

Women, Culture and Political Participation in Sāmoa

Penelope Schoeffel, Measina Meredith and Ruta Fiti-Sinclair, Centre for Sāmoan Studies, National University of Sāmoa.

Abstract

This is a case study of how culturally produced structural obstacles impede women's participation in local government, parliament and political processes in Sāmoa. 'Culture' has identified in most if not all studies of the low proportion (6.1) of women in the parliaments of the Pacific Island region; this article explains which aspects of culture holds women back in Sāmoa. Although Sāmoan women have achieved near-parity with men in education and professional, managerial and technical employment, since 1962 there have never been more than five women holding seats in the 49 member parliament, despite several donor-funded pre-election programs to encourage women to stand. We explain this paradox in terms of Sāmoa's "matai system" and village government, women's status as wives in village social organisations, and the patriarchal structure of Sāmoa's major Christian denominations.

Keywords: Women, Sāmoa, elections, parliament, local government

Introduction

In its blend of law and custom, Sāmoa's electoral system is unique. Elections are held every five years for the unicameral parliament and only *matai* (holders of titles conferred by extended families) may stand as candidates for elections. Following Independence in 1962 only *matai* could vote but following a referendum in 1990, universal suffrage was introduced giving all male and female citizens aged 21 years and older the right to vote. Voters directly elect the 49-member Parliament, with 47 district constituencies and two urban seats.

Since Sāmoa became an independent state in 1962, there have never been more than five women holding seats in the 49 member parliament, despite several donor-funded pre-election programs to in recent years encourage women to stand and help them to campaign. As Baker (2017) points out: "Nowhere in the world is the political under-representation of women more pronounced than in the Pacific islands region. Overall there are just 30 (6.1 percent) female parliamentarians in the region". Among the recent explanations offered in scholarly analyses of this situation in various Pacific Island countries (Soaki 2017; Julien and Baker 2016; Baker 2016; Liki 2013, Liki and Slatter 2015; Chatter 2015; Molotii et al. 2014) 'culture' is often cited. For example in MacLeod's (2015) summary of key findings from her regional study of women's leadership in the Pacific she writes: "Social organization and gendered cultural beliefs and practices are significant hindrances to women's participation in all spheres."

We will show how, in the case of Sāmoa, social organization, certain religious teachings, and gendered cultural beliefs and practices restrict women's opportunities to participate in local and national political processes. These particular restrictions are specific to Sāmoa. Generalizations about the Pacific islands as a region often miss very significant points of difference. For example Sāmoa is a monocultural society, unlike the Melanesian states. It does not have isolated rural communities on outer islands, as most other Pacific Island states do, and has traditional village governments that are recognized by the state in a stable but centrally controlled political system (So'o 2012; 2008), but it is influenced culturally and economically by neighboring American Sāmoa as well as (like Tonga) by its large diaspora communities in New Zealand, Australia and the United States. The relevant points of similarity in relation to gender among the Pacific Island states is that

most Pacific Island states have constitutional affirmations of traditional culture, and vague as these provisions may be, they enable resistance to Western liberal ideology to be framed in a discourse about customary norms and values.

If Sāmoa were to be judged on the extent of its gender equity based on gender indicators for education and employment it would compare favourable with many ‘developed’ countries. Sāmoan girls are exceeding their male counterparts across secondary and tertiary education levels (Ministry of Education Sports and Culture 2016). The proportion of women in professional occupations is slightly higher than men (50.6 percent), while the proportion in technical occupations (45.2 percent) is only slightly lower. Women hold 36.3 percent of managerial jobs (Sāmoa Bureau of Statistics 2012: 80) and comprise 47.8 percent of the total number of working business proprietors (Ministry of Commerce Industry and Labour 2010).

Sāmoa’s gender inequity in the political sphere. It is ranked 159 out of 190 on a world classification scale of women in national parliaments (Interparliamentary Union 2017), only marginally above other Pacific Island countries where there are more significant disparities between women’s advancement in education and employment than in Sāmoa (McLeod 2015; Fraenkel 2006; Huffer 2006). In the 58 years since Independence in 1962, a total of only 21 women have been elected to Parliament, of whom three had their victories overturned by electoral petitions so that only 18 women have actually taken their seat in Parliament. As noted above, only registered *matai* (titled heads of families) may stand for parliament. However, Sāmoa has many *matai*. According to the 2011 Census 16,787 persons hold *matai* titles in Sāmoa but of these only 10.5 percent are female (Sāmoa Bureau of Statistics 2012). In the 2016 election there were 24 women *matai* candidates among a total of 164 candidates. Only four women won seats in this election, no more than in previous elections, while a fifth was appointed on the basis of a recent change to the electoral laws, bringing the membership of parliament to 50, which we will explain below.

Political gender disparity is the outcome of certain aspects of social organisation and gendered roles in Sāmoan villages as well as characteristics of Sāmoa’s electoral system. We will explain the barriers to women’s political participation at local and national levels drawing on data from on two studies conducted by the Centre for Sāmoan Studies (CSS) of the National University of Sāmoa. One of these studied the extent of women’s participation in village government (Meleisea et.al. 2015) and another that examined the experience of the 24 women who stood for the 2016 elections in Sāmoa (Fiti-Sinclair et al. 2017).

Affirmative Action for Women’s Political Participation

Sāmoa ratified the United Nations Convention of the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1985 without reservation and has submitted five progress reports since that time. Following the 2012 report, the CEDAW Committee commented on the “...harmful norms, practices, traditions and deep-rooted stereotypes regarding the roles, responsibilities and identities of women and men in all spheres of life, in addition to the States party’s limited efforts to tackle such discriminatory practices.” In 2006 the Government informed the CEDAW Committee that traditional attitudes on gender roles are the main obstacles to Sāmoa’s participation in political and public life (Sāmoa Law Reform Commission 2006).

The government of Sāmoa was conscious of its CEDEW issues and also of its partial failure to achieve Goal 3 of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG3): Promote Gender Equality and

Empower Women, for which one of the indicators is the number of parliamentary seat held by women. Furthermore Goal 5 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG5) declared in 2015 was to: “Ensure women’s full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life.” The question was whether government could do anything about the low political participation of women in Sāmoa without antagonising its political base of predominantly male *matai*. The other consideration was the provisions of the Constitution of the Independent State of Sāmoa (1962); although Article 15 of the Constitution forbids discrimination on the basis of sex, Article 100 provides that: “A matai title shall be held in accordance with Sāmoan custom and uses and with the law relating to Sāmoan custom and usage.”

In 2013 the government decided to make a modest change to the Electoral Act to signify that was taking affirmative steps towards women’s participation in national government. The change ensures that a minimum of 10 percent of seats in parliament will be held by women. The arrangement is that if less than five women are elected to Parliament; up to five additional seats will be established, to be filled by those initially unsuccessful women candidates who nonetheless scored the highest number of votes without winning a seat. Electoral parity laws were not proposed for Sāmoa that rely on political parties to preselect equal number of women and men to contest elections, because the political parties do not pre-select a single candidate for each electorate. In the 2016 elections two political parties, the Human Rights Protection Party and the Tautua Sāmoa Party had candidates in the 2016 general elections but in many electorate’s candidates who had formally declared for same party competed with one another for votes.

In the 2016 election four women won seats and the 10 percent law allowed an additional female candidate to take a seat in parliament to become the fifth woman MP, thus increasing the number of Parliamentarians from 49 to 50 (Electoral Commission 2016). The main driver of the 10 percent rule had not been public sentiment but Sāmoa’s international human rights commitments under CEDEW and MDG3 and SDG5. As a study of the 2016 election study (draft, unpublished in August 2017) found¹ there was still some lack of enthusiasm from both men and women voters for greater women’s representation in parliament (and see also Baker, 2017: 7–10). The report contains the following quotations from interviews with voters:

From the ads and T.V you can see some women are o.k but others are ma’imau taimi [not ready for it]. (Female 21-29)

The Bible does not say we need more women in parliament, there should be no women in parliament, we should have no women MPs; E malepe palemene ia latou [they will divide parliament]. (Female 30-59)

Only woman with high ranking titles and from political families should run...Politics is dirty, women shouldn’t be subjected to the kind of tala tau sua [inappropriate jokes] that [name of parliamentarian omitted] likes to give. (Female 60+)

¹ The election study was done by the Australian National University in cooperation with the National University of Samoa and Samoa, the Samoa Office of the Electoral Commissioner (SOEC), Leadership Samoa, and the Samoa Umbrella for Non-Government Organisations (SUNGO).

Campaigning for Women

Efforts to encourage women to stand for parliament were first made in 2005 by the Inailau Women's Leadership Network set up by the Sāmoa National Council of Women ahead of the 2016 elections (So'o 2012). These efforts failed to translate to a significant increase, with only five out of 22 women candidates elected, which is no more than in 1996, when five had also been elected.

Prior to the 2016 elections, a well-funded campaign *Increasing Political Participation of Women in Sāmoa* (IPPWS) was established to encourage more women to register as candidates. This was mainly funded by Australian Aid as a joint programme of both the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and UN Women (UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women) and with the support of a number of local non-governmental organisations. The IPPWS was based on assumptions that more women would be elected to parliament if more women knew how to campaign, and that the electorates would vote for women who campaigned affectively using modern means of communication. It focused on awareness-raising and education, capacity building for women participating in the electoral process, and providing information and training to political parties ahead of the election. A multi-media approach using TV and radio networks, access to local newspapers and social media platforms was designed to inform the public about the 10 percent provision, how to register and vote, recent policy and legislative changes to the Electoral Act in relation to corrupt practices (bribing and treating). The programme provided some assistance with brochure production for candidates but did not otherwise provide financial assistance to campaign. It offered post-election mentoring support for all members of parliament on subjects such as gender-responsive budgeting and gender-sensitive legislation.

Among the activities of IPPWS was 'Elections Talk' (*Fa'asōa I Le Pālota*) a weekly call back show focused on promoting women's political participation. Hosted by Sāmoa Ala Mai, an NGO that aims to develop leaders and promote women in office, it aired from September 2015 to March 2016. Over that period, Elections Talk was played on two radio stations. Programs covered topics such as the Constitutional Amendment and voter registration awareness; promoting women in leadership and encouraging women to run for office, and providing female candidates with a platform to promote their campaigns. More than half of the 24 women candidates who ran for office were interviewed on air. There was emphasis on media coverage in the IPPWS including workshops on gender sensitive election reporting in August 2015 for National University of Sāmoa (NUS) journalism students and NGO representatives

The Sāmoa Umbrella for Non-Governmental Organisations (SUNGO) participated in a workshop to lead community outreach engagement on the importance of voter registration and participation, appreciation of women in leadership roles and understanding the constitutional amendment and the most recent legislative changes. The trainers reached out to rural and urban communities all over the nation (a total of 30 villages on Upolu and Savai'i) in preparation for the national elections. It included leadership training and invited guest speakers from the Office of the Electoral Commissioner, the Sāmoa Human Rights Institute, and UNDP Sāmoa to contribute to the training. Another activity was Roundtables on Women in Politics to discuss why women should participate in political life of Sāmoa. As part of the community outreach strategy, IPPWS partnered with the Centre for Sāmoan Studies (CSS), National University of Sāmoa to produce four roundtable discussions on Women in Politics.

Experience of Women Candidates in the 2016 Election

Despite all these donor-sponsored activities, the results for women were disappointing, with no more women winning seats than in previous elections. In 2016 elections 24 woman candidates stood in 14 electorates; four were elected, and one was appointed according to the new provisions of the Electoral Act. Three of those elected were sitting members, Hon. Fiamē Naomi Mataafa, Hon. Gatoloaifa'ana Amataga Alesana Gidlow and Hon. Faimalotoa Kika Stowers Ah Kau. Both Fiamē and Gatoloaifa'ana have won successive elections and are daughters of previous Prime Ministers. Faimalotoa won a by-election in 2014 after the incumbent passed away. Fiamē is a long-serving cabinet minister and Gatoloaifa'ana was an associate minister in the previous parliament, and held a full ministerial post in the parliament before that. Ali'imalemanu Alofa Tuuau is a new member, and Fa'aulusau Rosa Duffy-Stowers was appointed on the basis of the 10 percent affirmative action provision in the revised Electoral Act. The four women who won seats had carefully thought out strategies and well established bases of support. The three sitting members had homes in the village of their *matai* title (in their electorate), as well as in town. They all went to church in their village and two of them were deacons in their church. All three were closely related to the former holders of their electoral seat.

Like those who won seats, most of the 19 unsuccessful candidates were well qualified. Nearly all had tertiary educational qualifications and backgrounds in business or professional employment. Only six had their primary residence in a village within the electorate, the remainder mainly lived in Apia, however they said that they visited regularly and had family in their village. Only one candidate stood in an electorate where one or more villages did not recognise *matai* titles held by women.

Post-election interviews with the 24 women *matai* who stood for the 2016 election (Fiti-Sinclair, Schoeffel and Meleisea, 2017) revealed that most of them thought the IPPWS did not have much impact on the election results. While those who attended IPPWS workshops found them inspiring, they pointed to an increase in women candidates (compared to most preceding elections) did not significantly increase the number elected. Most of them thought examples and campaign tactics from modern democracies could not be effectively applied to Sāmoa's tradition-based electoral system. Some also thought the 'women' issue was over-exposed to an electorate that is accustomed to male leadership, and which may have 'switched off' because most people did not see why it was important for women to be in parliament (see Baker 2017: 7–10). Another common theme was the many candidates who thought that women voters do not support women candidates because they are women, because they are 'jealous' (see Baker 2017: 20–21) or because a women living with her husband's family (*nofotāne*) in his village is considered to have a duty to vote according to his or his family's choice. However the candidates all said that they believed that Sāmoa would benefit from having more women in parliament to represent women's perspectives and concerns, many mentioning women's role as peacemakers (*pae ma auli*), and women's insights as mothers.

About half of the unsuccessful candidates interviewed said that by obeying the law against bribery (Sāmoa Electoral Act 1963, amended 2010) they had reduced their chances of winning the seat. Most unsuccessful candidates said that successful candidates of both sexes had not obeyed this law and that money and gifts impressed voters more than any other campaign measure. They commented that voters expected candidates to provide transport to go to register as voters and to travel to polling places to vote on Election Day, and also expected to be fed on these occasions and given money. Several mentioned that aid money would be better spent on fact-to-face voter

education instead of training and awareness for women candidates. In their view, voter education was needed so people would understand the meaning of parliamentary democracy, and also that government projects were funded from taxes and aid, not political parties or from the pockets of politicians. Without voter education, most of these candidates said they thought that people did not sufficiently understand how parliament works and how development priorities are decided by the government.

Most candidates said that by standing for election they had learned the importance of local involvement, if not actually living in the village, then participating regularly and long term in local events, in the village council, in a village church, and having a supportive extended family in one or more of the villages in the electorate. Many of the candidates made the point that few women *matai* sit in the village council (*fono*), but those who do so have a better chance to make themselves known as decision-makers in the community. The successful candidates agreed that women who want to enter public life need to be courageous by taking their place as *matai* and speaking in their village councils. Their opinions generally confirm the findings of the CSS study that the exclusion of women from village level decision-making was the main reason why few women were elected to parliament (Meleisea et. al. 2015). Two of the successful candidates thought that a person aspiring to become an MP should hold *matai* title a title of high rank and seniority, because a senior, high ranking title is prestigious, and can be more influential. The issue of seniority was also alluded to by one of the unsuccessful candidates, who said that although she did attend the village council, she did not speak, in deference to a senior holder of the same title, who had that prerogative. The successful women candidates said that apart from having the right qualifications of rank and background, electoral success depends on a long term plan. They pointed out that a candidate needs to prepare for at least five years of the electoral cycle before the elections to build support in the electorate, though generosity, participation in village and district and church affairs, and to become well known as a potential village and district leader.

Customary Barriers

At the local level the governance of Sāmoan villages is ‘customary’ in the sense that it developed in the 19th century, followed Sāmoa’s mass conversion to Christianity (Meleisea 1995) The new faith swept away the highest levels of the old chiefly system in which the *ali’i* (high chiefs) were held to be descendants of the gods and a new ‘*fa’amatai*’ emerged. In the 19th century as Sāmoans became Christian, secular political leadership gradually evolved into the modern *matai* system in which the old hereditary distinctions of rank became less important for leadership than achievement, access to wealth and expertise of various kinds (Tcherkezoff 2000: 151–190).

There is a Sāmoan saying “*e sui faiga ae tumau fa’avae*” which translates as ‘customs may change but their foundations remain’. Many believe that the modern *matai* system is one of the foundations that has not changed and never will although Tcherkezoff (2000) and Meleisea (1995) show it has changed considerably over time. When gender inequality issues are mentioned in Sāmoa it is often said there is no issue; the respect for sisters and the brother-sister covenant (*feagaiga*) as well as legendary aristocratic women from long ago provide evidence that women are respected. Anecdotal evidence suggests that most Sāmoans think there are no customary barriers to women holding a *matai* title or standing for Parliament; it is often said that if there are few women holding titles, it is because women prefer not to be *matai* and therefore the small number of women

standing for or being elected to Parliament reflects women's choices. If this is so, it is interesting to consider why it is so; given the fact that significant numbers of women have been willing to take leadership roles in the Public Service and in the private sector.

Women matai

According to the 2011 census 16,797 people residing in Sāmoa held matai titles, of whom nine percent were women. A survey in 2014 found that only 5.5 percent of village based matai were women (Meleisea et. al. 2015). Many Sāmoans believe that before Sāmoa became independent in 1962 few if any women held *matai* titles. It seems likely that when educational opportunities were opened up for Sāmoans in the 1960s women began to take titles in increasing numbers. Few Sāmoans had access to higher education until the late 1950s when selective government secondary schools were first established. Before that intermediate-level schooling was mainly only available to the children of foreign or mixed-race townspeople. Before the new selective national colleges established their senior secondary levels, the top-performing students were sent to senior secondary schools in New Zealand, and later to teachers colleges, schools of nursing and universities.

Girls were well represented among those gaining admission to secondary colleges in Sāmoa and New Zealand and since that time there has been little gender disparity in educational participation or attainments at any level. Families evidently considered investment in girls' education to be as useful as investing in the education of boys, and in this respect Sāmoan custom worked in favour of girls. Farming and fishing is considered men's work and most routine household chores such as collecting food from the family plantation, feeding livestock, making a ground oven (*umu*), and cutting grass are done by boys. Girls are expected to do housekeeping tasks mainly inside the house, and light outdoor tasks such as weeding flower gardens and sweeping up leaves. Sending girls to school did not greatly diminish in the household labour supply and most primary schools were close to villages, so there were few obstacles to educating girls. Educational opportunity has enabled women to succeed in increasing numbers in the modern sectors of the economy; in the public service, in business and in the professions.

Ten women *matai* interviewed in 1978 said they were among the first Sāmoans to win scholarships to attend secondary schools and universities or training colleges overseas. One was the first Sāmoan to hold a PhD degree (University of London), two had Master degrees, two had Bachelor degrees and five had post-secondary Diplomas from New Zealand. One was also the founding president of the Sāmoa National Council of Women, a member of parliament and later Sāmoa's High Commissioner to New Zealand. Many of these women were given *matai* titles by their families, to honour their achievements. They may have been the first women registered as *matai*, although this could not be confirmed from the registry of titles at that time, as the sex of title holder was not recorded (Schoeffel 1979a: 515–516).

Educational achievement is still a common factor among women who hold *matai* titles and those who have stood in parliamentary elections since 1962. Of the 24 women candidates in the 2016 elections nearly all had tertiary educational qualifications as well as backgrounds in business or professional employment. For men, education is only one criterion to become *matai*; other traditional criteria such as seniority in age and skills in leadership, public speaking are just as important as education and income. In contrast, women are most likely to be given a title because they have high educational attainments and access to wealth through employment. Bestowing a title

upon a woman honours her, but it does not necessarily carry the expectation that she will become a leader in her village. In effect most women *matai* hold their titles on an honorary basis; they may have authority in their extended family, but typically have they limited opportunity to exercise authority in the village. There are rare exceptions, such as Fiame Naomi Mata'afa who is a leader in her village and has represented her district in Parliament for over 30 years. She is the sole holder of one of Sāmoa's highest ranking titles and is a direct descendant of three of Sāmoa's four paramount titleholders. Her father Mata'afa Fiame Faumuina Mulinuu II, was Sāmoa's first Prime Minister 1962–1967 and her mother La'ulu Fetauimalemau was one of its first women parliamentarians.

Aside from this small number of exceptionally high achieving women, the CSS research found that customary values are barriers to women's participation in local government. *Matai* leadership is regarded as the core of Sāmoan custom; *Matai* titles belong to one of two categories, chiefs (*ali'i*) and orators (*tulāfale*). Every extended family (*'aiga*) is represented by one or several *ali'i* or *tulāfale* who have been ritually bestowed with a title that is associated with a founding ancestor. Traditional villages (240 were studied, including 48 sub-villages of very large villages) have honorifics (*fa'alupega*) which define the customary order of precedence of *matai* titles with reference to their historical status, as well as the rank and role of each title (Meleisea et. al. 2015). *Matai* titles are the common property of an extended family and are appointed by a consensus decision of its male and female elders. The ritual bestowal of *matai* titles usually requires acknowledgement by the village councils to which they belong before the title can be legally registered. Since the early 20th century it has become increasingly common for *matai* titles to be split among two or more holders and nowadays bestowal ceremonies often honour many family members, both men and women living in Sāmoa and overseas. Not all *matai* perform the local leadership roles expected of a *matai* who resides in the village. Many live in Apia or overseas and hold titles to recognise their achievements and ensure their financial contributions to the affairs of local, and overseas, urban and village branches of the family.

In a village (*nu'u*), where the role and status of each *matai* is defined by the *fa'alupega*, *matai* take their places in the meeting house according to their rank, with a seating post allocated to every title (meeting houses are open-sided with rows of posts on each side supporting the roof). Each post designated the rank of the *matai* seated there. If there are two or more holders of the same *matai* title in a village, the senior holder of the title resident in the village usually takes that post. Each village has its own local government council (*fono*). Village councils collect revenue from community assets as well as government grants and other income such as fines and gifts. They decide on village development priorities. There are still contested issues concerning village autonomy and authority and the demarcation of customary and legal powers and between local and national and government in Sāmoa. The state has no power to appoint local government councils, but it pays allowances to village mayors (*sui o le nu'u*) who are elected by the councils to perform a liaison role between the village and national government.

Matai titles are usually only conferred on people of mature age and the CSS study found that 92.4 percent of all *matai* in villages governed by traditional norms are over 40, therefore it may be safely assumed that most Sāmoan men over 40 years of age living in villages are *matai*. It found that most village leadership roles in Sāmoa are held by elderly or middle-aged men of whom slightly more than half (55.43 percent) have received secondary level education (mainly to junior secondary levels), 14.61 percent had completed post-secondary education, and 29.42 percent had only achieved primary education levels. The largest proportion (35.61 percent) of *matai* are farmers, with

the next largest proportion (20.51 percent) having no occupation, indicating they are elderly and retired (Meleisea et. al. 2015).

In 14 villages, it was reported that the village council does not recognise titles bestowed upon women by their extended families (*'aiga*) (Meleisea et. al. 2015).² In 34 villages it was reported that women *matai* are recognised, but they are not allowed to sit in village council meetings. Accounting for the overlapping villages, this means women are explicitly excluded from leadership roles in approximately 53 villages. In most other villages it was reported that although women *matai* are not formally barred from sitting in the village council, they are discouraged from doing so by informal conventions and, as a result, choose not to attend village council meetings. A common reason for non-participation is said to be that the male *matai* make sexual jests amongst themselves that should not be heard by women. The taboo emanates from the Sāmoan cultural requirement that a respectful social distance (*o le va tapuia*) should be maintained between brother and sisters.

These research findings demonstrated that it is very difficult for Sāmoan women to formally participate in village-based political decision making. In Sāmoan politics, despite universal suffrage, village *matai* play a central role in choosing and electing members of Parliament. Low participation of women in village government translates into low numbers in national government. Because women are mainly excluded from leadership roles, there are few role models of women leaders to overcome prejudices and encourage men and women to vote for female candidates.

Most villages have community-based organisations of various kinds, such as community project groups, youth clubs or sporting teams, and in most villages there are usually several small non-agricultural businesses such as taxis, beach fale, buses, shops, dress-making, fabric printing, and others. Although women may lead non-traditional community based organisations or own and operate businesses without infringing the conventions of village organisation, less than half (38.2%) of community-based organisations were headed by women, while an even smaller proportion of village businesses (34.1%) were owned by women. Although many women lead small family businesses, if the business is on the husband's customary land, she may not own it. The CSS study also found that management committees of village and district schools are appointed by the village council of *matai* and 84.4 percent of school committee leaders are male. Only nine percent of school committees are headed by women. Further, although men are significantly underrepresented in the teaching profession, 38.0 percent of village primary schools have male principals and 20.5 percent had male deputy principals (Meleisea et.al. 2015).

Women's sphere of authority in villages

The CSS study found that many Sāmoans believe that woman are not marginalised in village decision-making because they have authority in the female sphere (*nu'u o tama'i'ta'i*) (Meleisea et. al. 2015). In old Sāmoa every village that was associated with a high chiefly title had a society of 'daughters of the village' (*au'aluma o tama'ita'i*) but in Christian Sāmoan these societies lost some of their traditional importance as life-long conjugality and the status of women as sisters declined and women's roles as wives and mothers was more strongly emphasised (Schoeffel 1979a). Church auxiliary committees were usually led by the wives rather than the sisters of the deacons, who were

² Nineteen villages were initially recorded as having this prohibition, the figure has been disputed in five cases, where informants disagreed about whether *matai* titles were recognised by the village or not.

usually also the senior matai of the village. These auxiliaries were tasked with providing food, fundraising, and cleaning and decorating the church.

Under the New Zealand administration 1921–1962 a new form of village women’s associations were introduced and new leadership authority was given to the wives of village matai to promote community health and hygiene. Komiti Tumama (women’s health and hygiene committees) were introduced in villages around Apia town, and in the 1930s were established in villages throughout Sāmoa. These *komiti* were organised following the Sāmoan customs of the time; with three separate status groups for the wives of *matai*, the daughters of the village and the wives of untitled men. Following the principles by which a woman has the status of her husband, the wives of chiefs and orators comprised the executive section and in most *komiti*; the wife of the highest ranking chief was president, and the wife of the highest ranking orator was the secretary. The daughters of the village had their own section in the *komiti*, but in most villages they had no formal role. The ‘service’ section of the *komiti* comprised the wives of the untitled men of the village. However, in at least one village of traditional importance, this tripartite structure was resisted by the daughters of the village, who refused to allow any women married into the village to join their *komiti* (Schoeffel 1979a).

From the 1930s, in addition to the traditional roles of women’s weaving groups, the modern *komiti* had many roles in village government. These included conducting regular inspections to make sure that there were no breeding places for mosquitoes and other disease vectors in the village, and that every household had hygienic standards of living with mosquito nets and fly-proof food safes. They supervised the village bathing pool and drinking water sources. They organised monthly clinics for mothers of babies and young children, led by visiting public health nurses, and in many villages they also provided first aid services for minor illnesses and injuries (Schoeffel 1979a; Thomas 1986, 2001). *Komiti* also dealt with certain local governance matters delegated to them by the village council of matai, for example women who had behaved contrary to village rules could be fined by the *Komiti*, or even excluded from membership.

By the 1980s *komiti* had begun to decline in importance. As roads and communications were improved and curative health and health inspection services were extended, along with modern piped water supplies, the old system of community based public health began to decline and with it the roles of the *komiti*. As migration overseas accelerated and as remittances flowed back to Sāmoa, settlement patterns changed. Families began to live in nuclear groups, in modern houses set in compounds along the roadsides, instead of the earlier nucleated coastal settlements. The greater distance between houses began to reduce the interaction between women in the community, and in many villages the one village-wide *komiti* fragmented into smaller, locality-based groups.

In 2004, for the first time, the Government appointed and paid allowances to village women’s representatives (*Sui Tama’ita’i*). Their allowance is half of that which is paid to the village ‘mayors’ (*Sui o le Nu’u*) although they have similar or overlapping responsibilities to keep village records and facilitate communication between the government and the village. The CSS survey found that most traditional villages still have village-wide *komiti*; only seven villages did not have an active women’s committee at the time of the survey. Today *komiti* do not have any formal authority in village matters unless this is delegated to it by the village council; women may be leaders among women but they have little direct voice in village government and very few village councils allow the *Sui o Tama’ita’i* to join their meetings. (Meleisea et. al. 2015)

Religious authority

Christianity is deeply embedded in Sāmoan culture as stated in the preamble to the constitution which declares: “Sāmoa is founded on God” and a recent constitutional amendment specifying that Sāmoa is a Christian country (Constitution Amendment Bill (No. 2) 2016). New forms of patriarchal authority originated from the influence of the mainstream Congregational, Catholic, and Methodist churches in the 19th century. Villages have at least one, often several churches and their resident pastors or ministers or catechists are all males. Male *matai*, who are also members of the village council, predominate among the deacons or lay decision-makers of these long-established mainstream churches. Although Church congregations have no formal role in village government, they are the main contact point between village families and are major agents of informal social control. Whereas village councils usually meet only once a month, church congregations usually meet several times each week for services, choir practice, fundraising and meetings of church leaders.

The Catholic and Mormon churches do not ordain women, nor do the Congregational and Methodist churches in Sāmoa even though their mother churches in other parts of the world have long done so (for example, the Congregational Church in the United States began to ordain women in the 19th century, and the United Methodist church has ordained women since the 1950s). Yet paradoxically, Sāmoa’s Methodist and Congregational churches resist the ordination of women because it goes against the ‘traditional’ order which they assisted to create in Sāmoa over a century ago.

The Christian model of conjugality has been exemplified by the village pastor or catechist and his wife for over a century, established in the period 1830–1850 as Sāmoans joined Congregational, Methodist and Roman Catholic churches. The effectiveness and influence of this model endures to the present day and was adopted by the Catholic Church; as the celibate Catholic clergy lived apart from the village, the church trained catechists and their wives to occupy positions in their parishes similar to that of their Protestant confreres.

The marriage factor

A significant impediment to women taking *matai* titles and assuming leadership roles is this expectation that a married woman should take her status from her husband. Married women are expected to join their husband’s church if they had belonged to a different church before they were married. The term for the wife of an *ali’i* or a clergyman, and a polite usage for any married woman, is *faletua* (house at the back). The term connotes domesticity; the ‘house at the back’ is where food is prepared, where work is done and where family life is conducted, in contrast to the house at the front. Most village-based *matai* holding high ranking titles have meeting houses (*faletele*, *falealimalo*) in front of their dwelling, usually reserved for meetings and other formal or public occasions.

In village life there is a defined role for a married woman. Traditional values encourage men and women to marry outside their own village and for women to reside with the family of their husband (*nofotane*). Wives are expected to be subservient in their husband’s family, to render service to his parents and his adult sisters and brothers living there. In effect this means going to the back of the house and preparing food and doing other chores. When a woman’s husband becomes a *matai*, if his title is one of local importance, she becomes a leader in the women’s committee and in the

women's group in the church. There is no role for the husband of a *matai* and the imbalance in status between a woman *matai* with an untitled husband is anomalous and therefore socially problematic. The expectation that a woman should be subordinate to her husband is a significant impediment to women aspiring to become leaders in their own right, although Sāmoa has very large numbers of women who ably back-stop their husbands careers in politics and in the churches.

If a man chooses to live with his wife's family (*faiava*) his status is also somewhat subordinate; he is also expected to serve his wife's relatives. His wife, as a daughter of the family and the village, already has higher status than she would if she was living with his family, in his village. Under these circumstances it is not unusual for a woman to ask her family to bestow a title on her husband to mitigate his anomalous subordination and meet public expectations that he should have the higher status of the two of them. When women reside with their own families and in their own villages, as do many capable, well educated women employed locally as teachers or nurses, they rarely hold *matai* titles. In these circumstances women are likely to believe that their brothers, even when less well educated, have a superior claim to hold the family *matai* title.

When both husband and wife are *matai* there can be conflicts of interest in relation to the allocation of resources. One of the main responsibilities of a *matai* is to represent his or her family at funerals and other ceremonies to acknowledge extended family connections. The *matai* must organise the *'aiga* to pool money and fine mats to be presented at these ceremonies, and later redistribute the gifts received in exchange. When both husband and wife have these obligations to different extended families it can put them under a lot of economic and social pressure.

For these reasons, women *matai* are more likely to be widows, unmarried, or married to husbands outside the cultural *'fa'asāmoa'* system, which is why most of the women who have been elected to parliament over the past 50 years were (or are) unmarried, widowed, or married to non-Sāmoans. Sāmoa's first female member of Parliament, the late Taulapapa Le'aupepe Faima'ala served two terms, representing a different constituency each time (1970–1972, 1973–1975); she was educated in New Zealand, was the first Sāmoan to be appointed head of nursing at the national hospital, and she was married to a part-European businessman living in town, as was the late Sina Annandale, elected from the Individual Voters roll in 1976. The late Matatumua Maimoaga, a New Zealand trained nurse, was elected to parliament in 1982 and again in 1991, and was married to a non-Sāmoan, as is Gatoloaifa'ana Amataga Alesana Gidlow, daughter of Tofilau Eti Alesana who was Prime Minister of Sāmoa 1982–1997. Gatoloaifa'ana was minister in the 2005–2010 government and an associate minister in the 2010–2015 government and was re-elected in 2016. The late La'ulu Fetauimalemau was a widow when she was elected to Parliament 1976–1978 after the death of her husband, Sāmoa's first Prime Minister Mata'afa Fiame Faumuina Mulinu'u II. Maiava Visekota, a prominent lawyer and civil society leader, was also a widow when she was elected to Parliament in 1996. The late I'iga Suafole, a New Zealand educated teacher elected in 1976, was single. (So'o 2012) Fiame Naomi Mata'afa, referred to previously is also single. She was the first woman Cabinet Minister and has held ministerial posts in successive governments since 1985. Following the historical pattern, in the 2016 election only eight of 24 candidates were married women, the majority were widows, divorced or single. Of those who were married, two of them were married to non-Sāmoans.

Conclusion

In the modern sphere of Sāmoan life where many women have become leaders in business and civil service employment, education and talent is the key to advancement. In contrast, in the traditional sphere of village government and village churches women are seen as helpers, not leaders. A married woman is expected to defer to her husband and his family, church and village. Leadership considered a male prerogative, especially if he has high traditional status and money. A man is much more likely than a woman, however qualified she is, to win support from the predominately male village and district leadership. Fraenkel affirms this paradox prevails in Pacific island states, in his comparative analysis of the impact of electoral systems on women's representation in Pacific Island parliaments:

Women are increasingly well represented among senior public servants in many countries, often outperform their male counterparts in schooling and are often strongly represented in business. It is in the political sphere where women are severely under-represented. Political leadership has, historically, been a male preserve, and a strong conservatism tends to discourage women from standing as candidates and to discourage voters, chiefs, 'big men' or local assemblies from backing women MPs. In such circumstances, the potential for enhanced women's representation is clearly visible, but requires some concerted effort to be realised, whether through greater political organisation around this objective or some affirmative action provisions.

In Sāmoa the 10 percent provision is such an affirmative intention although so far it has had limited impact. As we have shown there are deep rooted structural as well as ideological obstacles based on cultural norms to be overcome. The village is where political power lies. Electoral districts in Sāmoa are based on clusters of villages. Most townspeople must, unless they own and live on freehold urban land, register as voters in a village where they have family. Few women have *matai* titles and few village councils have women *matai* among their ranks. Most if not all village councils have considerable influence on which candidates stand in the electorate, and will signal their choices to the *matai* of the electorate, who in turn advise their families who to vote for. Our interviews with the women who stood for parliament in 2016 provide evidence that having a good education and having rendered service to the village, district and church is not enough; to be chosen a woman must be exceptional in some way, due to wealth, important family connections, national recognition, traditional rank and great determination.

Government policy towards Sāmoan custom since 1962 has been generally *laissez faire*, assuming that practices will gradually change in response to new social attitudes. Although mass emigration has dramatically changed life in Sāmoan villages, respect for patriarchal authority is seen as respect for Sāmoan culture. In town where women are visible in most occupations in positions of authority, at decision-making levels in village life, men and women adhere to separate roles in which women are subordinate, as prescribed by the churches and the norms of contemporary Sāmoan culture. Given this is considered to be sanctioned by God, few women in Sāmoa would have the courage to proclaim in poetry, as did Vanuatu's Grace Mera Molisa (1985: 24), that custom is "a Frankenstein corpse conveniently recalled to intimidate women".

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