Voters' Perceptions of Women as Leaders in Tonga

Research project by Tupou Tertiary Institute in partnership with Balance of Power

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Background context:

• **Women’s political leadership has seen limited progress** in Tonga – only two women were elected to national Parliament in the 2017 general elections, with only 15 women running out of 86 candidates.

• This is despite leadership **progress and status in other sectors**, including the public service and within family and community life.

• Deeply **entrenched social norms** – embedded within culture and beliefs – are the primary barrier to shifting the leadership power imbalance in this domain.

• However, conventional donor-funded ‘gender’ projects have primarily **focused on the ‘supply’ side** – disregarding ‘demand’ i.e.: perceptions of women’s leadership **legitimacy**.

• Donor ‘gender’ projects are **not widely well viewed** at the local level – e.g.: foreign interference, culturally disrespectful, irrelevant to local power dynamics.
Balance of Power:

- While funded by the Australian Government, Balance of Power is taking a **new approach** to supporting women in political leadership.

- It is entirely and intentionally **locally-led**, i.e.: implemented by Pacific Islanders who ‘are BOP’ – intrinsically motivated local actors who would be advancing BOP aims regardless of external funding.

- Focused on tapping into and responding to people’s ‘**under the iceberg**’ drivers – belief systems, identities, cultural allegiances, distrust of foreign interference – to influence social change.

- This involves ‘**influencing the influencer**’ – i.e.: incentivising and supporting local powerholders – (within the media, government, churches, custom leadership) to advocate for BOP’s objectives.

- Central to this is a **strong evidence base** – knowing how and why people think, feel and act they way they do, and what influences them - and not making assumptions based on external experiences and frameworks.
Partnership between Balance of Power and Tupou Tertiary Institute:

- **Locally-led research** is central to the Balance of Power approach to ensuring a strong evidence base.

- This not only **informs implementation** strategies, but also empowers local institutions to take the lead in identifying and exploring issues of **local concern** – in **contextually appropriate, non-extractive** ways.

- With an issue as sensitive as beliefs and attitudes around gender equality, **trust is critical** in the data collection process; research bodies/individuals must have local credibility and sensitivity.

- These factors **underpin the partnership** brokered between BOP and TTI around the subject of ‘voters’ perceptions of women as leaders in Tonga’
Tupou Tertiary Institute – our priorities in the research activity

• Our **aims** in conducting this research.

• How we understand ‘**locally led research**’ - why this is important and how this was applied in the brokering of the research partnership with Balance of Power.

• Our **methodology** – building on the past and the centrality of contextual sensitivity.

• The significance of partnering with the **Tonga National Youth Congress** and our stakeholder **relationships** across all levels.
Key research findings

• 61% of respondents believed that the Tonga family unit, “fāmili” is hierarchical, with males at the top of the hierarchy and therefore the head of the Tongan family.

• 69% of respondents believed that mothers/women should stay at home with children while fathers/males attend and participate in village (fono) meetings.

• 80% of respondents felt that a woman, staying in her husband’s village, can participate in village meetings if she has been involved in village activities.

• 52% of respondents believed that it was appropriate for a Tongan mother to be a wage earner while father remains at home to conduct domestic chores.

• 80% of respondents recognized the privileged role of “mehekitanga” (father’s sister) in the Tongan family.

• 57% believed that males should lead in the villages while 57% believed that both males and females can lead in the workplace, 53% believed that both males and females can lead in parliament, BUT the percentage for both genders had a much higher percent for those that chose males as best leaders.

• 52% stated that they will vote for a male candidate over a female candidate with exactly the same qualifications.

• 92% believed that fewer women than men have the right skills and experience for parliament.
Research implications

• There is a still a very strong view that men are inherently better leaders in family and in the village and for parliament.

• There is greater acceptance of women as economic earners, but that their role as mothers still comes first. Greater visibility of women leaders in decision making arenas, such as being leaders in workplaces, must be considered as way of encouraging increased women participation.

• Stories which highlighted unfair treatment of women appeared to have an emotional impact on respondents and elicited a different response from their ‘traditional’ views. Storytelling that highlights injustices for women, should be a major tool for advocacy for womens’ rights.

• Traditional Tongan values about gendered roles within the Tongan family seems to be reinforced within the village and church communities – without influence and advocacy efforts at this level, national policies will continue to remain aspirational.