



## No women elected in Tonga: time to change the story

By 'Ofakilevuka ('Ofa) Guttenbeil-Likiliki  
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As in 2008, 2010 and 2014, none of the female candidates standing in Tonga's 2021 general election were successful.

**Gender of candidates in Tongan elections, 2005-2021**

	2005	2008	2010	2014	2016*	2017	2021
Total # of female candidates	6	8	11	10	1	15	12
Total # of male candidates	55	63	133	90	3	71	63
Elected females	1	0	0	0	1	2	0

\* By-election

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Out of a total of 38,500 votes, 34,198 were cast for the male candidates and only 4,352 were cast for the 12 female candidates, down from 14% of total votes in 2017 to 11% in 2021. The only female MP incumbent running, Losaline Ma'asi, did not make it for a second term. At the 2017 snap elections she won 35% (1,034) of the total number of votes in her constituency Tongatapu 5. Yesterday, she won only 23% (614).

Her Royal Highness Princess Angelika Lātūfuipeka Halaevalu Mata'aho Napua-o-kalani Tuku'aho at the opening of Tonga Women's Parliament 2021, just three days before election day, reminded us that there is a need to move away from just a desire to increase the number of women in parliament to having a concrete action plan to achieve it. She made a strong statement that the current arrangements are not sufficient for increasing the number of women in Parliament. This is the key to opening up the dialogue for re-visiting and re-educating decision makers on temporary special measures (TSM) such as reserved seats, affirmative action party quotas and legislature quotas that have long been contested in

Tonga.

Women in Tonga were given universal suffrage in 1951. This was a political milestone for women navigated by her late Majesty Queen Sālote Tupou III who was one of only two women in Tonga's history to occupy the powerful position of monarch. However, since 1951, only six women have been elected to parliament.

The irony is that the majority of those who not only registered but who turned up to vote have been women, at all general elections since 2005.

So what's happening?

Two major pieces of research on voter's perception of women as leaders conducted in 2016-17 and 2020-21, using the same research methodology, showed that the majority of eligible voters believed key decision-making and leadership roles are best left to men and that roles such as household work and nurturing children are a women's responsibility. The following table gives a few highlights of the comparative results of these studies.

#### Views on gender roles

	2016-17	2020-21
Father is the only head of the family	0.68	0.61
Husband should attend village meeting and wife should stay at home with kids	0.71	0.69
Husband should go and work and mother should stay at home	0.71	0.58
If both parents are working outside the home and a child gets sick it is the responsibility of the mother to stay home and take child to doctors	0.53	0.58
It's okay for male candidate to smoke, drink alcohol and be married twice, however it is not okay for a female candidate.	0.71	0.52

2016-17 research from *A Failed Democracy: Tonga's Watershed Legal Democratic Electoral Reforms Left Her Women Behind*, 2019. 2020-21 research from *Tupou Tertiary Institute Research & Training Centre, Voters' Perception of Women As Leaders in Tonga*, 2021.

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This widespread belief that leadership and key decision-making roles are best suited to men unfortunately translates into the results we see at election after election.

To change the story, one needs to have a good understanding of the difference between equality and equity. In Tonga, women do not have the same social, cultural, political and economic experiences as men. Society does not perceive women the same way they perceive men. Moral standards and domestic expectations are not held against men as highly and

rigidly as they are held against women. This automatically pushes women backwards, further down the field and it soon becomes clear that the playing field is not level at all.

Equity forces us to dig deeper and think more critically. To understand the lived experiences of women, we need to unpack the constructed private and public dichotomy – society's patriarchal expectations of women. The social expectation that women will prioritise managing the home and its affairs, taking care of the children, and attending to their husbands' needs will continue to result in attitudes at the voting booth that do not favour women as leaders.

Temporary special measures are measures that work on changing attitudes and behaviour over time as the general public becomes exposed to larger numbers of women in parliament. For younger people, in particular, having more women in parliament will become a norm for them rather than something to be desired. Once TSMs are removed, the country will return to the normal voting procedure with the anticipation that voters no longer frame leadership as a gendered role. In the case of Rwanda, a constitutional amendment in 2003 provided that 30% of its seats must be reserved for women. By 2018, the share of females MPs had increased to 60%.

The last four elections in Tonga have never resulted in more than 8% female representation in parliament, and often, as this time, it has been zero. We need significant change. We must aim for at least 30% or more by taking legislative action. If this is not possible now, we need to build our women's movement over the next four to five years and work towards revolutionary change in attitudes and mindsets – it can be done. #WatchThisSpace2025

*Note: A longer sentence was shortened and corrected to read 'However, since 1951, only six women have been elected to parliament.' – 21/11/2021*

## **About the author/s**

### **'Ofakilevuka ('Ofa) Guttenbeil-Likiliki**

'Ofakilevuka ('Ofa) Guttenbeil-Likiliki is Director of the Women & Children Crisis Centre (WCCC) in Tonga, a women's rights activist and a filmmaker.

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