

## **RESEARCH BRIEF**

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

**Centre for Samoan Studies  
National University of Samoa**

The research aimed to better understand the barriers to women's political participation in Samoa. The paradoxical situation is that Samoan women have achieved approximate equality to men in most modern spheres of government and the economy, yet 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.

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 electorates. Any person holding a registered matai title may stand for parliament. Matai are persons chosen by the senior male and female members of extended family or lineage ('aiga) to hold a family title, with the endorsement of the village with which the title is historically associated. To legally register a title, a representative of the village must sign the title registration form. Until 1991 only matai could vote in elections. Following a referendum in that year, the franchise was extended to all persons over 21 years of age.

The research found that although women own approximately 30% of village based businesses, the system of traditional village government in Samoa presents significant barriers that limit women's access to and participation in decision-making forums in local government councils, church leadership, school management and community-based organisations. 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.

Obstacles to women standing for or being elected to parliament include many cultural factors. Traditional villages have long been organised around separate statuses and roles of men and women in which executive authority is vested in men. The trend of social and economic change has tended to undermine the traditionally high status of women as 'daughters' of the village, and the important roles of village women's committees in the 20th century.

Samoan culture, ever flexible, resilient and accommodating, has responded to a number of social and religious changes over the past 200 years. New ways have been found to honour women in new circumstances. Since the 1960s, increasing numbers of Samoan women have become matai, often in

recognition of their educational and career achievements; however of all village-based matai, only about 5% are women.

The process of cultural accommodation is still unfolding. Although most villages do recognise women matai, 19 villages do not, on the grounds of tradition. This means that even if a woman is given a title by her lineage, she cannot legally hold it if it is not recognised by the village. This is a very obvious impediment to women wishing to stand for parliamentary elections because village councils are highly influential in elections, especially villages with the large populations of eligible voters. When village councils back a candidate, that candidate has a strong chance of winning the seat.

The most common obstacle to women's voice in local government is that among the very few female matai living in villages, even fewer sit in the village councils. This form of exclusion is very difficult to quantify because it may not be formally articulated, but is more of an unspoken norm. A common justification is that when men jest together women cannot be present because of the customary concept of 'o le va tapuia (sacred space), an aspect of the covenant of respect between sisters and brothers. Leaving aside the question of whether such jesting is appropriate or dignified in village council meetings, it is evident that many believe that women matai would not feel comfortable participating in meetings in most villages. Their absence reinforces public perceptions – even religious beliefs – that decision-making is a male prerogative, not only in the village councils, but also in village school committees, and by extension, in national parliament.

Article 15 of the Constitution of Samoa forbids discrimination on the grounds of sex, but Article 100 provides that a matai title shall be held in accordance with Samoan custom and uses and with the 'law according to Samoan custom and usage'. This law is not defined in the constitution or any legal act. However, a Bill to amend the Village Fono Act of 1990 may give village councils legal authority to protect Samoan customs and traditions, and to safeguard village traditions, norms and protocols, and may empower them to define village customs and traditions. Such authority is already invoked by some villages as grounds for refusing recognition to women matai.

While the research team acknowledges that much of Samoa's social stability rests on the continued effectiveness of village councils and churches in village government, the exclusion or marginalisation of women's voice in the governing of Samoa's villages, as well as at the national level, is likely to be to be counterproductive in relation to some of Samoa's development issues. These issues have been well documented in government reports and include high rates of teenage pregnancy and prevalence of sexually transmitted infections, poor management of village and district schools, prevalence of family violence and gender-based violence, lack of attention to the needs of girls in village youth organisations, inadequate vaccination coverage in infants and children, problematic use of alcohol and drugs, pockets of rural poverty and disadvantage, and prevalence of preventable non-communicable diseases. Women as well as men need to take leadership in addressing these issues and women need and deserve more voice in setting local priorities.

The researchers recommend that (i) the Law Reform Commission and parliament amend the Village Fono Act (1990) to ensure its consistency with the Constitution of Samoa and the government's commitments to CEDAW, and that (ii) the Samoa Council of Churches encourage gender equality in a manner consistent with their doctrines and processes.