

Voters' Perceptions of Women as Leaders in Tonga

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

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TUPOU TERTIARY INSTITUTE RESEARCH & TRAINING CENTRE

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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, “fāмили” 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 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 women's 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.