

## POLICY BRIEF

### POLITICAL REPRESENTATION AND WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT IN SAMOA

#### 1. RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

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The research aimed to document the structural obstacles to women's participation in local and national government and the implications, if any, for women's economic status. The hypothesis was that the 'roadblock' to women's political participation is Samoa's neo-traditional local government system (each village in Samoa is governed by a council of matai and approximately 80% of the population live in villages). Samoan women have achieved approximate equality to men in most modern spheres of government and the economy, but have never, since Samoa's independence in 1962, succeeded in winning more than five seats in the 49 seat parliament. In most parliaments, women have held only one or two seats, usually for a single term. In 2015 Samoa was among the countries ranked lowest in the world for women's representation in parliament, at 128 out of 140 countries.

The research was conducted with assistance from, and in collaboration with, the Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture (MESC) and the Ministry of Women, Community and Social Development (MWCSD) over the period April 2013 to July 2015. It consisted of (i) a nationwide survey of women's participation in political and economic village-based organizations, covering all 'traditional' villages and sub-villages in Samoa; (ii) a qualitative study of village organisation in a sample of 30 villages with and without formal obstacles to women's participation in village government, and (iii) interviews of women candidates who have stood for past elections.

#### 2. FINDINGS

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##### 2.1 The Constitution and CEDAW<sup>1</sup>

The Constitution of Samoa prohibits discrimination on the grounds of a person's sex and Samoa is a party to CEDAW without reservations. The law provides that all persons over the age of 21 are entitled to vote in an election. However to be eligible to stand for parliament, a person must be a registered matai (chief) endorsed by his or her village. The research identified many structural/cultural obstacles to women standing for parliament.

##### 2.2 Women's eligibility.

Women are eligible to hold matai titles, but only 5.5% of village-based matai are women. Approximately one in every 12 Samoan adults holds a matai title. Matai titles are conferred by families and lineages and there are cultural preferences to bestow titles on male rather than female heirs. Because few women have matai titles they play a minimal (if any) role in village government: in local government councils, church leadership, or leadership roles in school management and community-based organisations. About 30% of all village-based small businesses are owned by women. Without significant participation in leadership decision-making at the village level, it is difficult for women to become – or to be seen as – national leaders.

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<sup>1</sup> The United Nations Convention to End All form of Discrimination Against Women.

## 2.3 Electoral disadvantage

Nineteen villages, located in 14 out of 42 parliamentary constituencies, do not recognise women matai. Villages are the backbone of the electoral system in Samoa and comprise the majority of the voting population in all but two of Samoa's 42 constituencies. Villages that do not allow women to hold matai titles disadvantage a woman wishing to stand in that electorate, in a manner that could be considered contrary to the spirit and the provisions of the constitution.

### KEY RESEARCH FINDINGS

***Very few women participate in village government or are eligible to stand for parliament.***

*2.1 Practices by some village councils contravene Samoa's constitutional provisions for gender equality and commitments to CEDAW*

*2.2 Women are eligible to hold matai titles, but only 5.5% of village-based matai are women.*

*2.3 Women candidates are disadvantaged in 14 out of 42 parliamentary constituencies where villages do not recognise women as matai.*

*2.4 Customary norms deter eligible women from taking a seat in the village council.*

*2.5 Village women's committees report indirectly and infrequently to the village council.*

## 2.4 Few women in village government

The most common obstacle to women's participation in local government is that few female matai sit in the village councils, even when their matai titles are recognised by the village. This is due to a number of cultural attitudes and practices documented by the research. The church is an important arena for demonstrating leadership ability and leadership in a church community is important, even essential, for those aspiring to stand for parliamentary election. The survey found that justifications for the exclusion of women from decision-making roles in villages were more frequently based on religious grounds than on customary grounds.

## 2.5 Women do not represent themselves in village government.

Most villages have women's committees, but these do not have policy or decision-making roles in village government. Issues of concern to the women committee are usually relayed to the village council indirectly through the official village council representative

## 3. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The State has no power to change Samoan customs but villages are obliged to comply with laws of Samoa and their traditional

powers are limited by law. A Bill to amend the Village Fono Act, 1990 will, if passed by parliament, extend the powers of the village council to define village council policy, by-laws and procedures to be followed in making village council decisions. The proposed amendments will give legal recognition to the authority of the village council to protect Samoan customs and traditions, and to

safeguard village traditions, norms and protocols. It could also potentially entrench the exclusion of women's participation in local government.

It is likely that cultural and religious values that limit women's political participation will only change

gradually. Therefore, In keeping with provisions of the Constitution of Samoa (Article 15) for the equality of citizens, and the rights of Samoan families to bestow their matai titles (Article 100), the researchers recommend that the parliament consider, in its current deliberations on the amendment of the Village Fono Act 1990, to include provisions to:

### **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

#### ***The Amendment of the Village Fono Act should include provisions that:***

- *Forbid discriminate on the basis of sex with regard to the recognition of matai titles, or the right of a matai to participate in the village council.*
- *Require village councils to formally consult with the women leaders of the village in defining village policy, by-laws, and decision-making procedures.*
- *Require that representative of the village women's committee may directly represent their issues and concerns to the village council at its meetings.*

- Disallow village councils to discriminate on the basis of sex with regard to the recognition of matai titles, or the right of a matai to participate in the village council.

- Formally consult with the women leaders of the village on the formulation of village by-laws, village council policy, and on procedures to be followed in making village council decisions.

- Provide that the president of the village women's committee and/or the village women's representative may directly represent issues and concerns of the village women's committee to the village council at its meetings.

The research team also recommends that the Churches of Samoa, through the Samoa

Council of Churches, and within their respective established doctrines, processes and procedures, consider ways and means to:

- Formally remove leadership barriers in the Church based on sex.
- Give women more voice in the government and leadership of the Church at village level.
- Increase Church leadership towards ending family violence.

## **5. PROVISION OF POLICY ADVICE.**

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Amendments to the Village Fono Act are before parliament in the 2015 June-July session. Detailed representations on these recommendations concerning the Village Fono Act were made to parliament in the form of a letter in the Samoan language to each member of parliament, Cabinet and to the Prime Minister, in June 2015. Representations were also been made to the Attorney General of Samoa, and the Chief Executive Officer of the Law Reform Commission. Representation to the Samoa Council of Churches was made in July 2015.

The overall aim of the research has been to encourage a conversation on the issue of women's political participation which has been achieved through the dissemination of the research findings in the media, and a number of public consultations and debriefings in English and in Samoan. The research has also been shared with UN Women and UNDP Samoa offices which have on-going programs to encourage women's political participation.

## **7. FOLLOW-UP RESEARCH**

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General elections will be held in Samoa in early 2016. We recommend that an election study be conducted with particular attention to constituencies with women candidates. The Centre for Samoan Studies is seeking funds to conduct this study.

## **FURTHER READING**

Meleisea et. al. 2015. Political representation and women's empowerment in Samoa. Volume 1: Findings and Recommendations. Volume II: Methods and Results. Centre for Samoan Studies, National University of Samoa.

Schoeffel, Penelope and Measina Meredith. 2015. Women and Politics in Samoa: Tradition versus Modernity' in Nicole George and Kerryn Baker (eds.) 'Women in Politics in the Pacific Islands'. Australian National University e-Press (forthcoming)