



Intractable Barriers to Women’s Election in Tonga

Lepolo Taunisila and Sonia Palmieri

DOI: [10.25911/8HWB-R467](https://doi.org/10.25911/8HWB-R467)

7 February 2022

In this In Brief we consider lessons learned in the aftermath of women candidates’ defeat in the 18 November 2021 general election. We identify five intractable barriers to women’s election in Tonga: voters’ expectations of reciprocity in exchange for electoral support; deeply entrenched perceptions of men’s legitimacy as political leaders; untimely support for women candidates; an inhospitable political environment for electoral gender quotas; and a lack of accountability on gender equality commitments.

Many of the women contesting the 2021 general election ran in different electorates against male candidates only, the exception being in Tongatapu 5 (TT5), where two women – the incumbent, Losaline Ma’asi and ‘Akanete Ta’ai – ran (see Table 1). Seven of the 12 women candidates contested the election as independents, and another five ran for Paati Temokalati ‘a e ‘Otu Motu ‘Anga’ofa, or PTOA. Seven of the 12 candidates ran for the first time in this election, while one woman candidate contested her fifth election.

In December 2021, the Fi-e-Fi-a’a Fafine Tonga, or FFFT, brought together candidates and local political experts to consider the question of barriers to women’s

political representation in Tonga. Five barriers were identified for women contesting the 2021 election.

1) **The expectation of reciprocity in political campaigns requires financial resources most women candidates do not have.** The cost of election campaigns is a known barrier to aspiring women politicians the world over (Ballington and Kahane 2014). With a compounding effect in Tonga, the expectation of reciprocity – that voters will be gifted food, kava, water tanks and even road maintenance – makes it difficult for women candidates (and other non-incumbents) to compete. While changes to the Electoral Act in Samoa restricted ‘electoral gifting’ in 2014, understood to disadvantage women candidates more than men and youth (Haley et al. 2017:36), in Tonga we observe that few voters consider this ‘exchange’ as bribery, which is technically illegal under Tongan electoral law. Commentators present at the post-election debrief noted the difficulty in proving a link between ‘electoral gifting’ and voter choice in the courts.

2) **Men remain ‘legitimate’ political leaders in the eyes of Tongan voters.** In 2020–21, the Balance of Power program, in partnership with the Tupou Tertiary Institute,¹ undertook a large-scale research project on voters’ perceptions of women’s leadership. One thousand participants – men and women – were asked about their perceptions of individuals’ appropriate roles and behaviours in family, community and political life. The study found that 92 per cent of those surveyed considered men were more likely to have the ‘right’ skills and experience for parliament (Kata and Lolohea 2021). In this context, the results of the election were not entirely unexpected. Indeed, media commentary following the election included the question ‘what’s wrong with an all-male parliament, anyway?’, the assumption being that men can and do represent women in parliament.

Table 1: Women candidates in the 2021 Tongan general election

Name	Attempt	Constituency	Candidacy
‘Akanete Ta’ai	First	TT5	PTOA Board
Ana Soakai	First	HP12	Independent
Eta Harris	First	VV15	Independent
Fane Fangufangu Fituafe	First	TT6	PTOA
Loisi Halaliku	First	VV14	Independent
Milika Ikahihifo	First	HP13	Independent
Vika Taufu Kaufusi	First	TT10	PTOA
Gabriella Ilolahia	Second	TT3	PTOA
Losaline Ma’asi (incumbent)	Second	TT5	PTOA
Silivia Loumaile Mahe	Third	Eua11	Independent
Vika Fusimalohi	Third	TT9	Independent
Mele Amanaki	Fifth	TT7	Independent

Men's more privileged role in Tongan politics was felt by women contesting this election, some of whom noted at the post-election session that certain campaign spaces were decidedly off-limits to them. Kava clubs, for example, are often where men make their voting decisions, which are later shared with their wives and families on the expectation that they will follow suit.

3) Support for women candidates continues to be at 'the last minute'. While a new emphasis on voter perceptions had been a focus of programmatic support in the year-long lead-up to this election, a women's candidate workshop and a practice parliament for women (the Tongan Women's Parliament) were both organised in the month before the general election.² Participants at a December 2021 workshop for journalists, co-sponsored by the Pacific Media Assistance Scheme (PACMAS) and the Tongan Media Association, considered that more attention to women candidates in Tonga was needed, and suggested that the Women's Parliament be held annually. Participants expressed the view that the Women's Parliament was effective not only in encouraging women to contest general elections, but also in raising interest in leadership opportunities at more local levels. By way of example, it was noted that a former participant of the Women's Parliament had been subsequently elected as a district officer.³

4) The lack of a formalised party system that embraces electoral gender quotas is detrimental to women's candidacy. Despite the prevalence of women running as independents, for some candidates the 2021 election confirmed a belief in the need for a more formal party structure, which would then open further discussions on the possible adoption of electoral gender quotas as a form of temporary special measures (TSMs). While not technically an electoral quota, the provision for the prime minister and cabinet to appoint additional members of the executive does constitute a (broadly defined) TSM.⁴ In successive elections since 2010, the appointment mechanism has tended to work as a compensatory measure, rather than an affirmative action measure. The Tongan Women's Parliament in October had passed a motion on the need for affirmative action, and a report from the event will be presented to the Speaker of the Legislative Assembly. Women candidates expressed the hope that the new Speaker would table their report in the Assembly.

5) Accountability is required on locally determined gender equality objectives. Post-election reflections also reiterated the importance of a strong women's movement in Tonga which could articulate — in locally appropriate language and sentiment — the particular contribution that Tongan women would make to political decision making, including in parliament. Participants in the debriefing session dismissed the idea of women's political empowerment being something driven by non-

government organisations and international development agencies. It was suggested that there was a need to hold the Tongan government accountable for its national commitment to women's leadership as expressed, for example, in the National Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality Tonga Policy and Strategic Plan of Action: 2019–2025. Some of the measures in the plan include the need for civic education so that more recognition of women's leadership abilities is achieved.

Conclusion

Even in their election defeat, women candidates expressed a sense of satisfaction that they had participated in the election, that some of them had posed 'a threat' to the incumbent, and that others had won the greatest number of votes in their own village. The number of women who contested for the first time in this election is significant. Not uncommonly, women the world over have had to contest a number of times before winning the seat. The challenge is in encouraging Tongan women to keep trying. This requires more localised and sustained support across the election cycle.

Author notes

Lepolo Taunisila is the country program manager of the Balance of Power program. Sonia Palmieri is a gender policy fellow with the Department of Pacific Affairs.

Endnotes

1. The Balance of Power program is an initiative of Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development. The Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga's Topou Tertiary Institute offers tertiary education.
2. The Tongan Women's Parliament is facilitated by Tonga's Legislative Assembly and supported by the United Nations.
3. Local government is provided for by the Fonos Act 1988 and the District and Town Officers Act 1988. In the island groups of Ha'apai and Vava'u, governors are responsible for local administration, executed by district and town officers. In the principal island of Tongatapu there are elected district and town officers, reporting directly to the Prime Minister's Office. Governors are appointed by the prime minister and elections of officers are held every three years.
4. We thank a peer reviewer for this point.

References

- Ballington, J. and M. Kahane. 2014. Women in Politics: Financing for Gender Equality. In E. Falguera, S. Jones and M. Ohman (eds), *Funding of Political Parties and Election Campaigns: A Handbook on Political Finance*. Stockholm: International IDEA.
- Haley, N., R. Ng Shiu, K. Baker, K. Zubrinich and G. Carter 2017. *2016 Samoa General Election: Domestic Observation Report*. SSGM Report. Canberra: ANU.
- Kata, U. and V. Lolohea 2021. *Voter's Perceptions of Women as Leaders in Tonga*.

The **Department of Pacific Affairs (DPA)** is the leading international centre for applied multidisciplinary research and analysis concerning contemporary state, society and governance in the Pacific. DPA acknowledges the Australian Government's support for the production of the In Brief series. The views expressed in this paper are those of the author/s and do not necessarily reflect those of the ANU or the Australian Government. See the DPA website for a full disclaimer.