



Department of Pacific Affairs

The Long Road to Becoming a Parliamentarian in Samoa: Political Apprenticeship, Learning New Language and Pushing Gender Boundaries

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In this Discussion Paper, Hon. Ali'imalemanu Alofa Tuuau tells her story of becoming a member of the National Legislative Assembly in Samoa in 2016. Samoa ranks 166th out of 191 in global rankings on women's representation in national parliaments. While the quota system in Samoa guarantees women comprise 10 per cent of national parliamentary members, Hon. Ali'imalemanu's story reveals how the matai or chiefly system and its associated decision-making and language systems present significant hurdles for women with ambitions to become a member of parliament (MP). The paper concludes with a message to all women who are thinking about stepping up for leadership roles.

My story of becoming a parliamentarian is surprising, mostly because becoming an MP is something I never wanted to do; it was the idea that I dreaded the most. When I was young, my uncle and my cousin were parliamentarians and I observed them. I knew how difficult a job it was.

I grew up in a village in Savai'i, which is the bigger island of Samoa. I went to primary school there, then moved into town for my secondary school and lived with my mother's brother and his family.

I knew right from when I was in year four or year five that I loved figures and that's the pathway I followed. I had the opportunity to go the University of the South Pacific in Fiji where I studied for my first degree in financial management and public administration and then I completed an MBA (Masters of Business Administration). I was the eighth woman to become a certified public accountant in Samoa. I worked my way up from accountant to chief accountant to finance manager across different organisations

and government departments, including Price Waterhouse Coopers and the Public Trust Office in Samoa. I worked with the University of South Pacific in Fiji for about 13 years, mainly in the finance area, before moving back to Samoa to work for a regional environment program called SPREP, the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme. I worked there for 14 years.

I had a very comfortable life, but I enjoy challenges. So, when I reached the level of finance manager, I thought, 'Now, what's next?' I thought maybe I would look at director or deputy director posts. But at that time I was back in Samoa and was visiting my village regularly. I saw how there was hardly any development in my community. I started contributing to projects to help my community meet their needs and that is when I started thinking that the thing that I never wanted to do — to become an MP — might be what I needed to do if I really wanted to make a contribution to my village and the constituency. I can make that contribution as a normal person working elsewhere, but you need to be in there as an MP in order to have the projects, to make things happen, and for your community to develop. So that's the main reason why I wanted to go into parliament — to make a contribution to development. You need to be in the right place in order to get things done.

When I decided to run for parliament, my husband and my two girls were very supportive, they're very strong characters. But my two boys said, 'Mum, do you want to go into that kind of thing where you always have no money? You have a very high salary, you are taking us for holidays every year, you are living a very comfortable life. There are a lot of good projects you've done because you have a very good salary package. Are

you letting go of all of those things for that very small salary? Will you be able to adjust?' I thought about the comfortable life I was having but there was always

the urge to get out of my comfort zone and take the challenge.

Parliamentary and political system in Samoa

Samoa officially became an independent and democratic nation in 1962. Samoa has a unitary national legislature (the Fono) with a unicameral (single) legislative chamber, which is complemented by a traditional local-level governance system of village councils (*fono*). A prime minister is selected, with majority support, from within the members of parliament and is appointed by the head of state (Meleisea et al. 2015; So'o 2008; Haley et al. 2017).

At independence, the Samoan constitution limited eligibility for voting and political candidacy to *matai* title holders only. Universal suffrage was granted in the lead up to the 1991 elections and now all Samoan residents over 21 are eligible to vote in elections (So'o 2008). However, the restriction on political candidacy to *matai* title holders remains (Haley et al. 2017).

The five women who hold seats in the current parliament represent close to one-quarter of women's overall representation since 1962 (Baker 2018). In the 2016 election, four women were elected in their own right and one woman was appointed through the safety-net type quota system. If fewer than five women are elected, the positions are then filled by the candidates who had the next highest number of votes. If no women are elected, women candidates will be appointed through an additional five seats. This means that the number of seats in parliament can range from 49 to 54 (Meleisea et al. 2015:15; Haley et al. 2017; Baker 2014).

Elections for national parliament took place in the absence of political parties for almost two decades. Samoa's first political party, the Human Rights Protection Party (HRRP) was established in 1979 (Baker 2018). Two parties contested the 2016 elections, yet the HRRP holds 94 per cent of the seats in parliament.

Party membership for candidates can be fluid and parties do not pre-select candidates. Rather, the village *fono* system plays a strong role in candidate selection and endorsement (Baker 2018). Traditional systems of governance at the village level are closely aligned with Samoan electoral boundaries. *Matai* represent families in a village and a number of villages form one constituency. Samoa has 265 villages which were grouped into 49 constituencies for the 2016 election (Haley et al. 2017). When *matai* register to stand for elections, they must secure a signed declaration from a representative of their village council. The declaration is to demonstrate that candidates have provided service (or *monotaga*) to their village through development activities and religious service (Meleisea et al. 2015). Residents are free to vote for their preferred candidates in elections; however, village council endorsement is strongly correlated with successful candidates (Meleisea et al. 2015; Haley et al. 2017).

In the 2016 elections an average of three candidates contested in each constituency; in Hon. Ali'imalemanu Alofa Tuuau's constituency of Alataua West (43), six candidates (three men and three women) contested (Haley et al. 2017). The previous incumbent had won the last two elections and had 65 per cent of the vote in 2011. For an in-depth case study of Alataua West's candidate selection and endorsement process, see Baker 2018.

Political apprenticeship: Understanding the role of a parliamentarian

The uncle I lived with when I was a teenager was an MP. When his constituents came to visit, I listened, I cooked, and I helped with his service for the district. I also observed. I figured out how much money he was spending every day on his constituents. I saw how it was always about giving. The constituents came for lots of things and I thought that was a bit unfair, it seemed as if an MP had to be a financial provider. That was how people in each and every one of our districts saw the role, and I'm sure it was the same all around the country.

Traditionally the MP is like a banker for their constituency. Their constituents come to them for everything: electricity bills, water bills, school fees, funerals, education, church buildings, and celebrations. There's a lot of that culture: it's just giving, giving, giving. When my cousin took my uncle's place, about five or six years later, it was the same thing. He had a business, and I saw how that business was negatively affected by that kind of giving. And on top of that, most of the community development projects were funded by his business. The church buildings, the school buildings, they were all paid for by my cousin. He said to me, 'Alofa, if you want to go into parliament you have to have a business in order to survive, to feed your family and your children, because all your salary goes to the constituency, to your village and to your extended family. That's the tradition.' Knowing this is why I was scared to really get into this kind of thing. But it's good in a way that I experienced it. I wanted to overcome the fear that was within me, of getting into that kind of career position.

I think a parliamentarian is there for the betterment of the whole community, for a big number, not just individuals. When I was campaigning for elections I tried to change mindsets. It was difficult at the start; constituents kept coming for personal assistance. So, I used that time to make them aware of the role of the parliamentarian, that we are there for development for the whole community and not for individual support. But I also had to be careful because the election was coming. When I became an MP they still kept coming, so I still tried to give a bit of whatever they came for. I always made the time to explain carefully the role of an MP. Then I gave them something like 50 tala for their bus fare to get back to the village. I also used the time at

family gatherings, church gatherings and the women's gatherings — everywhere I went in the community — to give the same message. At first I think my family was the worst, when they should have known, from the experience of my uncle and cousin, how it is. But then they really helped me spread the message. I even talked to the other members of parliament. I advocated that we needed to increase understanding of the role of an MP.

Gradually it stopped. Now the only things my constituents come to me for are community projects, which I love doing. It took six months before I realised that it had slowed down. Sometimes there are months when no one comes. I have a peaceful mind now. I'm very happy now that they only come to me for community things, for a project, not for individual needs. I want to stop that culture. I don't think it's traditional culture, I think it's a new practice they've inherited. Changing those mindsets is one of my proudest achievements.

Preparing for elections: Groundwork and service

When I first started thinking about running for parliament, just after the 2011 general election, I didn't really put it out there or make people aware of my intentions. I did it quietly through the work I was doing.

I remember when my village came for help to survey a piece of land where our school was to be built. I went ahead and found a surveyor and got them to do the work. Sometimes when I went back to my village and saw that there were things that needed to be done, I initiated and sorted it out quietly. I helped my village in a lot of ways because I knew the processes, and so there was always that service I could do. Helping people is something I always enjoy.

I built awareness of my existence through the services that I did, not just in my village, but in the other two villages of my constituency as well. So that was just after the election, I was already building up my support. Then about three years before the next election I started thinking seriously, because to run for parliament I needed to become a *matai*, and I needed the village's support.

Becoming a *matai*

In Samoa you need to be a registered *matai* with the Lands and Titles Court for three years before you can run for parliament. *Matai* titles are conferred by your extended family. In my family there's no rule, policy or process about it. When it is decided that a new title is to be conferred, they have meetings where they nominate who should be bestowed with a *matai* title. These meetings only happen every four or five years. Funnily enough, there was never a mention of any girl in our family, they always discussed my brothers and my male cousins.

Towards the end of 2012, when my cousins and my second cousins started talking of the *matai* to be bestowed, they were all talking about just the men. I thought there won't be another opportunity — the election is in four years — I want to become a *matai*. So, when my whole family — there are a lot of us — came together to decide, I put up my hand to request being a *matai*. My cousins, especially my female cousins, thought 'is she crazy?' The older man who runs our family looked at me as though I must be joking. But they also knew I had done so much service for the community. They asked me if I was serious and I said,

'Yes, I want to become a *matai*.' It's very seldom for women to become *matai*. When I became a *matai*, I think there had only ever been ten other female *matai* in the village before me.

When I got in as a *matai*, many of my female cousins said, 'You lead the way, there are other girls who want to follow you.' I'm glad that they realised the importance of becoming a *matai*. That's what I'm trying to advocate for now. I encourage the other women *matai* to come with me into the council, so they can make a contribution and become known. I have been observing some young women and they have the potential to be representatives for our constituency. Not straight away, but for them to prepare that groundwork so one day they can go into parliament. I have been chatting with them and encouraging them to go to their village and listen. I learnt the hard way, so I'm trying to do that now for those young ones. So by the time they are ready to run, they will have the confidence and knowledge of what is expected.

I reached three years of being a registered *matai* in September 2015, five months before the election in March 2016. I would not have been able to run if I had delayed. I was very lucky.

Matai

Matai is a title encompassing chiefs who represent lineage (*matai ali'i*) or orators or powerful 'weavers of words' (*matai tulafale*) (Kruse Va'ai 2011:23). The title is bestowed by the *aiga* (extended family) or 'a group of people who co-operate by preserving the name of a founding ancestor and who respect all the ritual obligations associated to this name' (Tcherkezoff 2000:152). Power belongs to extended families rather than individuals and therefore the *matai* title can be bestowed and withdrawn by extended families (Huffer and So'o 2005). In practice, *matai* titles are lifelong and rarely revoked by families (So'o 2008). Extended families tend to select *matai* on the basis of 'ancestry and ability to contribute to family affairs — which nowadays includes wealth and education, leadership ability and trustworthiness' (So'o 2008:19). An individual's reputation is defined through their links to *matai*, their family and their village (Kruse Va'ai 2011).

Matai is not only a title or obligation. *Matai* embody values that underpin *fa'asoma* (the Samoan way) and the *fa'amatai* (way of the chiefs) through: '*pule* (authority, power); *soalalupule* (joint decision making); *autasi* (consensus); *alofa* (love, compassion, care); *fa'a'aloalo* (respect); *mamalu* (dignity); and *tofā ma fa'autaga* (wisdom)' (Huffer and So'o 2005:312). Wisdom is a collective notion, which comes about through relations with other *matai*. Wisdom is a gift from the land as well as a burden and obligation and requires *matai* to be shrewd and cautious in decision-making (Huffer and So'o 2005). The Samoan proverb — *o le ala i le pule, o le tautua* — means the way to authority is through service. *Pule* or authority is not a destination but a continuing deed; accompanied by an obligation for continuing service. Leadership in the *matai* sense is therefore about promoting solidarity, humility, obligations and service to extended family (Kruse Va'ai 2011).

Women and men who are descendants of *matai* have equal claim to the title, but generally women have deferred to brothers or other relatives to hold this role. Women have increasingly sought to become *matai* since independence. In part, this is in response to the limitations imposed by constitutional laws, which initially restricted eligibility for candidacy and voting to *matai* title holders. While the constitution has since been amended, eligibility for political candidacy is still restricted to *matai* (Kruse Va'ai 2011). The increasing numbers of women holding *matai* titles has also been linked to increased education levels for women (Meleisea et al. 2015).

As at the 2011 census, approximately 15,021 men and 1766 women held *matai* titles (Samoa Bureau of Statistics 2018). Most *matai* are men over 40 years of age. In some villages, women are not eligible to be *matai* and are therefore ineligible to nominate as political candidates (Meleisea et al. 2015). In other areas, a *matai* title may be honorary and more in recognition of a women's educational or career status rather than creating expectations or obligations of leadership for their community. In Meleisea et al.'s survey of traditional villages, close to one third of respondents reported that female *matai* 'choose' not to participate in village council meetings: 'in many villages, the women *matai* follow local conventions and therefore do not attend village council meetings even when they are not forbidden from attending' (2015:41). While not all women with *matai* titles have political aspirations, in areas that prohibit women from becoming *matai* or where women's participation in village councils is not encouraged, this presents a real barrier to women's to political success (Haley et al. 2017; Baker 2018).

Village endorsement

Twelve months before the election I finally announced to my family that I wanted to run. Politics had been in the family line for some time, with my uncle and cousin serving as members of parliament. But when they passed away, my family never thought of a girl to take over, they were always looking at the boys. I think they were prepared to try a girl because of my service to the family. I always coordinated the family, if there was a funeral or family gathering I always took leave and made sure I was present. I was always pulling the family together. I think they realised that I had been doing it for quite some time and I was really the one who should run. I had proven myself.

There were some processes, some protocols. My family had to go into the village and let them know that I wanted to run. You have to get your own village's approval before they bring you to the other villages to let them know of your intention.

In the village we are divided into two parts based on our *matai* titles, our family lines: Tamaigoa and Samoeleoi. When we have meetings one half of the village meet, then the other half meet and then we come together on a monthly basis. Different villages have their own style, but in my village, that's how we do it.

You can run for elections without endorsement from your village because of the rights of the

individual, but having the blessing from your village is very important. The first step for me was to gain endorsement from my half of the village, Samoeleoi. That day was a very big occasion, but it was also a day of great shame.

We woke very early. I had asked my daughters to prepare 100 to 150 plates of food for the people who would attend the meeting. This is a usual custom, especially if it is your first time to go into a meeting; we give something, usually food. We knew the meeting would take about three or four hours.

My family selected my uncle to take me to the meeting. He had high status as an orator and he was to take on the role of introducing me to the house of the chiefs. He took me into the house and once the meeting had started he proceeded with the formalities of introducing me and letting them know my intentions to run for parliament. There were about 50 *matai* inside the house, outside there were about another 60 people from the village. All listening.

My uncle's introduction was not well received. The *matai* who was running the meeting started it off: 'Oh, so you want to sit on the throne when there is someone who is already sitting on the throne?' He referred to me as David from the Bible story of Saul and David. The implications of the words were very hurtful. 'Oh, so you want to take over the throne of Saul, when you should

be sitting there at the foot of the chair, at the foot of the throne? He was referring to the incumbent MP for our constituency, who was also from my family line. I was just bowing my head and trying not to cry. It was so intimidating.

Even though there were about 50 chiefs inside the house, there are only eight people who are allowed to speak due to their family line and claim to the orator title. All of them had their say, except for my uncle, the only *matai* who was supporting me. One other *matai* was sitting on the fence. He said, 'Maybe we should give her a chance and see what she can do,' and then he suggested to allow both the incumbent MP and me to run, as long as we had approval of the other half of the village. This one *matai* who gave me a chance had always sought out my help to fix things when he came to town in Apia. I think he realised there were many things that I and my family had done that others may not know about. There is also a connection between his family and my mother's family. That's another reason he sort of gave in and supported me.

But the other six were not in favour. They were saying that a *matai* is someone who knows how to speak the proper language, someone who is strong, someone who is not a follower, someone who is not just a yes person, someone who knows the culture within the village. They went on for a long time.

My husband was not there, only my children. Just before the meeting finished, my daughters distributed the food. There was nothing left because so many people were there. I tried to be brave as I sat there, but I felt like I didn't want to run for election anymore. What they said caused me such great shame: 'Oh, you want to take the throne. You want to sit up there. Who are you? Do you know how to speak the proper language?' They said all this even though they knew my parents very well and all of the work that they had done for the village. They knew me too, but they pretended that they didn't know me. They said all those things to intimidate me. They also scolded my uncle for bringing me into the meeting. They said, 'You have got the wrong process. You should have not brought her here. You should have gathered a smaller group first and then that group should have brought her.' They changed the processes to make things difficult.

My uncle was very humble. He is a great *matai*. When I look back, I know he was the right person to introduce me because he could be humble and control

his anger. If it was another person from my family who was not so calm and masterful, it would have been a whole different story: the other *matai* would have made a decision straight away and I would not have been endorsed. But as they went on and on with their criticism he stayed really calm. He spoke softly to show his respect and to position himself below them, he was lowering himself to demonstrate that we were humble people coming for their blessing. Even though he is one of the top oratorical chiefs and he speaks the oratorical language masterfully, he really humbled himself, not putting himself where he should have been, in order for the village to accept me.

Now I am in the circles where I mix with these *matai*, I realise that this is a strategy they use. They tried to intimidate me and cause me great shame so that I wouldn't continue to put myself forward as a candidate. They humiliated me in front of half of the village.

I thought I had given up but I held on because when I looked at my two girls, I thought of how they had woken up very early in the morning and prepared food for over 100 people. I thought of my family who had given me support to be a *matai* and to be a candidate, how I had my whole family behind me. Looking at my daughters gave me the bravery, the strength, to go on.

Eventually, I guess out of respect, they decided to leave the matter. They said, 'We will leave it for the time being. We will inform you later after we meet again.' That was in March 2015. It took nine months to hear from them again.

When we came home, our family was so angry. Everyone was angry. My mind was so unsettled. Everyone was talking: 'We have done so much for the village but our service was not recognised.' For the two or three days before we returned to Apia, all I could hear was the anger and disappointment of our whole family towards our village. When the *matai* humiliated me like that, they humiliated my whole family.

In December 2015, almost nine months after that meeting, and only a month before nominations for candidates would close, I was overseas for my daughter's graduation. It was just before Christmas day when I got the call. My uncle, the *matai* who had introduced me, rang to tell me the house of the chiefs wanted me to come for a meeting. It took them nine months to make that decision and now they wanted

me to come straightaway, even though my family had told them I was away for my daughter's graduation. I thought, 'No, I don't want to be tossed around by these men,' so I said, 'No, I am in New Zealand attending my daughter's graduation. I will be back next week and then I will come.'

When I got back I was nervous, I wondered whether they would allow me to run. That's how things are in the village, they are really tough on the culture, you always have to follow the right protocols. When I got in I went to Savai'i the very next morning. There was lots of talk of how cheeky I was to not come on the day. A meeting was called with me and the incumbent candidate, and the whole village was there. They had a kava ceremony. When they handed me the first kava and I took some, my hands were shaking. The chiefs started a process. They said, 'We asked you to come last week and you didn't come.' The talking went on for quite some time to make the point that I didn't come when they asked. I was sitting inside the house, but still I could hear the noises of disapproval — especially when I took my kava — from people in the village who were outside the house. They were supporters of the current member. Then finally they said, 'But now that you are here we will give you the chance to run, we will endorse two candidates.' The *matai* from my family had been doing the groundwork while I was away and making excuses for me on my behalf. I think that is why the house of the chiefs gave me another chance. I was trembling and struggling with my words. I thanked them for allowing me to run as a candidate. Then they asked why I wanted to run. I had already thought very carefully about what I would say. I said, 'It is several years since I returned from working in Fiji and having served in the Pacific region. I thought here I am serving many countries and yet my village has hardly any developments. Why would I go further out into the region to serve those countries when here is my village that really needs the help? That is why I request that you give me an opportunity to serve while I am still able to, before I get old and I am not able.' They then said, 'So we have made a decision. You two will run as candidates. And only you two will represent this village.' There were four others but we were the only two they allowed. Because of the rights of the individual, the other two still ran for elections, but for us two, we could run with the blessing of the village. But they gave their endorsement with conditions. They

said, 'If one of you wins, the other one will never sue.' Those were the strict instructions given to us and that was agreed.

The meeting only took place two weeks before nominations closed, so I almost missed the chance to run. After that my family decided to take me to the other two villages within the electorate for their endorsement. This all had to happen in the week before nominations closed.

I knew the visits would entail a kava ceremony. In our culture when a kava ceremony is held on your behalf, you have to give something in return, but under the electoral rules we are not allowed to give gifts to win votes. So, I went to the man in charge of the electoral rules and I asked him what to do. He said, 'You know the culture very well. Do not use the election to stay away from the culture, you have to do it, but not in excess of what is usually done.' So we went to the village called Tufutafoe to find out what a visitor usually gives for a kava ceremony. We sought the advice of families we are connected to. And they said it was usually 4000 or 5000 tala (approximately AU\$2200–2700) and being a money person, I thought to be safe, I'll give 2000 tala. So after they had the kava ceremony for me, the *matai* and the family that took me said, 'Thank you, we all know that we should not use bribery but this is not bribery, because this is our culture we will make a contribution to the village food for this day because of the honour you have given us through the kava ceremony.' We gave it to the whole village rather, not just the *matai*, because the whole village was there. So, in the next village we did the same. The other village had more people, but I just gave the same amount, 2000 tala for the kava ceremony. The kava ceremony was held because they requested to see the person who was going to run, so my family took me there to introduce me.

Campaigning

As soon as I was endorsed, some members of my family and three people from outside formed a campaign committee. They brought in three people from outside. The ten of them would go around and find people who were not registered on the electoral roll and encourage them to register and vote. We did a lot of work to encourage people to register. When we started there were only 989 people on our roll. When we finished there were almost 1400 people registered. I think that additional 400 was because of our work. When

my opponent's campaigners realised that we were encouraging people to register, they also started the same process, but they only started a month before the roll was closed.

I went every weekend to Savai'i and I visited my uncle who was a mentor to me. He selected two or three families for me to visit every weekend. They were families that he knew were not on our side. It is not usual to just show up to people's houses uninvited, this was all my uncle's idea. Being a shy person, I felt so embarrassed and ashamed to visit people's houses without being invited. I always took my sister and my younger cousin, who is a schoolteacher, with me. When we'd pull up in front of their house I'd be full of dread. I'd stand there outside their house for five or ten minutes trying to think of what to say before I'd even go into their driveway.

After visiting three or four families I started to get the hang of it. I'd just say, 'I am going for the election and if I can have your support...' Some of them would be straight and would let me know how they planned to vote. Others would ask me questions and let me know what they wanted for their village. I think there were only two families who said some things that they wanted done, but the rest would just say something like we are with the current member, or we are with the lawyer (the other lady candidate) but we will discuss. That was a respectful way to let me know they wouldn't vote for me.

Even though it was embarrassing, I thought there is no harm in trying. I followed the program scheduled by my uncle, visiting families in the village, even though I did not really know them well and they were more connected with the other candidates. But he would say, 'Go, we are connected because we have the same *matai* title,' or, 'We did schooling together.' He would find connections, so I would go. I visited a lot of families in Savai'i, but not in the Apia area. I left that to my campaign committee who made sure people were registered and told them I was running.

I was very careful with my campaign committee. I would brief them every Monday and say, 'Never tell them to vote for me, just let them know I am running.' I was cautious because we have so many electoral rules. When I was in the village I let them know I could see many things that needed to be done, with regard to the schools, with regard to the roads. That's all I said. I didn't make any promises.

The incumbent candidate only came back to the village the month before the elections. Members of parliament are given committees and at the time they had the power to select 10 members from their constituency to be committee members, this has now been reduced to seven. Committee members perform the role of advisors and are paid a salary. Somehow he had appointed 19 men from our village. Those men campaigned on his behalf.

Another candidate in my constituency performed very well. She is a lawyer. She was knocking on all the doors, especially the last week while I was still in Apia tidying up my work. I understand she went around our village twice, knocking on every door and promoting herself. People in the village look up to someone who is educated. They looked up to her because she is a lawyer. I didn't promote myself like that, I just said that I wanted to do a service. When I got elected, I thought, I've got to get that shyness away, I've got to let them know that I also have a degree, I am a finance person, I have been working at high levels. So that is what I learnt from my lawyer colleague, to promote myself also.

Going to court

Later after I had won the most votes in our constituency, the incumbent member and another candidate took me to court.¹ The incumbent member accused me of bribery because of the contributions my family had made at the kava ceremonies for village endorsement.

While we waited for the case to be heard, some *matai* from my village sought out the incumbent to remind him of our agreement with the village council that we would not sue the winning candidate. They went twice to Apia to find him but he could not be located.

When the matter reached court my lawyer sought a mediation process to which the judge agreed. The incumbent had two lawyers and one spokesperson. My lawyer decided not to attend, so I was accompanied only by a female cousin who was my mentor. In the mediation process, the incumbent requested for me to pay \$500,000 in lieu of his lost position as an MP due to my alleged bribery. We negotiated for two days without an agreement and so the matter went back to court. The court case started, but surprisingly the incumbent's lawyer requested two more hours to finalise the mediation.

We went back to the mediation room and the incumbent said he would withdraw the case on a number of conditions: I was to pay half of his legal costs and the costs of advertising to inform the public of his petition withdrawal, and was to apologise in person within five days to his sisters who were behind his court case.

I fulfilled all of these conditions. However, when I went to make my apology, his sisters said there was no need as we did not do anything wrong to them. One sister said a prayer for all of us and to ask forgiveness from God. We had tea then we left.

I almost didn't make it to being an MP: nine months for our village to consider whether I am suitable, and then once I won my position, I was taken to court.

Learning language and pushing gender boundaries

There are three kinds of languages in Samoa. The formal oratorical language which is spoken by the chiefs, the *matai*, then the partial one, which is formal and informal, and then there's the informal everyday language. The formal language is only spoken in the arena of the *matai*, where all the decision-making occurs for the village; when there's a bestowment of a chiefly title; and in parliament. Sometimes at women's community meetings the opening speech may include a little bit of formal language, then normal everyday language is used for the discussion. The main thing I was concerned about when I decided to run for parliament was that I could speak the informal language respectfully, but I did not understand or know how to speak that formal oratorical language. When you can master that language, everyone thinks that you can represent them in parliament.

You can only learn the formal language by listening. It is not in textbooks. I had been a *matai* for three years before I ran for elections, but not once had I entered the arena of the *matai*, where that language is spoken. Even though women can be *matai* it's usually just men in the meetings where that language is spoken. In daily life, you are not really exposed to that language.

I only entered the house of the chiefs once I became an MP. Women rarely go into the house. They still regard that house as only for the *matai*, only for the men, so I used my status as an MP to get into the house. I was scared, but I thought if I really want to

get involved in decision-making for my village, I really have to be in that house.

They usually have monthly meetings, sometimes bi-monthly. The houses are round and the established *matai* know where to sit. Usually the less important ones sit at the back. So that's how I started. One day I went in and I sat right at the back, listening to the protocols. I was the first woman of the village to go into that house. I was intimidated to go in, I didn't know the culture, but I really wanted to be a part of the decision-making, so I thought I just have to go in and listen. It was good that I listened first because I realised on that first day that only one person from each *matai* line can speak. The uncle who took me in the first time is a talking chief, an orator. So if he talks, I am not allowed to speak. That's the first thing I learnt. Even though the house is full of *matai*, there could be five or six of us with the same title, only a few can speak. There are matters where the chiefs who run the village will say, ok we will give the opportunity for some more views and they allow maybe two more from the *matai* line to speak, but that's in very rare situations.

After that meeting I thought here I am, an MP, yet it is only my uncle, the talking chief, who can speak on behalf of my family. So, the second time I went in, I deliberately went and sat right next to the high chief — the most important person, who is high and mighty — to claim my space as an MP. It's only when I sat there they started to recognise me. After the first meeting, I was sure enough of the protocols, when to listen, who's the first to speak and so on. The third time I went, as they started making decisions about one of the projects in the village, I respectfully asked, although I was very nervous, 'Can I say something please?' I thought if I really want the women *matai* to be recognised by our village as being able to make a valuable contribution to the running of the village, I'd better do it right for the other women. I had prepared myself well and I made sure my contribution had a lasting impact.

After that first speech and my advice on that project, I had that feeling inside the house that they thought, 'Oh she makes sense.' Then after that another matter came up and I again raised my hand. I think I spoke about three times. I really made sure it was worthwhile for the men to listen to me.

After that I usually went to the monthly meetings and listened. After about three months I had caught up and I could confidently speak in the formal language.

I think I could speak more confidently than most of the chiefs in there. My own village was very supportive; they knew I was struggling with the language but they were very encouraging. I suppose the services I had been doing for our villages really helped them to accept me. When they look back to four years ago they must laugh at how I was really struggling. But I think that women are fast learners. I thought, if you want to learn, it's not something you learn like in school, it's listening. That's how I was able to master the language. Listening and learning how they speak. I did actually go and get into some Samoan language text books to learn how some of the proverbs are used, and looked at the protocols of that language to reconfirm my understanding. When I came through it I thought, 'What was I scared of? It's something that you just listen to and then get the hang of it. It's not a textbook kind of learning.

Now when a matter is discussed and my uncle has spoken I also ask if I can speak. I'm not breaking the rules, being too different, but I am trying to break that

culture of not allowing people to have the opportunity to voice their views. There are the only five or six people who get to make the decisions. The other *matai* criticise and they are angry with what's going on, because they are not given the opportunity to speak, I always talk straight, whenever I want to talk I just put up my hand or I just let them know in a respectful manner that I want to say something. I realised in the last meeting I attended that the others are starting to change and speak up also.

In Samoa the number of women *matai* is starting to grow, but there's still a lack of getting involved in the decision-making of the village. In that arena, that house, they have the say of the village. They decide what happens whenever someone does something wrong. They decide on what penalties will be imposed. But it's very rare that women are involved in this decision-making.² It's still something for our Samoan culture to implant into the minds of women.

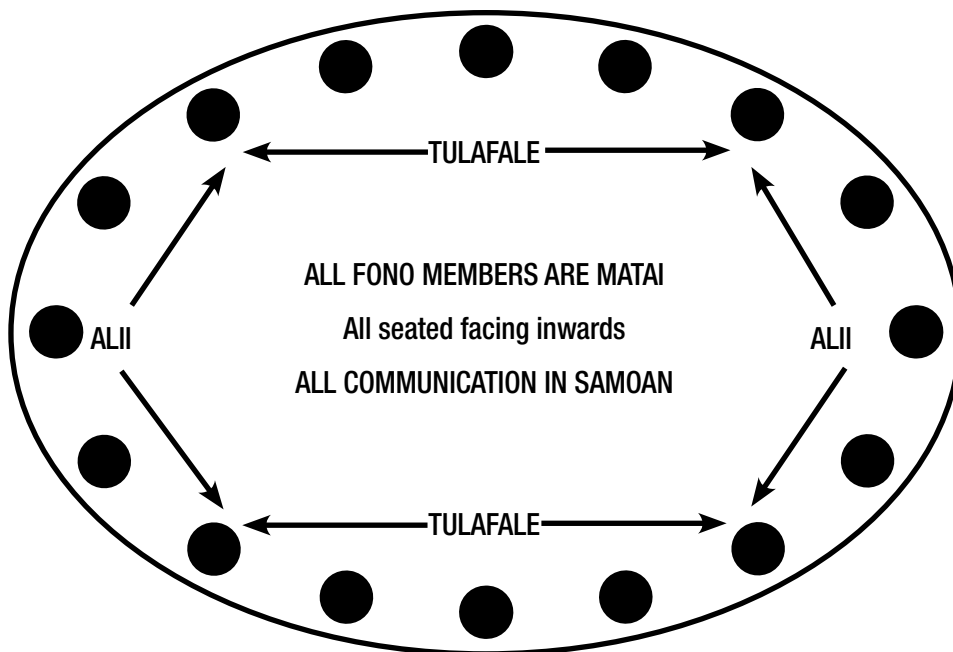


Figure 1: Seating arrangement for village *fono* inside the house of the chiefs

Source: Kruse Va'ai 2011:69 (reproduced with author's permission)

Village councils – *fono*

Together *matai* form a *fono* or village council, however, as noted earlier, not all *matai* participate in the *fono*. The Village Fono Act 1990 provides official recognition of the village council's role in local level governance and cooperation, including punishments, dispute resolution and resource sharing (Huffer and So'o 2005; Kruse Va'ai 2011). The Act, however, did not recognise all traditional roles of the village council, as some traditional customs contradict with individual rights provided for in the Samoan Constitution (So'o 2008). Speechmaking, discussion, deliberation and decision-making in open settings 'where all can hear what is being said' is an important element of the *fono* system (Huffer and So'o 2005:325; Holmes 1969). Deliberation and decisions that occur in the *fono* are shared through word of mouth or, where required, media such as radio and newspaper (Kruse Va'ai 2011).

The position of participants in a *fono* is dependent on their status, ranking and level of participation in a meeting. The front of the *fono* is high status and the back is low (Keating and Duranti 2006). *Tautua* (service or behind or in the back) is an important part of apprenticeship or pathway to leadership. 'Implied in this notion is that the future leader has not only put in the hard work and apprenticeship necessary but also intimately understands what it is like to be "in the back" '(Huffer and So'o 2005:318).

Gaining respect in parliament

When I got into parliament I prepared for my maiden speech thoroughly. I made sure it was memorable. I can confidently say it had a lasting impact. Most of what I said there I can tell has been used for subsequent speeches, which made me feel accepted by the male *matai*. Once again, the language was important. As an MP you have to master that formal language because it is spoken in committee meetings and in parliament. The senior officials who come to your meetings, they all speak that language.

Our prime minister is a good communicator. He speaks the formal language, but then he speaks the everyday language in order to try and get across the message. That is exactly what I am doing now. I use the formal language when it's needed but in most of my speeches I use respectful everyday language to make sure I get the message across. I learnt from listening to others in parliament that there are times when the formal language must be used, but most of the time the respectful layman's language is most effective.

After joining parliament I became the first woman to chair the Parliamentary Committee for Finance and Expenditure. Some committee members knew of my work as an accountant and they were confident in my ability and supported me to be the chair. But the rest of them had question marks about me. Usually new MPs are not elected to be a chairperson of a committee and

in addition, I was the first woman to chair the finance committee. I knew there was a general expectation that it has to be a man. I knew I could do it — I was just hoping for the chance.

I was really intimidated at the start. When I got in there, I could sense the older ones were doubting me and I was quickly trying to learn how things were done. I didn't respond to them and their doubts, even though I felt very hurt in a way. After two days I thought, 'No this can't be, I have to step up, I have to be the leader and lead the committee.' They said it should be done this way, it should be done our way, the way they want it. But after that I thought, it has to be the way of our current committee, with me as the chairperson leading the way.

I saw ways of improving the processes but I didn't want to just jump in and change things. I wanted to see what other things are done well. I only change the weaknesses with improvements, rather than making change because it's my way. I always observe and experience first, to see what good things already exist.

I think after my first report and my first budget presentation, all the doubts went out the window. It's not a challenge anymore, they really respect me now because of what I have done so far. I think I have the respect as a woman and as a chairperson. I was very confident I could make a difference and use my skills in finance to improve the work of parliament.

Oratory in parliament

Samoan language varies according to the level of respect required. Levels of respect are dictated by the social situation, the social standing of the speaker and the degree of status that they confer to their listener, and the status of other bystanders or audience members (Keating and Duranti 2006). Language variations range from colloquial through to respectful (Pawley 1966; Hunkin 2009). Respectful language is the most polite version of Samoan, but is to be distinguished from the oratorical language. Respectful language is the language that should be used when speaking to chiefs of high rank and involves vocabulary replacement. For example, in ordinary language woman is *fafine*, but in respectful Samoan, *tama'ita'i*. This is comparable to 'woman' and 'lady' in English usage, and the fact that the Queen of England might not 'drink' water, she 'imbibes' it (Personal communication 2019).³

Oratorical language however, is a distinct language system, or register, used specifically for speechmaking, particularly at ceremonial occasions and 'is less a form of communication than art for its own sake and for the sake of the social structure it complements' (Holmes 1969:343). The oratory performance contains reference to myths, legends, proverbs and poetry. Expressions may be drawn from cultural or folklore traditions, and since the introduction of Christianity, biblical references (Hunkin 2009). The oratorical register is used to convey lineage, status and hierarchy. The register can be used to show respect, defer to others and validate others' rank (Holmes 1969; Milner 1961; Kruse Va'ai 2011). In traditional ceremonies between villages, orators may engage in a type of contest where speech is used to demonstrate genealogy. An orator demonstrates their knowledge of myths, legends and proverbs as a means of affirming their status (Tuimaleali'ifano 2006). Orators also make use of voice to display their skill, with increasing volume as speeches proceed (Holmes 1969). Milner (1961:304) describes this knowledge and skill of the orators as 'jealously guarded', in contrast to everyday Samoan language which is 'common property'.

Today, parliament is conducted in a mix of Samoan and English. Oratorical language is used in the opening and closing ceremonies of parliament and in formal speeches. 'Prior to the closing of Parliament, there is a *faatau* or verbal deliberation between contenders as to who will take the honour of displaying their oratorical skills in addressing all of Samoa' (Kruse Va'ai 2011:60). While the oratorical register is used in formal proceedings, the Samoan term *tala tau sua* (men jesting) is used to describe another style of communication in politics. The connotation of this term is that politics is dirty and not appropriate for women (Meleisea et al. 2015).

My proudest achievements

When you are an MP, you know all the avenues for help and using this knowledge is the service I am really doing for the community. I guide and lead my community, but I'm not there all the time, so I help them to learn where they need to go to find help. I set them on the path. Sometimes I just take the constituent to the ministry and say, 'Please this one he wants to develop a cattle farm,' and then I let constituent learn that you don't just get those things handed to you on a plate.

I give advice to parents on the relevant education and career path for their children. Sometimes the young people are doing vocational courses but then

they want them to look for jobs on the management and administration side of things. You have to look at these areas where your children have the necessary skills or aptitude, like carpentry. So it's the simple things that outer districts really lack — just that awareness of knowing where to find help. I believe that's all part and parcel of serving the community.

I try to focus on the poor families first. I help out when I know there's no-one employed in the family. I know that there are children who went to high school and they're sitting around so I try to get them employment, at least so there's one person in each family who can earn some money. I also try to help out with their projects: some who wish to start a small

business, or some who want to extend the farm. I make sure there is a wide distribution of the wealth.

I created the opportunity for young men from one of our villages to go to New Zealand for the seasonal workers program. The government was accepting men from all over the country to take up the seasonal workers program. But I wanted something different. I wanted to see how the program would work if you took them from just one village. We were given the opportunity for 11 young men to be in a pilot project. Before they left to work, I had a good talk with them. I planted into their minds the importance of hard work, loyalty and honesty so that more opportunities would come to the village.

The proudest moment of my life came when they returned and I saw the difference it made to the standard of living for those poor families. As soon as they got back, six young men bought cars for their families, three of them built new houses and the other two did renovations. The employer has increased the number of workers, so now there are 30 altogether and I am trying to extend it to the other two villages. The feeling that came from seeing the difference it makes to their lives cannot be measured.

Now our roads are done, it is like a small town. I applied for some funding re-do the village pools and people are going there to swim. It is like a tourist area now. My sewing project for the women is starting next week. The vegetable garden is on the way. I have started to capture the trust of the women because I have focused on them, but I have not neglected the men.

Now when I drive past, they stop the car. I know them now. I am more visible now, demonstrating I can deliver projects. When there are church gatherings in Apia, I go and sit with them, even if it is just one hour.

In parliament, my proudest moment was presenting the first budget speech in 2016. People still talk about it. I think I really made an impression — that women can do much better work in parliament. They can do the same as men and even better.

People in the village are so proud of me now when I speak in parliament. And they also realise that I am selected to be on most of the committees as a women's representative. They hear me discuss the finances in parliament. So, I think I don't need to sell myself anymore. Since I got into parliament I have done many projects and provided a lot of services. I think the service speaks for itself.

Leadership is service

Leadership is all about serving and guiding. Going into leadership positions and going into parliament is very exciting. It is a very inspiring service-oriented career. If you go into it thinking of all the responsibilities that will be on your shoulders, then it can be a bit scary. But if you go in there with that feeling that you are going there to serve and to guide others, if you have confidence in what you are good at, then you can do anything.

Leadership is also about consciously seeking the skills required in order to make things happen. My advice to other women is to use what you are doing best to make your contribution. Even if you're a nurse or a teacher, do what you are best at and take the lead in that area. You need a good background, but you don't need to be highly educated. With all due respect to academics, you don't need to have a PhD. Be authentic, be open about your weaknesses, then your constituents will give you support. Master the language and prove that you can speak. If you focus on doing a service, you will see what you are good at. Be confident in your skills and abilities, and lead in the area where you are strong.

By the time I reached parliament, I was confident that I could perform well because of all my practice and training to get to that point, whether it was in my career, with the church or with my community. I used to think that women needed more confidence and needed to prove their worth to step up and take leadership roles. But now through my work as an MP, I have realised that women are valuable as they are; they are already highly skilled and they are already demonstrating leadership. They just need to overcome their fear of being judged and know how to promote themselves. Women have double the amount of leadership potential because of our dual roles of organising the home as well as having a career, but they don't step up to leadership roles because they think their place is in the home. But your role in the home makes you valuable, you are looking after the children, organising the family and contributing financially. You work twice as hard, you have more than twice the responsibility of the husband. There's a saying that you need to prove your worth, but I realised that the women don't need to prove their worth, they are already extremely valuable as they are right now. Your worth is through your actions.

I have learnt that an important part of leadership is knowing the processes — when to accept things, and when to search for another way. For example, if I put across a proposal and it's not supported, I need to package it in another way. I find out who is not supportive and I now have the courage to sit with them and discuss what they feel is not good with the proposal. I find that you end up knowing what they're concerned about. Then you realise that you also have to learn from them because you don't know everything. You can get frustrated if what you are putting up is not supported or you can go around and chat with them. Then you learn. Then you can accept their decision. You also need to know that it is a democratic process and you need to accept the majority's decision. But there are times when you discuss with them and they realise they had a different perception. After that you can find that they will come around again and speak for you, and support what you are putting forward. That's what I've learnt: to use all your avenues, and to know when to stop and accept that it's a democratic process.

My eldest son was concerned that people always say that politics is dirty. I was troubled by this, because that is not a word heard in our culture and our traditions. But I learnt when I got into parliament that it is not politics that is dirty, it's the deeds of the person themselves. But getting into politics is really about serving. If you go in with that focus, you will find that you enjoy the rest of your time as a politician. That's what I'm enjoying now — it's the service.

Balancing work and family

Going into parliament is a partnership with my husband and my children. There was a lot of adjustment to the time and financial pressures for all of us. I really needed their support. I didn't want any member of my family to be unsure. The second partner is my extended family. When you sign up for this job, you sign up your whole family, your extended family and your community. I was able to go into parliament because I had the support of my whole extended family. They do a lot of work when I am not around. When I was younger, I did that for my uncle. When people came, I helped them rather than sending them to my uncle. It's so funny that process, that is our culture in the Pacific.

I have observed that women are apprehensive to step up to leadership roles because they are concerned about balancing their time with family. When you

become a public figure there is a sense that you tend to neglect your family life, but balancing time with family is important. I was a workaholic and I learned the hard way that things fall apart when you don't take care of all parts of your life. You come back the next day and the work is still there, so it is about trying to work smarter. It is difficult, but with good planning you can make sure your life doesn't become one-sided with your public figure role.

In my role as a parliamentarian I have a very busy schedule and many overlapping responsibilities. I have family and social obligations, obligations to parliament and obligations to my community. I plan carefully to give time to all of these. I usually jot down three or four main tasks for each day. Even though I often want to delay the difficult tasks, I tackle them first. I plan a month ahead and I schedule time for family, parliament and the community. There will be adjustments to my schedule. There are obligations where I know it is simply a must, and there are some where I know things will still happen if I do not attend. These are the things that I can drop off. I prioritise, because I can't be everywhere all the time.

It was difficult to stick with my plan in the beginning, but I am used to it now. I also make sure I have one hour each day to myself. I walk and I think. I revisit what I've done through the day, thinking of what went well and what needs to be improved or done differently.

There is a time when I just pluck everything off the to-do list and have time with my family. It gives me satisfaction every day that I have time for my husband, my children and my grandchildren. Just three hours helping my children with a problem, or seeing if there is something that I need to focus on with my husband, like the development of the constituency or with the church. Time with my family is the time that I enjoy most.

I know that a lot of the Samoan women are worried about their marriage when they are considering leadership roles. Men are the head of the household and the role for women is in our families. I think most of the cultures are similar in the Pacific. But my experience now is that for a woman to be a successful leader, there has to be a close partnership with her husband. I make sure my husband is involved and he has been a great help. Before I thought it was my role alone, but I realised I needed him as a partner in my

role with my constituents. I include him in every project proposal, although I know the confidentiality of some of the things that he should not. If you involve him in everything, then there will be no questions about what you are doing. When you get your husband into that close partnership, you will find a great support from him.

I hope that many other women can be motivated through my story because I believe a lot of them are starting from a much better position than where I was. I'm sharing my experience and the challenges so that they know how to pave their way towards going into those leadership positions. They can take the shortcuts; they can learn from my experience. Women just need to showcase their worth. I believe that when women get out there they can really prove themselves. Women in parliament do really well. It is the way to get there, that is the challenge. I've been observing all the women who go into parliament in Australia and New Zealand. I'm proud of their work. Here in Samoa we just need our way to get there and then we can showcase what we are worth.

In the Pacific now it's time for a change. There should be more women in leadership positions. Women have the potential. It's about time that smaller island countries take a step up.

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Endnotes

1. Court cases are common following elections, usually in the case where unsuccessful candidates take elected candidates to court for alleged bribery. If allegations are successful, a bi-election is called or if the allegations are disproven then the candidate retains their seat (Fiti-Sinclair et al. 2017).
2. For further reading on gender issues, customary law and village *fono* refer to Boodoosingh and Schoeffel 2018.
3. Hedvig Skirgard 10/9/2019. PhD Candidate. The Wellsprings of Linguistic Diversity. ARC centre of Excellence for the Dynamics of Language. College of Asia Pacific. Australian National University. Personal communication.

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