

VILLAGE GOVERNMENT IN SAMOA: DO WOMEN PARTICIPATE?

Centre for Samoan Studies, National University of Samoa

Women in Samoa are high achievers in modern life, yet Samoa has among the world's lowest level of female political participation

The Centre for Samoan Studies (CSS) at the National University of Samoa (NUS) is conducting research on women, village government and politics prior to the forthcoming elections. The Samoa Local Government Research Project (SLGRP) aims to provide empirical evidence on the extent of women's participation in political and economic village-based organizations. The two year (2013/2014-2014/2015) study is funded by the Australian Development Research Awards Scheme (ADRAS).

The research is testing the hypothesis that the practices of village councils and mainstream churches deter women from assuming leadership roles. We think this might be the reason why so few women aspire to parliamentary careers, and why hardly any of those who do, are elected. We suspect that it may also economically disempower women in village life, even those women who are active in and play many leading roles in the urban economy.

Until CSS conducted its nation-wide survey of leadership across villages last year (2013), there was no data to support or to deny these assumptions and Samoans frequently disagree about them. Some insist there are no obstacles to women's participation, arguing that low political participation is because women are not interested in leadership roles. Others argue that there are customary impediments.

In most countries where there are few or no women in parliament, it is usually because women have low status. In the modern aspects of life in Samoa, women do *not* have low status.

Women have approximately equal shares of skilled employment in Samoa

There are approximately equal numbers of women occupying executive and middle management positions within the public sector. Government reports show that the proportion of women in formal employment, if manual laboring work is excluded, is close to that of men, and a high proportion of urban businesses in Samoa are owned or managed by women.

In education, female enrolment rates are comparable to and, at the secondary and tertiary education levels, better than male enrolment rates.

In these respects Samoa's gender equality indicators are comparable to those of Australia and New Zealand.

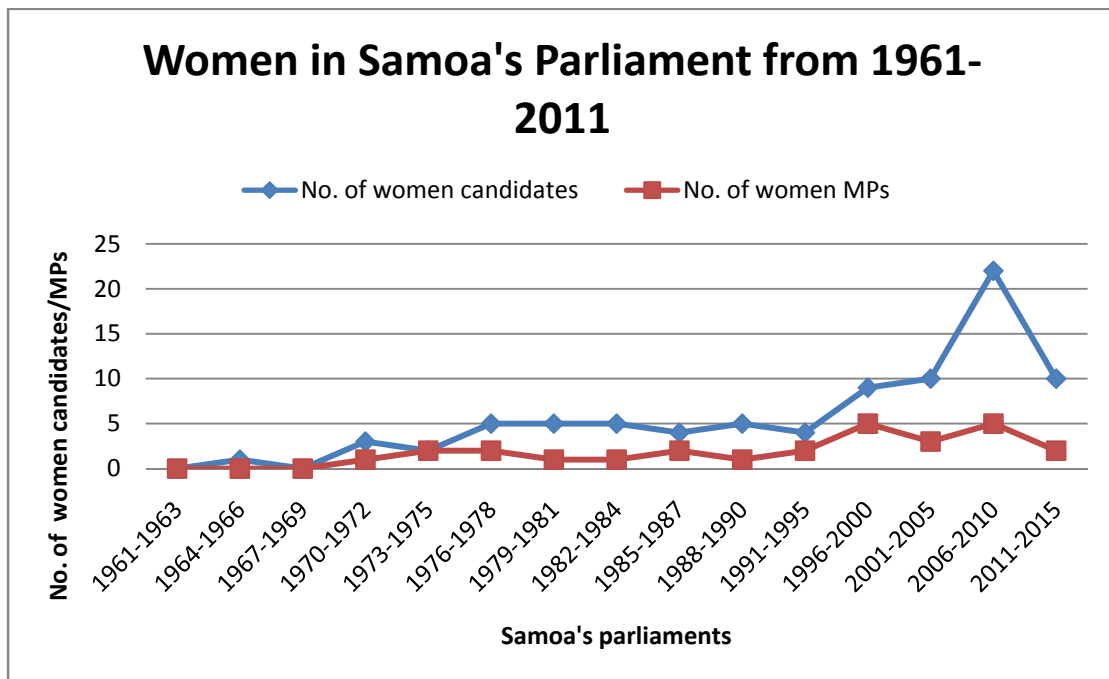
Samoa has fewer women in parliament than most other countries

The political participation of women in Samoa ranks among the lowest in the world, recorded at 131, near the bottom on the world scale of 139 countries for representation of women in parliament.

Political participation of women is low (2/49 members of Parliament). Ever since independence in 1962, women candidates elected to parliament have remained below the 10 percent mark.

Despite increasing women’s opportunities at the voting booth, the increase in female candidates has not been very significant (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 Women’s political participation from 1961-2011



Source: So'o (2012)

At present, there are only two women parliamentarians, both daughters of former prime ministers, who are exceptional in many ways.

As Figure 1 shows, although the number of female candidates for elections has been increasing, especially in 2006-2010 elections when there were efforts to encourage more women to stand. Regardless, participation of women in parliament reveals a consistently low pattern.

Special measures have been legislated to increase the number of women in parliament. The arrangement is that if less than five women are elected to the 49-member Parliament up to five additional seats will be established to be filled by those initially unsuccessful women candidates whom nonetheless scored the highest number of votes. This will ensure that 10 percent of parliamentary seats are held by women.

To understand this situation we must look at village governments in more detail.

Male matai are decision makers in village councils

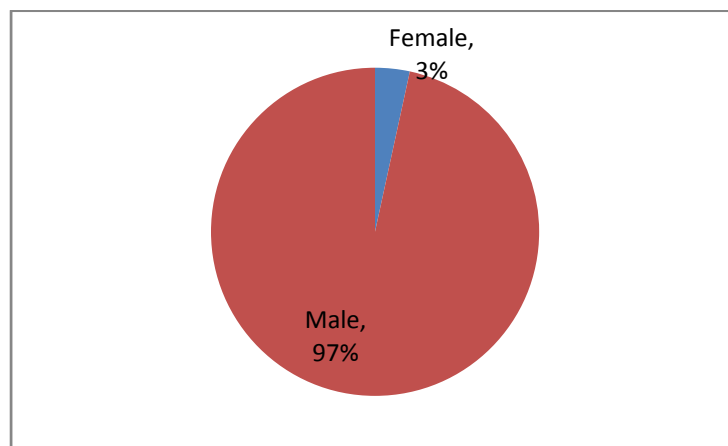
Eighty percent of the total female population of Samoa lives in rural areas, mostly in traditional villages.

Samoa has 240 traditional villages.

These traditional villages have a total of 13,423 matai, an average of 56 per village. However some villages have hundreds of matai who may or may not reside in their respective villages.

Pulenu'u (village mayors) are elected by the village councils and paid by the government. They act as intermediaries between the national and village government. Only five traditional villages have female pulenu'u (see Figure 2).

Figure 2 Percentage of village mayors by sex

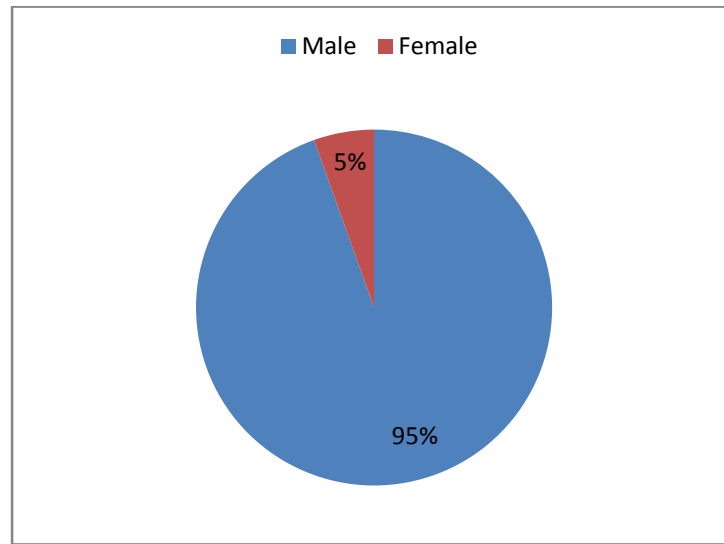


Source: SLGRP database.

Hardly any village-based matai are women

According to the Census of 2011, women comprise 11 percent of all matai who were living in Samoa that year. Contrary to this figure, the SLGRP found that women comprise only 5 percent (576) of all village-based matai (see Figure 3).

Figure 3 Percentage of titleholders by sex



Source: SLGRP database.

There is no consensus among Samoans about whether women have rights to hold matai titles or what the roles of female matai should be; some believe it is an ancient traditional right, noting that chiefly genealogies of Samoa were founded by female chiefs, while others believe that matai titles should be held only by men. Some believe that while a woman may hold an ali'i (high chief) title, a woman cannot be a tulafale (orator chief). In the next stage of our research we will study Samoan beliefs on these matters more closely.

Women matai rarely participate in village government

Women matai may be excluded from local government. According to custom, every matai has the right to take the place assigned to that title in the meeting house of the village council to which the title belongs. In practice, however, there are many exceptions to this rule.

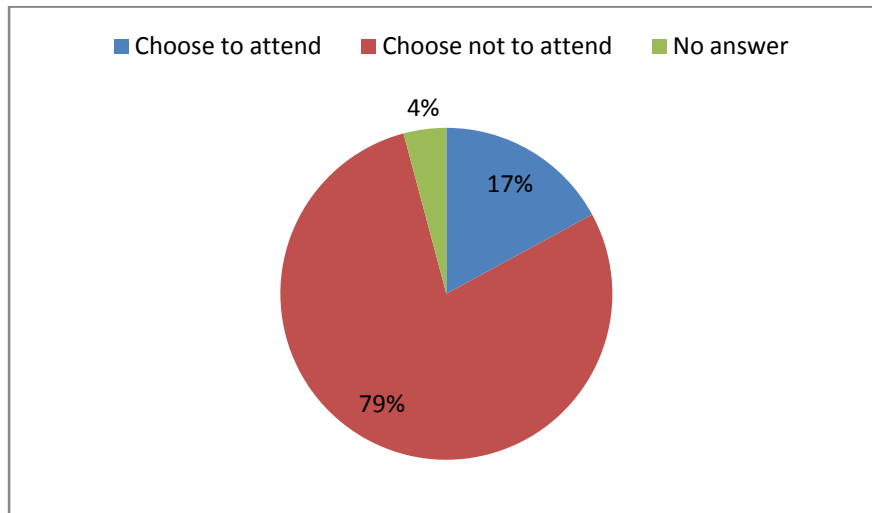
In 41 villages, the village government expressly refuses to recognise titles bestowed (saofai) upon women by their 'aiga.

In 34 villages, women matai are recognised, but are not allowed to sit in village council meetings.

In many other villages, although women matai not expressly forbidden to sit in the village council, they are discouraged from doing so by informal conventions.

Most women matai choose not to attend village council meeting, even if it would be permitted (see Figure 4). This is because matai titles are often subdivided between a numbers of family members, with only the senior, resident male holder sitting on the village council, with female family members bearing the title, in effect, on an honorary basis.

Figure 4 Percentage of women titleholders who attend village council meetings by choice



Source: SLGRP database.

Village church communities are led mainly by men

All traditional villages have resident pastors, all of whom are males. The long-established mainstream churches in Samoa do not ordain women, even if their Protestant counterpart churches in other countries do so.

Church congregations are informal agents in village government. They are the main contact point between village families and they are major agents of social control. Whereas church congregations meet at least once weekly, most villages conduct council meetings on a monthly basis.

In the decision-making councils and committees of the majority mainstream churches, many churches have some women members, but most decision-makers are male matai, who are also members of the village council.

Women's committees may be losing their former importance

The village council of matai commands the services of the village women's committee (komiti) and the association of untitled men (aumaga).

Komiti were introduced by the colonial government in the 1920s with major responsibilities for public health. To a large extent they have taken the place once held by the traditional women's organization, the aualuma o tama'ita'i in which membership is restricted to the daughters of the village, and which excludes women who have married into the village.

Komiti are led by the wives of the senior chiefs and orators in each village. Their roles are determined by the status of their husband's titles relative to his rank in the village government.

Of the 240 traditional villages, most had one Komiti for the whole village. However, 66 had more than one Komiti. Where there are many komiti, they represent different religious denominations or sub-

villages. Seven villages did not have an active women's committee at the time of the survey. This suggests that the role of the komiti may be becoming weaker than in the past.

In 2007, the government agreed to recognize and pay allowances to the elected representatives of village women's committees (known as Sui o Tamaitai).

The Sui o Tamaitai play a similar role to that of the pulenu'u, the village mayor, recording births and acting as a link between the village and government departments and civil society organizations. However, they are only paid half the allowance paid to the pulenu'u.

One hundred and eighty two villages had Sui o Tamaitai. We do not yet know whether the 58 villages without Sui o Tamaitai do not have them because their women's committee is inactive, and will examine the matter further in Year 2 (April 2014 – April 2015) of the research. Some villages, because they have more than one woman's committee, have more than one Sui o Tamaitai. Most Sui o Tamaitai do not have matai titles.

School Committees are mainly led by male matai

Because school committees are appointed by predominantly male village councils, it is not surprising that 84 percent of school committee members are male. Only 16 percent of school committees were headed by women.

Sixty two percent of village primary schools have female principals and 79 percent have female deputy school principals. Although men are significantly underrepresented in the teaching profession, 38 percent of primary schools had male principals and 21 percent male deputy principals. The majority of primary and secondary school teachers are female.

Smaller numbers of women than men own village-based businesses

Of all village businesses, women own about 34 percent, compared to 66 percent of males. The majority of female-owned businesses are small shops. We assume that, because In Samoan custom women have land rights in their own villages, that women are more likely to own a business if they are living in their own village. This point will be investigated further in Year 2 of the research.

Fewer Community based organizations are led by women

Among leaders of community based organizations or non-government organizations (NGOs), women comprise less than half (46%). As most NGOs target women for community projects, the fact that men are in the majority is quite surprising and may be related to the belief that leadership roles should be held by matai. This point will be investigated further in Year 2 of the research.

There are major obstacles to women's political participation in Samoa.

The survey findings demonstrate that it is very difficult for Samoan women to formally participate in village-based political decision making. Women represent only 5 percent of matai in traditional Samoan villages and very few of these women have a voice in local government. This figure is close to that for women in national government, which is 4 percent. In Samoan 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. Although only a minority of villages specifically excludes women from village councils, in most villages, if there are women matai there, they are discouraged from participation by informal conventions. Because women are mainly excluded from leadership roles, there are few role models of women leaders.

The Government of Samoa has no power to determine or even influence the gender composition of village councils. The constitution of Samoa recognizes customary institutions and they are enshrined in the electoral system. This is so even though the Government of Samoa has made several commitments to gender equality, including the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which was ratified in 1992 without reservations.

Future research by the Centre for Samoan Studies

The results of SLGRP nation-wide survey that was conducted in 2013 will inform the design of the next stage of the project, where case study approaches will be applied to a sample of 30 villages.

Taken together, the project is paving the way for more informed discussions about women's participation in local decision-making and, from another perspective, shedding light on the effectiveness of gender policy and legislation in Samoa.

The policy implications of the project are widespread, as gender is a cross cutting issue in the development of all other sectors. The project will assist the national government to develop better policies that take account of gender equality issues in Samoa, to improve progress on Millennium Development Goal 3, obligations assumed under the ratification of CEDAW and, future development goals.

Acknowledgement

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This report is based on the collective efforts of the SLGRP team; Dr Malama Meleisea (Research Director), Dr Penelope Schoeffel (Assistant Research Director), Dr Ioana Chan Mow (ICT advisor and Lead analyst), Semau Ausage Lauano (Statistical advisor), Hobert Sasa (Assistant ICT and statistical advisor) and Measina Meredith (Project Manager). For more information, please contact m.meredith@nus.edu.ws.