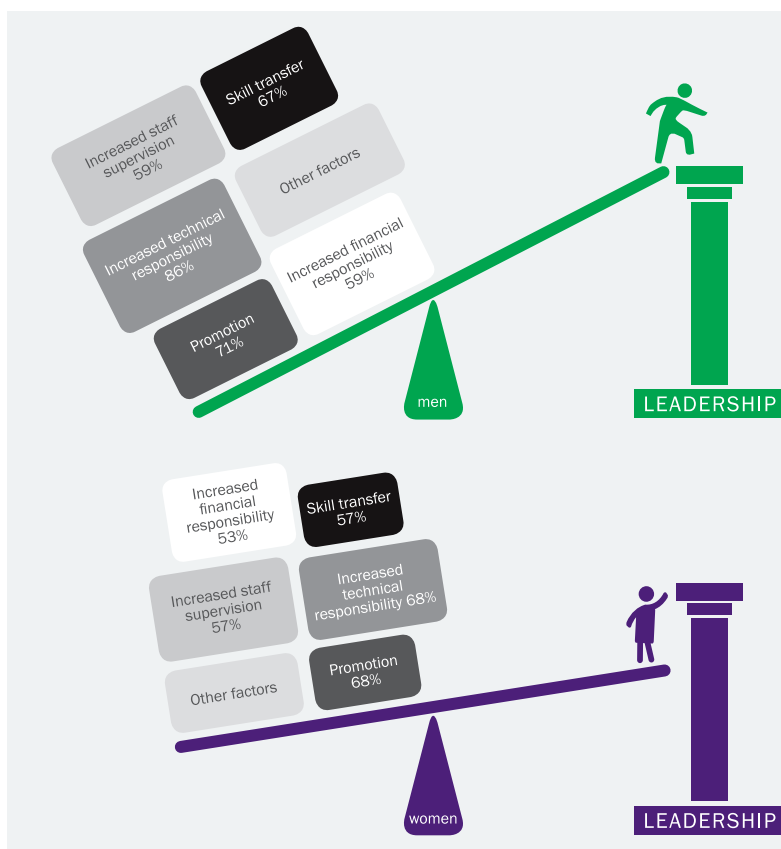
'If men have completed overseas study they are more respectful of females. If they have just been working here it is quite difficult to delegate.' Alumna, public sector, Lao PDR.

The evaluation found that Australia Awards alumnae are exercising leadership in many ways, in many settings and at many levels. Women interviewed placed strong importance on mentoring and guiding others as being a critical aspect of leadership. More than half of women reported that after returning from their scholarship they were supervising more staff and most of them considered that this was largely due to their scholarship.

After returning home many women show leadership by transferring a range of skills to others both formally in the workplace and informally in other settings.

Source: Global analysis of tracer studies





Scholarships contribute to women's professional advancement but the proportion of women who reported positive outcomes for a broad range of measures was consistently less than that for men. While some of the gender differences are small, if women are disadvantaged in many different ways the cumulative impact of this may be sufficient to make it much harder for women to become leaders.

Source: Global analysis of tracer studies

The myth of meritocracy has two dimensions:

1. Those assessing 'merit' are heavily shaped by their experiences and values which are influenced by gender. For example, the areas of expertise and types of work valued by women are often undervalued by men.
2. The person being assessed is shaped by self-belief and by opportunity both of which are highly gendered. For example, women, often have shorter and less continuous time in the work place than their male colleagues.

Improving women's leadership outcomes

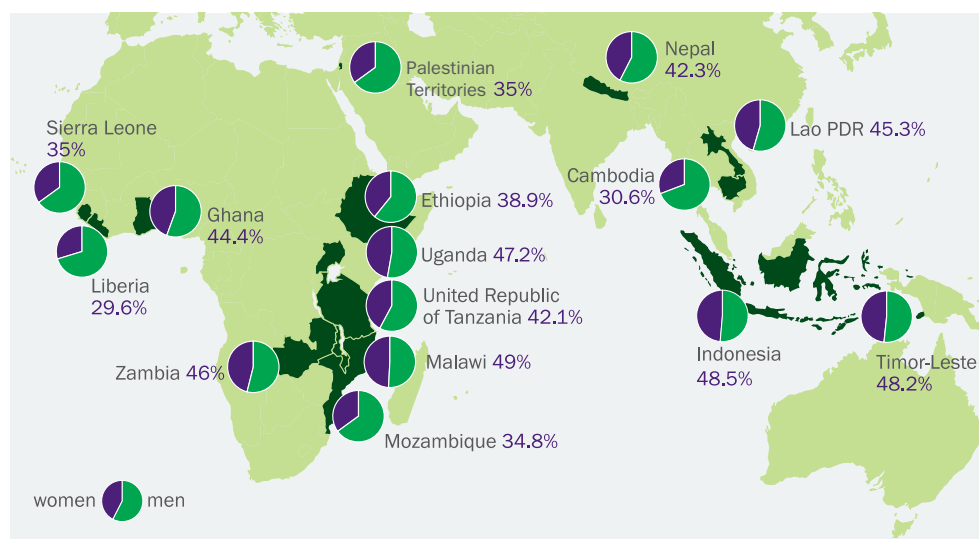
The evaluation identified actions needed to further improve women's leadership from an already promising base. These actions include ensuring women have access to and are awarded scholarships to at least achieve gender parity, using activities to build on gains from scholarships and improving monitoring and evaluation.

Concerted, well considered efforts have succeeded in increasing the number of women receiving scholarships in some of the most difficult contexts. The work done by Australia Awards Pakistan provides a good model of how parity can be achieved in difficult contexts. Overall women received 55 per cent of scholarships in 2013 and 2014.

The proportion of scholarships awarded to women varies greatly at the country level. In some countries, including

Mongolia, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Samoa and Tonga, over 60 percent go to women. In other countries less than half are awarded to women with some falling well short of parity. This may serve to entrench gender inequity.

Recommendation 1: DFAT Posts should be required to revise selection criteria and processes for Australian Awards Scholarships to improve women's leadership outcomes. In all countries where there are ten or more scholarships awarded annually at least 50 percent should be awarded to women. If country programs have not identified sufficient women to meet this requirement, the number of men awarded scholarships should be reduced until a gender balance is achieved. Selection criteria should be revised to increase the probability that women who have leadership potential or proven leadership capacity can secure scholarships.



Women were awarded less than half of scholarships in 15 of the 38 countries which allocated 20 or more scholarships in total for 2013 and 2014. In some of these countries men were awarded many more scholarships than women.

Source: DFAT

In some countries, scholarships are targeted to priority development sectors, the public sector, key organisations in the public sector and geographic focus areas. Targeting often results in high allocations to the public sector, while typically most women applying for scholarships come from other sectors. Many women felt they were more likely to become influential leaders if they were working outside the public sector. Women's leadership outcomes could therefore be improved by reducing targeting to enable more women to apply for and secure scholarships.

Recommendation 2: DFAT posts should be required to revise targeting strategies to improve women's leadership outcomes. At least half of scholarships should be open to all candidates.

In some countries there has been a gradual shift in Australia Awards investments from scholarships to short-term training (short course awards and fellowships). In the context of budgetary constraints, a shift to short courses may be appropriate in some countries which have well developed tertiary education systems or domestic scholarship schemes. The nature of short courses means that they are unlikely to have the leadership building effects of scholarships. The shift to short courses also appears to disadvantage women. Most short courses have not been designed or delivered with a gender equality objective and the participants have predominantly been men. Different award types need to be used more strategically to build women's leadership and strengthen outcomes from scholarships.

Recommendation 3: DFAT should use different types of Australia Awards in addition to scholarships to build women's leadership.

There was broad support amongst women interviewed for post-scholarship leadership training in their home environment. Promising innovation in this area includes an initiative in Mongolia working with both women and men and a short course in Indonesia for female leaders in civil society. Australia Awards alumni associations have been established in many countries to maintain engagement with scholars but have not been used effectively to support women's leadership. The Africa Women in Leadership Network provides a good model of how alumni associations can be used to support women's leadership.

Recommendation 4: DFAT should explore options for post-scholarship leadership development for women, and to build male supporters of, and advocates for, women leaders.

Tracer studies need to be consistently and regularly used to build a body of evidence to assess the contribution of scholarships. The tracer study questionnaire needs to be modified so that leadership outcomes can be more fully assessed. Currently devolved management and implementation of scholarships has provided country programs with flexibility, but it has also meant that lessons learnt have not been adequately shared. Tracer study data,

evaluations and learnings from country programs should be compiled centrally and shared between country programs.

Recommendation 5: The DFAT Scholarships and Alumni Branch should revise existing monitoring and evaluation to include a specific focus on leadership outcomes, and establish processes to share knowledge between country posts.

Scholarships are particularly transformative for women from low income countries where gender inequality is pronounced. In such contexts Australia Awards should prioritise investments in scholarships in preference to other types of award and supplementary activities. Scholarships will be better able to support inclusive and sustainable development if they have women's leadership as an explicit goal.

Recommendation 6: DFAT should continue to invest in scholarships and make building women's leadership an explicit goal of scholarships.

Achieving potential in a progressive workplace: The ANZ bank in Lao PDR specifically encourages Australia Awards scholars to apply during its recruitment rounds, considering them to be 'just miles ahead' of others. Ten per cent of ANZ Lao staff are Australia Awards alumni. The bank's strong commitment to women's leadership has allowed women with Australian qualifications to flourish. All of the Lao women on the bank's executive committee in Vientiane are Australian alumnae. These women felt that increased visibility of women in the private sector does have a broader influence. Photo Anne Lockley



The Office of Development Effectiveness (ODE) is an independent branch within the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT). The full evaluation report and the management response to it can be accessed at www.ode.dfat.gov.au.