



LEADERSHIP PATHWAYS OF WOMEN IN SAMOA

Research Project
May, 2022



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Women Matai Title Bestowment in Vaimoso, Samoa.

ABOUT THIS REPORT

The research was undertaken by Sustineo Pty Ltd (Sustineo) on behalf of the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women (UN Women) under the Women in Leadership in Samoa (WILS) Project.

The WILS Project is a three-year project implemented by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and UN Women with funding from the Australian Government in partnership with the Government of Samoa.

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The overarching goal of the Women in Leadership in Samoa (WILS) Project is to strengthen gender equality and women's leadership in Samoa building on lessons learnt from the Increasing the Political Participation of Women in Samoa (IPPWS) project to reinforcing progress already made on gender equality and women's leadership at the national level. The project is based on a Theory of Change (ToC), which states that the project will adopt a Samoanisation concept, an idea that contextualises international best practices, and where the involvement and partnerships of local people will facilitate an inclusive and participatory process to increase project ownership.



Mother's Day Parade Celebration
Photo courtesy of Samoa Observer

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GLOSSARY OF SAMOAN WORDS AND PHRASES

SAMOAN WORD OR PHRASE	ENGLISH TRANSLATION
<i>Ali'i ma faipule</i>	Formal term for Samoan high chiefs and orators in villages
<i>Augafa'apae</i>	A term to describe daughters of high chiefs as princess-like
<i>E au le ina'ilau a tina</i>	'The women's row of thatch is complete' or 'Women's legacy is one of total achievement', meaning women are valued as hard workers
<i>E togi le moa ae u'u lona afa</i>	Letting go of the chicken and yet still pulling the sennit; used to describe those who are undecided about something
<i>Fa'aaloalo</i>	Respect
<i>Fa'afāfine</i>	The term fa'afafine translates as 'in the manner of a woman'. Fa'afafine are those assigned male at birth whose gendered behaviours are, to different degrees, feminine. The fa'afafine community identifies as different from lesbian and gay communities, and some fa'afafine identify as third gender. Some fa'afafine may live entirely as women, while others adopt only some feminine attributes.
<i>Fa'afātama</i>	Fa'afatama are those assigned female at birth but who behave in masculine ways and identify as men.
<i>Fa'amatai</i>	Samoan chiefly system
<i>Fa'asamoa</i>	Samoan culture and tradition
<i>Faasinomaga</i>	Identity
<i>Fa'atamāloa</i>	The term fa'atamaloa is used interchangeably with fa'afatama, but it specifically refers to mature/married fa'afatama.
<i>Feagaiga</i>	Covenant; the term describes sisters or daughters as the apple of their brothers' or male relatives' eyes
<i>Faifeau</i>	Pastor or church minister
<i>Faletua</i>	Formal word for wife of a church minister or high chief
<i>Fono</i>	Meeting; used to describe village council meeting or other formal meeting in the workplace, church etc.
<i>Komiti</i>	Committee
<i>Maota</i>	House of a high chief
<i>Mafutaga a tina</i>	Women's group or association
<i>Mamalu</i>	Honor or holiness
<i>Matai</i>	Samoan person with a chiefly title
<i>Monotaga</i>	Contributions that those with <i>matai</i> titles, whether high chiefs or orators, regularly make to their village in the form of financial or material contributions
<i>Nofotane</i>	Married woman who lives in her husband's family
<i>O le ala i le pule o le tautua</i>	The pathway to leadership is through service
<i>Pae ma le auli</i>	A phrase to describe women as peacemakers in families and communities

SAMOAN WORD OR PHRASE	ENGLISH TRANSLATION
<i>Paolo tu</i>	A term used in funerals to refer to the family of the spouse of a deceased person. The expectation is that this family makes the biggest presentation in terms of money, fine mats, and other goods to the deceased's family
<i>Pitonu'u</i>	Sub-villages
<i>Pulenu'u</i>	Village representative, formerly known as village mayor
<i>Sa'o</i>	Most senior chief of a family
<i>Sa'o tamaita'i</i>	Leading woman or daughter of a village high chief who has princess-like status
<i>Sau ma se oso</i>	Refers to visiting parties bringing a gift(s) for the host family or community
<i>Sui tama'ita'i o nu'u</i>	Village women's representative
<i>Sui faiga ae tumau faavae</i>	Practices change but foundational principles remain
<i>Ta'imua</i>	Initiates and leads activities; denotes one of Samoan women's characteristics
<i>Talanoa</i>	Informal chat, also used to describe a Pacific indigenous research methodology
<i>Tautua</i>	Service to one's family or community
<i>Teine o le nu'u</i>	Young or adult women who reside in their own village with their aiga. They have higher status than nofotane or outside women living in the village through marriage
<i>To'oto'o ma le fue</i>	Samoan orator's wooden staff and flywhisk made by plaiting strands of coconut husk, used when delivering a public speech in outdoor cultural ceremonies
<i>Tu'ua</i>	Most senior orator <i>matai</i> in a village
<i>Va fealoa'i</i>	'Space between people' refers to social relationships that are nurtured through respect to maintain harmony
<i>Va tapuia</i>	Sacred space; refers to social relationships between people, between people and gods, or between people and their environment



Graduates of the Professional Programme for Aspiring Women Directors 2021

Photo: UN Women/Jordanna Mareko

LIST OF ACRONYMS

ACRONYM	DEFINITION
CEDAW	Convention of the Elimination of All Forms Discrimination Against Women
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GBV	Gender-based violence
IPPWS	Increasing Political Participation of Women in Samoa
LGBTQIA+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning, Intersex, Asexual, and more.
MP	Member of Parliament
MWCSD	Ministry of Women, Community and Social Development
NGO	Non-government organization
PSC	Public Service Commission
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
SUNGO	Samoa Umbrella for Non-Governmental Organizations
SVSG	Samoa Victims Support Group
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UN WOMEN	United Nation Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women
VLDI	Village Leadership Development Initiative
WILS Project	Women in Leadership Samoa Project
WinLA	Women in Leadership Advocacy Group
WPEL	Women’s Political Empowerment and Leadership

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In December 2020, Sustineo was engaged by the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) to lead the design and implementation of *Research on Leadership Pathways of Women in Samoa* (UNW-RFP-FJI30-2020-1167). The purpose was to better understand the barriers that hinder Samoan women's access to leadership roles across different levels of society and to identify innovative strategies to support women's access to leadership. The research had four objectives:

1. To identify pathways of leadership for Samoan women
2. To identify factors that facilitate women's access to leadership in Samoa and factors that create barriers
3. To identify strategies used by Samoan women leaders to gain access to leadership positions
4. To identify innovative strategies for development partners on how to support and encourage an increase in women's access to leadership in Samoa.

These research objectives were investigated through a mixed-method approach, drawing primarily on qualitative data. Data collection involved face-to-face engagements with 145 men and women participants, including 94 participants from 12 focus group discussions across six villages in Upolu and six in Savaii, and 51 interviews with leaders of organizations across six societal levels: village, parliament, government, business sector, women-led organizations¹, and church. Awareness of existing leadership programmes, including the UN Women's Women in Leadership Samoa (WILS) Project, was not a determining factor in participant selection. Data collection was conducted by experienced Samoan researchers.

LEADERSHIP AND GENDERED POWER RELATIONS

To explore access to leadership for women in Samoa, we first need to understand how leadership is conceptualized and how women's leadership fits within this framework. Research participants understand leadership as embodied in one or a combination of the following factors and expressions:

- ***O le ala i le pule o le tautua* — The pathway to leadership is through service.** *Tautua* is considered to be the foundation to leadership for both men and women.
- ***E au le ina'ilau a tina* — The women's row of thatch is complete.** Women are valued as hard workers and *ta'imua* (the first to act and initiate things).
- **Being a *matai*.** Access to a *matai* (chiefly) title is an important signifier of leadership, although it is recognized that not all leaders are *matai*.
- **Women's status as *feagaiga* or sacred covenant.** Women have a special status in families and communities, and this can be interpreted as women and men exercising leadership in separate but complementary spheres.
- ***Tinā ma Tamaitai o le pae ma le auli* — Women as peacemakers.** Women have an important role in families and communities as 'peacemakers' and in this way, they can demonstrate a consultative and conciliatory form of leadership.

1. Women-led organizations refers to both civil society and professional organizations which, at the time of the study, were led by women.

Embedded in these expressions are gendered power dynamics that reinforce systemic barriers to women becoming leaders. Local and national-level leadership has traditionally been male-dominated, with women exercising leadership primarily in separate spheres to men and generally having less opportunities for leadership. Many participants identified village councils, parliament, and churches as spaces that they perceived as restricted or closed to women's leadership. Yet there was more space for women's leadership at other levels, including in the public service, business and women-led organizations.

Power dynamics are important to understanding the environment in which leadership is practiced. Power relations in Samoa are complex and context-specific, underpinned by *fa'asamoa*. Each village has its own by-laws and this creates a diverse environment in terms of creating opportunities for women to be in leadership roles.

Change is occurring in the understanding of women's leadership in Samoa. More women are assuming leadership roles and women's leadership is becoming increasingly valued in government, private, and civil society sectors. However, women still do not have equal access to leadership opportunities, and change is occurring at different rates across society with relatively limited entry points and opportunities for women in leadership and decision making in village, parliament, and church spheres in comparison to men.

ENABLING AND CONSTRAINING CONTEXT

There were many factors that facilitated women's access to leadership in the cultural, religious, social, and institutional context of Samoa. Samoan cultural values that respect and honor women are important, as are village norms that increasingly allow the active participation of women *matai* in village council meetings. Women are well-recognized as leaders in relation to educational achievement, business, the public sector and politics. Women's leadership is bolstered by a strong policy and legal framework for equal rights, inclusive governance, and pathways such as the '10% law'² for women in parliament. As noted above, women are valued as *ta'imua* for their regular and active participation in family and village activities. However, participants noted that there were numerous barriers to women's equal access to leadership opportunities particularly at the village and church levels (Table 1).

2. *The Constitution Amendment Act 2013 provides for a minimum number of women Members of Parliament, which constitutes 10% of the Legislative Assembly.* Source: https://www.palemene.ws/wp-content/uploads/01.Acts/Acts%202013/Constitution_Amendment_Act_2013_-_Eng.pdf

Table 1: Barriers and how they affect women's access to leadership.

Barriers	Impact on women accessing leadership
Social norms that legitimize and normalize men's leadership, meaning women find it more difficult to prove themselves as leaders in many contexts.	The status quo is not challenged, and men continue to be prioritized and supported for leadership roles in many contexts but particularly at the village level.
Women's leadership being placed in a separate sphere to male leadership, with men seen as the final decision-makers in many contexts.	Women are confined to leading women only groups and not participating in higher-level village decision-making, and sometimes feel obliged to defer to men in the workplace.
Enduring village norms that do not recognize women <i>matai</i> , or do not allow or encourage them to participate in village councils. These include formal barriers such as bans of women <i>matai</i> , and informal barriers such as the use of offensive or sexual jokes in village council meetings.	The voices of women <i>matai</i> continue to be excluded from village decision-making processes. These barriers continue to exist unchallenged as they are claimed to be part of village rules and traditions.
The oratory language of <i>matai</i> , with women <i>matai</i> who do not live in the village finding it difficult to learn this language, and women <i>matai</i> who do reside in the villages often lacking the confidence and support to use it.	Women are disinclined to use oratory language, are not encouraged to speak in village meetings which limits their influence in decision-making, and continue to rely on male relatives to speak in cultural ceremonies which reinforces male traditions of leadership.
Women's status as <i>nofotane</i> (marrying into husband's family) and a lack of leadership opportunities within the villages they reside in as a result.	<i>Nofotane</i> women do not have the same access to pathways to leadership as other women and men in the village.
Religious norms and church practices that are resistant to women's leadership.	Women continue to be absent from major institutional decision-making processes of the church. Women's participation in institutional high-level decision-making remains a marginalized topic.
The high prevalence of gender-based violence.	This reinforces social norms that prioritize male leadership from the family sphere up, and limits women's opportunities for autonomy and leadership. The impact of gender-based violence varies across different groups: for instance, <i>nofotane</i> are particularly vulnerable to gender-based violence, and this intersects with other barriers to leadership.

ACCESS, LEGITIMACY AND EFFECTIVENESS

Access, legitimacy and effectiveness encompass the factors — ranging from system processes to individual strategies — that enable and enhance women’s potential to successfully overcome barriers to leadership and to exercise leadership effectively.

- Key points of access to leadership are having a *matai* title and good networks. While having a *matai* title is not necessary to be viewed as a leader, it is commonly associated with leadership.
- Common strategies to establish the legitimacy of leadership are *tautua* (service) to family and community, success in business and formal employment, and (as a more limited pathway) success in politics.
- Exercising leadership effectively involves working within cultural, religious, and social norms, adopting an inclusive leadership style, and working collectively with men.

It is important to note that access to leadership, legitimacy as a leader and effective leadership in Samoa are all gendered, with women having to work harder to gain leadership positions, establish themselves as legitimate leaders and practice leadership effectively.

While certain leadership pathways are critical in one or two contexts, their value is more limited in other contexts. Having a *matai* title, for example, was critically important at the village level and for access to politics, but less important in the government sector, private sector, civil society and in the church. Conversely, having a high education was among the most important pathways for leadership, but was less important at the village levels than in other spaces.

INDIVIDUAL CHARACTERISTICS

In terms of pathways to leadership for women, certain individual characteristics were highlighted as important. Most commonly, these were:

- A track record of service to the community.
- Having a high status, although what ‘high status’ means is context-dependent and can mean multiple different things.
- Educational achievements.
- Showing respect and humility.
- Being honest.
- Having a good family background and having the support of family in leadership aspirations.
- Being confident.
- Having strength in religion and faith.

While individual characteristics are important, they are not sufficient on their own. An enabling environment that supports and encourages women’s leadership is crucial, not least in creating space for more diverse forms of women’s leadership and greater inclusion of rural women, young women, and women with disabilities in leadership structures. Creating such an enabling environment requires confronting the cultural, social, and religious norms that constrain opportunities for women’s leadership and prioritize men’s leadership.

CROSS-CUTTING DEVELOPMENT PARTNER RESPONSES

Participants were asked about their understanding and views on development partner initiatives to support and encourage increased women's access to leadership in Samoa, broadly defined without a specific focus on the WILS program. Overall, participants understand the role of development partners as initiating, funding, and facilitating leadership training programs and, to a lesser extent, village-focused economic development opportunities.

The role of UN organizations and other development partner programs in promoting gender equality was recognized. These efforts were seen as contributing to a broader public awareness and dialogue on the value of women's representation that had real impact. However, women's leadership initiatives were seen as targeting educated, urban-based women, and the more innovative approaches being taken in the space by programs such as WILS did not have great visibility.

In offering suggestions for improvement and considerations for the future of leadership programming, research participants noted a need to expand leadership training to include women and men in villages, to involve the church and local educational institutions, and to create training programs that were more targeted, contextualized and in-depth.

KEY IMPLICATIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS

These research findings have several implications for how barriers to women's leadership are to be understood in Samoa, with particular reference to the four research objectives. These are listed below, followed by key considerations for programming in supporting initiatives to enhance women's leadership at all levels of Samoan society.







Implications

Identifying pathways to leadership for Samoan women

The foundation for leadership is *tautua* (service). In practice, women are serving their various communities already, but this service does not necessarily accumulate social capital in the same ways as men's service. For example, men are more likely to serve their village through sitting on the village council as *matai* than women are, and this is usually the basis for village-level (and, potentially national-level) leadership. Norms are changing in this respect, but many women still do not wish to sit on their village council, choosing to serve their communities in other ways.

Recognising these different forms of leadership and service as equally valuable is important to increasing the visibility and legitimacy of women's leadership, rather than simply expecting women to adopt male leadership practices, and a key part of this work would be raising the visibility and public profile of less conventional forms of women's leadership. This is important as the research highlighted a number of potential pathways for women that do currently exist at different levels of society in Samoa. Leadership pathways vary for different women in different contexts, and most benefit from a combination of supportive contextual factors and individual strengths (see Table 2).

Table 2: Women's leadership pathways

Levels	Respondents	Pathways to leadership in respective contexts
Village 	Village women	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having a <i>matai</i> title • Contributions to the village through <i>monotaga</i> and other forms of service • Active participation in village women's groups • Active participation in village council decision-making (for villages with women <i>matai</i>) • Active participation in village church activities • Supportive village leaders such as high chiefs, women <i>matai</i>, or Members of Parliament (MPs)
Parliament 	Women in Parliament / women candidates	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having a <i>matai</i> title • Contributions to the village through <i>monotaga</i> and other forms of service • Active participation in village council decision-making (for villages with women <i>matai</i>) • Supportive village leadership • Supportive family • Having a successful business in or outside of village • Having a good education
Government 	Women <i>matai</i> / non- <i>matai</i> in government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having a high educational qualification • Supportive family • Service/<i>tautua</i> through one's government ministry • Supportive network of colleagues and supervisors • Supportive public service policies • Being proactive & demonstrating leadership skills as a new public servant • Participation in leadership training • Having a <i>matai</i> title
Business Sector 	<i>Matai</i> , Apia-based adult entrepreneurs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having a good education • Access to resources • Supportive family • Having a <i>matai</i> title
	Non- <i>matai</i> , Apia-based, young entrepreneurs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having a high educational qualification • Having a proactive and daring attitude to life • Supportive family and work colleagues • Access to women leaders who are good role models
Women-led Organizations 	Women with disability, non- <i>matai</i> , Apia-based, leader of organizations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Service within disability organization space • Supportive family and colleagues • High educational qualification • Having self-confidence
	Non- <i>matai</i> , Apia-based, leader of organizations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having a high educational qualification • Having a proactive and daring attitude to life • Access to women leaders who are good role models • Participation in leadership training
Church 	Women in the church	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supportive family and church leadership • Initiating internal discussions about women's leadership

The above pathways draw from the experiences of research respondents, and highlight characteristics identified as supporting the attainment of leadership positions in these areas, but this is not necessarily a prescriptive list. Context is important and pathways may not look the same for different women even in the same fields.

Identifying factors that facilitate women's access to leadership in Samoa

Creating an enabling environment for women's leadership means tackling structural constraints to women's leadership. **Many women in Samoa already have the capacity for leadership, but key structural constraints limit their opportunities**, including barriers to gaining *matai* titles and village rules that disallow women's participation in village council meetings. Addressing these barriers, with a focus on structural change over individual deficit approaches, is difficult because it involves changing mindsets about women's leadership. Critical in addressing the barriers are three key government policies: the *National Policy on Gender Equality and Rights of Women and Girls 2021–2031*; the *National Policy on Inclusive Governance 2021–2031*; and the *National Policy on Family Safety: Elimination of Family Violence 2021–2031* (Ministry of Women, Community & Social Development 2021a, 2021b, 2021c).

Access, legitimacy and effectiveness in the context of leadership are all affected by gender relations and power dynamics: the opportunity to exercise leadership is not the same for men and for women. As this research revealed, leadership is mediated by status (especially access to a *matai* title), age, disability status, and other factors. Yet a diverse range of Samoan women are successfully practicing leadership in different spheres, and their experiences provide models and potential strategies for future leaders. It is important to **tell the diverse stories of women's leadership in Samoa** and use these lessons to increase opportunities for the future.

There was a strong sense that programming on women's leadership should be **locally-led**. Acknowledging that each village has its own by-laws and leadership traditions, understanding them and the governance context of each village, and taking an **'insider' approach** to changing norms of leadership were seen as critical to the success of women's leadership initiatives. There was strong support for more **investment in village-level programs** and for enhancing leadership initiatives within existing programs. While these critiques are not surprising, they do not necessarily consider how women's leadership programming has changed and evolved over time. More needs to be done to **increase the visibility** of new women's leadership initiatives that are already responding to requirements of being locally-led, working within local processes, and promoting change at the village level.

Considerations

Building from these implications, there are a number of considerations regarding future programming and efforts to enhance women's leadership in Samoa.

- 1. Creating an enabling environment means tackling structural constraints to women's leadership.** Rather than an individual deficit approach that focuses on capacity-building — assuming women lack the capacity for leadership — the key focus should be structural barriers and implementing relevant policies to change social norms and perceptions of leadership that prioritize and place higher value on male leadership.
- 2. Advocates are needed: influential men and women to be advocates for the cause.** At the village level, senior chiefs who are key gatekeepers of local-level decision-making need to be open to women's leadership. In religious institutions, church leaders need to be too. This will mean challenging entrenched and longstanding gendered norms within institutions. Change in these spaces will be difficult. It will require a long-term and consultative approach, and women and men who are influential, supportive of women's leadership, and willing to act as agents of change, will be needed to lead this process.

3. **Gender-based violence is closely linked to women's access to leadership.** The extent and impact of violence on potential and current women leaders across all levels of Samoan society needs to be made more visible. It needs to be addressed through relevant mechanisms to enforce current government policies and to promote models of gender-based violence and harassment policies that other sectors can adopt. More research is needed on the impact of violence against women in politics and online harassment on women's leadership aspirations and opportunities.
4. **Positive change is happening, and we need to share the stories of success and the diverse pathways to leadership that are emerging.** Where rules and norms in some villages have been shifted to allow women leadership opportunities, lessons can be learned that may apply elsewhere. The experiences and strategies of women who are actively involved in decision-making in their villages can inform leadership initiatives. Likewise, there are many different pathways to leadership and while a *matai* title is important, it is not the only path. Telling the diverse stories of women's leadership in contemporary Samoa will highlight the many pathways that are available to women.
5. **Celebrating women's service to the community is important in setting the foundations for leadership.** In Samoa, service and leadership are intrinsically linked, yet aspiring women leaders can face significant barriers in demonstrating service to their communities. As well as the important work of confronting these barriers, more could be done in highlighting the many ways in which women serve their communities and publicly recognizing this work as leadership. A fundamental pathway to leadership is demonstrating service and widening the definition(s) of service to include work predominantly done by women will expand the space available for women's leadership.
6. **While there is space to make training more impactful, innovative programming that is already happening should be celebrated and made visible.** There is scope to build on efforts that are already underway: to encourage and support women to master oratory language; to engage with villages and rural women; and to deliver context-specific programming in Samoan language. Leadership training that is targeted, suited to local contexts, and informed by the women who live there and their aspirations, is the most likely to be successful. This programming, however, needs to acknowledge and work to challenge the structural barriers to leadership, as it is these rather than individual capacity that most hinder women's pathways to leadership.
7. **The church was identified as a key space where women's leadership opportunities are restricted.** Engaging local and regional women theologians and church *faletua* within broader work on women's leadership could provide a stronger platform to grow awareness within the church leadership on the value and contribution of women leaders. Working in spaces within the church where women are already practicing leadership could be effective in broadening awareness and initiating change.
8. **Leadership is collective, and efforts to increase women's leadership should focus on community.** Focusing efforts on groups rather than individuals could strengthen networks that are important in promoting women's leadership. Incorporating the principles of *feutagaiga* (consultation) into leadership training will also contribute to effective leadership.
9. **Bringing young women and women with disability along is crucial.** How to include young women in leadership networks should be a priority. Youth are an under-served group and enhancing opportunities for leadership for young women (and young men) — perhaps through working with educational institutions and supporting the efforts of existing youth advocacy groups — is important. With a growing number of young women entrepreneurs, work can be done in establishing how to support and enable their leadership aspirations. Women with disability are excelling in leadership in women-led organizations where opportunities are provided including those focusing on disability issues but across other sectors have very limited access to opportunities for leadership and therefore their contributions to decision-making are restricted. More work is needed to create pathways for leadership for women with disability within the public service, the private sector, and decision-making spaces at all levels.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. BACKGROUND

In December 2020, Sustineo was engaged by the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) to lead the design and implementation of *Research on Leadership Pathways of Women in Samoa*. The project is a key component of the Women in Leadership in Samoa (WILS) Project. The research aligns with Priority Area 4 of the *National Policy for Gender Equality & Rights of Women and Girls 2021–2031*, ensuring ‘improved gender balance in leadership, governance and public life’ including the family, village, and church (Ministry of Women, Community and Social Development 2021a).

Given persistent barriers to women accessing leadership positions broadly defined (see Pa’usisi 2019; Schoeffel, Meredith & Fiti-Sinclair 2017), the *Research on Leadership Pathways of Women in Samoa* project addresses the complexity of barriers that women leaders face in Samoa. It considers strategies that have worked, lessons learned from experience, and identifying pathways forward. The project was driven by qualified and experienced Samoa-based researchers with a deep understanding of Samoan culture.

1.2. PURPOSE

The project supports current efforts by the Government of Samoa and development partners to promote gender equality and women’s leadership in Samoa. The purpose of the project was to improve understanding of factors that inhibit and enable women’s pathways to leadership across Samoan society and to help address persistent barriers that continue to constrain Samoan women’s access to leadership roles. Within the project, there were four research objectives:

1. To identify pathways of leadership for Samoan women
2. To identify factors that facilitate women’s access to leadership in Samoa and factors that create barriers
3. To identify strategies used by Samoan women leaders to gain access to leadership positions
4. To identify innovative strategies for development partners on how to support and encourage an increase in women’s access to leadership in Samoa.

1.3. RESEARCH APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

This section outlines the approach and research methodology. It outlines research design considerations, the *Talanoa* methodology and specific methods, participant selection, analysis, ethics, and research limitations.

1.3.1. Design considerations

Three considerations were important in designing the project. First, we began with the understanding that Samoan society is socially, culturally, and politically complex. For example: recognizing that each village has its own protocols, and that council decisions at the sub-village level may not reflect that of the whole village. Different *matai* titles have different status levels, and that final authority on village governance matters often rests with a small minority of highest chiefs. Such complexity shapes understandings of leadership within and across the six societal levels being examined: village, parliament, government, business sector, women-led organizations, and church. Second, an inclusive research approach was necessary in terms of engaging female participants as well as males. While the project focus was women’s leadership, the views of different genders were important, particularly in evaluating the context in which women’s leadership is practiced. Third, an understanding of Samoan women as a diverse group with different experiences based on *matai* status, age, employment status, educational level, rural/urban locale, and other factors, was important.

1.3.2. *Talanoa methodology*

The research utilized participatory approaches at all levels informed by *Talanoa*, a Pacific Island Indigenous methodology relevant to research in the Samoan context (Vaiote, 2006). *Talanoa* is about “engaging in dialogue with or telling stories to each other ... [without] concealment of the inner feelings and experiences that resonate in our hearts and minds” (Halapua, 2008, p.1). In this research, it guided the researchers’ approach to participants from pre-data collection to the end of engagement, with an emphasis on actioning the principles of reciprocity, respect, and humility. This was particularly relevant to Samoan society where respect for social relationships (*va fealoa’i*) is highly valued and adherence to appropriate protocols is expected. For the most part, participants’ consent to participate in the research reflected their recognition of *va fealoa’i* with the Samoan researchers who conducted data collection. As *matai* and church leaders themselves, the researchers played a crucial role in the success of data gathering. For their time and sharing their views, participants were reciprocated with cultural gifts or food items.

A *Talanoa* approach was central to the way in which the specific qualitative methods: semi structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) were implemented. The semi structured interviews were undertaken with female and male leaders of organizations across six societal levels: village, parliament, government, business sector, women-led organizations, and church. The FGDs involved rural village participants across six villages in Upolu and six in Savaii.

1.3.3. *Guiding conceptual framework*

Our conceptual framework is based on the conditions and factors set out in Elise Howard’s (2019) overview of support for women’s leadership in the Pacific (See Annex A). The Howard framework encompasses a wide definition of leadership, applicable at the village-level, within public and private sector contexts, as well as church and civil society sectors, and the political sphere. It provides flexibility to understand how different types of leadership intersect: for example, as individual women take on multiple leadership roles across different levels, or as women at different leadership levels work together in coalitions.

At a guiding level, Howard’s three categories provided broad framing for the project’s research objectives as outlined in Table 3.

Table 3: Alignment of Research Objectives and Analytical Categories

Analytical category	Alignment to research objectives
Enabling/constraining context	Research Objective 1. This captured factors that create barriers to women’s access to leadership in Samoa, and those that facilitate access to leadership, with particular reference to the operating ‘environment’ and structures that shape leadership. Exploration of this category was related to the identification of factors that facilitate women’s access to leadership in Samoa and factors that create barriers.
Access, legitimacy and effectiveness	Research Objective 2. This encompassed the factors — ranging from system processes to individual strategies, that enable and enhance potential to successfully overcome barriers to leadership and to exercise leadership effectively. This category aligned with the identification of strategies used by Samoan women leaders to gain access to leadership positions.
Individual characteristics	Research Objective 3. This included individual characteristics that shape the relative success of women accessing and exercising leadership. This category aligned with the identification of pathways to leadership for Samoan women.

In the application of this guiding framework, Research Objective 4 — *the identification of innovative strategies for development partners on how to support and encourage an increase in women's access to leadership in Samoa* — was pursued as a **cross-cutting objective**. It was framed to respond to the findings identified in the other areas, with reference to specific strategies and methodologies that could support elements outlined in the three categories towards increasing women's leadership in Samoa.

It is important to emphasize the guiding nature of the framework's application. It was used to shape the research process and to ensure it builds from extensive previous research on women's leadership in the Samoa context. It was not applied in a prescriptive way: the broader research design and adherence to *Talanoa* principles in the data collection process ensured the use of the framework did not exclude the emergence of findings bespoke to the Samoan context.

1.3.4. Participant recruitment

For **FGDs**, target villages and participant groups were discussed with the Samoa-based research team. A two-person research team led the recruitment, organization and conduct of FGDs with the women, with another two-person team doing the same for FGDs with men. Target villages were contacted via a village women representative or village male representative, drawing on the networks of the Ministry of Women, Community and Social Development (MWCSD), WILS team, or the research team. For two villages in Upolu, the researchers travelled there to make initial contact and arrangements with the Village Representative, while the rest were organized via phone calls.

Once initial contact was made with respective village representatives, the research team worked with them to confirm the participants. This involved confirming that participants represented every third household beginning from the church pastor's or Village Representative's house. This approach ensured a randomized participant selection. Where a selected participant declined participation, a representative from the next household was invited to participate.

For the **interviews**, participants were purposefully selected from across different sectors. Potential interviewees were contacted by the researchers to explain about the research, seek consent to participate, and if agreed, set an interview time. Participant information sheets were provided, along with letters of invitation for certain participants, including for current and former MPs.

1.3.5. Research participants

Data collection took place between 13 August and 15 October 2021. It involved face-to-face engagements with 145 participants of which 86 (59.3%) were women. All participants self-identified as either female or male. The average age of the participants was 46 years, with a higher average age among women (47 years) than men (44 years). Three adult women participants self-identified as people with disabilities. No participant identified themselves to the researchers as belonging to the *fa'afāfine*, *fa'afātama*, *fa'atamāloa*, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex, asexual and more (LGBTQIA+) community. Approximately 72% of all participants were currently married, while others were either divorced, widowed, in a de facto relationship or had never been married. Fifty-four participants were *matai*, including 29 women. Seven of the 29 women *matai* held more than one *matai* title.

FGDs involved rural-based participants from Upolu and Savaii. Overall, 49 women (including six *matai*) and 45 men (including 18 *matai*) were engaged through FGDs, with between 7 and 10 participants in each group. The groups engaged included:

- 4 groups of older women (2 focus groups on each island, with 32 total participants).
- 4 groups of older men (2 focus groups on each island, with 28 total participants).
- 2 groups of young women (1 focus group on each island, with 17 total participants).
- 2 groups of young men (1 focus group on each island, with 17 total participants).

The average age of young women participants was 28 years, and 54 years for older women. For the young men, the average age was 25 years, and 51 years for older men. All 17 young women and 17 young men were non-*matai*. The relatively small number of village-based women *matai* compared to men *matai* who participated in FGDs reflects a broader situation of comparatively few *matai* women residing in villages, with the majority living in Apia or overseas (Ministry of Women Social and Community Development, 2015)

Site selection for FGDs was guided by the findings of the 2015 *MWCSO Women Matai and Leadership Survey* which details the numbers of female and male *matai* in each village. From the survey, two categories of villages were identified:

- Those with **no or very low** number of women *matai* (between 0 and 9)
- Those with a **medium or higher** number of women *matai* (10 or more)

Based on these categories, the groups involved in FGDs came from six villages with a low number of women and six from villages with a medium or high number of women *matai*, shown in Table 4.







Table 4: Village categories represented by focus group participants

Stakeholder Groups	Upolu villages	Savaii villages
Older Women's Groups	<i>Village 1</i> (7 women <i>matai</i>) — LOW <i>Village 2</i> (17 women <i>matai</i>) — MEDIUM	<i>Village 3</i> (9 women <i>matai</i>) —LOW <i>Village 4</i> (11 women <i>matai</i>) — MEDIUM
Older Men's Groups	<i>Village 5</i> (1 woman <i>matai</i>) — VERY LOW <i>Village 6</i> (32 women <i>matai</i>) — HIGH	<i>Village 7</i> (3 women <i>matai</i>) — VERY LOW <i>Village 8</i> (40 women <i>matai</i>) — HIGH
Youth Groups Young women	<i>Village 9</i> (15 women <i>matai</i>) — MEDIUM	<i>Village 10</i> (4 women <i>matai</i>) — VERY LOW
Young men	<i>Village 11</i> (0 women <i>matai</i>) — NO WOMAN MATAI	<i>Village 12</i> (15 women <i>matai</i>) — MEDIUM

Semi-structured interviews involved largely Apia-based leaders across different sectors. Of the 51 interviews conducted, 39 were with female leaders (including 23 *matai*) and 12 were with male leaders (including 7 *matai*). All interview respondents were based in Apia, other than five village men representatives and five village women representatives. Male participants were on average older (62 years) than female participants (54 years). The MPs and Village Representatives were, on average, the oldest groups, 69 years, and 60 years respectively, followed by church leaders with 59 years.

For the 39 female interview participants, MPs and election candidates were the oldest with an average age of 61 years, followed by Village Women Representatives with 57 years, women leading organizations with 53 years, women CEOs/Board members with 52 years, and women business owners with 48 years. The majority of women participants (28) were currently married, while others were either widowed (2) or had never been married (9). Table 5 outlines the numbers of participants across different societal groups.

Table 5: Participant information across six societal levels

<p>Village</p> 	<p>Total number of village-based participants: 104</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rural adult women in FGDs: 31 (6 <i>matai</i> and 1 person with disability) Rural young women in FGDs: 17 (all non-<i>matai</i>) Rural adult men in FGDs: 29 (18 <i>matai</i>) Rural young men in FGDs: 17 (all non-<i>matai</i>) Village Representatives interviewed: 5 (all <i>matai</i>) Village Women Representatives interviewed: 5 (3 <i>matai</i>)
<p>Parliament</p> 	<p>Total number of men & women interviewed: 9</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2 current women MPs & cabinet ministers 2 former women MPs & cabinet ministers 3 women candidates, 2021 election 2 former male MPs & cabinet ministers All are <i>matai</i>
<p>Government</p> 	<p>Total number of women interviewed: 13</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Women <i>matai</i>: 10 Women non-<i>matai</i>: 3
<p>Business Sector</p> 	<p>Total number of self-employed women interviewed: 4</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Women <i>matai</i>: 2 Women non-<i>matai</i>: 2
<p>Women-led Organizations</p> 	<p>Total number of women interviewed: 7</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Women <i>matai</i>: 1 Women non-<i>matai</i>: 6 (including 2 with disabilities)
<p>Church</p> 	<p>Total number of men & women interviewed: 8</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Number of women (<i>faletua</i>) interviewed: 3 Number of male leaders interviewed: 5 No <i>matai</i>

1.3.6. Analysis

Data analysis involved three main steps. First, an initial identification of preliminary themes and findings was carried out. As part of this, all FGDs and interview transcriptions were reviewed to ensure responses were clearly and accurately recorded. Where there was uncertainty, the research team notes were consulted, or audio recordings were re-listened to. Second, the interview and FGD transcripts were thematically analyzed and coded according to the key themes under the four research objectives. Third, the emergence of key themes and findings were validated through regular discussion with the Samoa-based research team. This was a valuable process in ensuring the nuances reflected in the data were captured in the analysis.

1.3.7. Ethics

Adherence to research ethics was maintained throughout data collection activities. This included full attention to the core ethics principles of informed consent, privacy, and confidentiality of collected data. Participant information sheets, letters of invitation, and consent forms were used to ensure free and prior informed consent. All participants consented to audio record FGDs and interviews. To maintain anonymity, participants are identified in the report only by gender, position/occupation, and *matai* status if applicable (interviewees), or gender and general location (FGDs). The exception is one current MP who consented to be identified by name. Quotes throughout the report are used to illustrate general themes in the data and in the majority of instances, have been selected from a series of similar responses. Further identification of the respondents is not relevant and would risk their anonymity.

An important aspect of our approach to research ethics was ensuring that the interview process was conducted in ways that conform with Samoan cultural and social norms and practices. *Sau ma se oso* (visiting party taking a gift for the host) was emphasized as important by the researchers. This was mostly in the form of food items. Throughout the process, Samoan *fa'adaloalo* (respect) for the participants was demonstrated.

1.3.8. Limitations

There are important limitations that should be acknowledged related to the research implementation.

Impact of the political situation. The implementation of the project was delayed because of Samoa's political situation in the period after the 2021 National General Election. Data collection eventually started in mid-August 2021, but it was not without challenges. In the original design, interviews were planned to be conducted with mostly Apia-based stakeholders, with the emergence of initial themes to inform the village-based FGDs. With the political situation playing out in Apia, it was decided in collaboration with the Samoa-based research team that it would be more appropriate to reverse the sequencing of the methods, with the FGDs taking place first.

Being sensitive to the political context was an important part of the research team training and in practice the researchers were attentive that engagements with participants did not get derailed to focus entirely on the political situation. While some participants did draw on their views or experience of the political situation where appropriate, the focus on women's access to leadership at all levels of Samoan society was successfully maintained during data collection.

Declined interview participation. During the recruitment of participants for interviews, there were a number that declined to participate. Of women participants, individuals across all stakeholder groups, except for Village Women Representatives, declined but these were predominantly former or current MPs, election candidates, and government CEOs. The two main reasons given for women participants' non-participation were being too busy, and that the research stirred negative personal, or family experiences related to the recent political situation. Of the men, a former MP declined participation for health reasons, and a church leader declined as they were overseas.

In some instances, it was not possible within the time available to arrange like-for-like replacements for possible interviewees from different sectors. For example, there were challenges with confirming interviews with female government CEOs. Within the time available, replacements were sought from other valid groups of stakeholders including senior women academics and Assistant CEOs. Replacements for business owners and representatives of a female-led non-government organization (NGO) were comparatively easy to find with participants from the same stakeholder groups. The lack of gender diverse and LGBTQIA+ is a gap and further research efforts could be focused on this space.

1.4. REPORT STRUCTURE

The report is structured as follows.

- **Section 2** presents a literature review on women's leadership in Samoa, using Howard's framework to establish the broader context for women's leadership in Samoa as part of setting the foundation for understanding the broader research findings.
- **Section 3** distils key messages from the research regarding what leadership means in the Samoa context and the importance of understanding power dynamics.
- **Section 4** identifies the enabling and constraining factors that influence women's leadership across levels of society in Samoa (research objective 2: *To identify factors that facilitate women's access to leadership in Samoa and factors that create barriers*).
- **Section 5** then presents insights into the factors that shape access, legitimacy, and effectiveness regarding women's leadership in Samoa (research objective 3: *To identify strategies used by Samoan women leaders to gain access to leadership positions*).
- **Section 6** details a number of individual characteristics that correspond with key pathways to leadership in each of the societal sectors covered by the research (research objective 1: *To identify pathways of leadership for Samoan women*).
- **Section 7** details insights from Samoan research participants regarding development partner responses to supporting women's leadership in Samoa (research objective 4: *To identify innovative strategies for development partners on how to support and encourage increase in women's access to leadership in Samoa*).
- **Section 8** highlights key considerations for future programming on women's leadership.

The Annexes outline supporting documentation to the research process. This includes Howard's Framework of factors affecting women's leadership (Annex A); participant information sheets in English (Annex B) and Samoan (Annex C); letters of invitation (Annex D); consent form (Annex E); and researchers' confidentiality form (Annex F).

2. WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IN SAMOA

Women's leadership is important to ensure equality in decision-making including full and equal participation in society as well as realisation of women's human rights. Increasing women's leadership is a key national priority in Samoa, as set out in Samoa's *National Policy for Gender Equality and the Rights of Women and Girls 2021–2031* (Ministry of Women, Community and Social Development, 2021a). This section is structured to establish the context for this research based on previous literature regarding women's leadership in Samoa and how it plays out across different levels of Samoan society, including the six societal levels the research focuses on: village, parliament, government, the business sector, women-led organizations, and church. Reflecting the available literature, the review covers the first three spheres in more detail, with a particular emphasis on politics, and relatively limited focus on women and leadership in church and civil society.

The literature review is structured against the four categories that frame this research, as outlined in Section 1.3.3:

- Enabling and constraining context
- Access, legitimacy, and effectiveness
- Individual characteristics
- Cross-cutting development partner responses.

The purpose of this section is to establish the foundation upon which the primary research conducted as part of this project are presented in Sections 3–7.

2.1. ENABLING AND CONSTRAINING CONTEXT

Summary of key findings — enabling and constraining context

Cultural context

While women and men have equal rights in selecting *matai* (chiefs), in practice, women are under-represented as title holders and this is a key barrier to leadership.

The concept of *feagaiga* that defines sisters as the apple of their brothers' eyes is commonly cited as the basis of gender relations in Samoa, yet women's access to leadership and decision-making in villages does not always reflect this important balance.

Political context

Women *matai* are less likely to participate in village governance, an important forum for leadership.

Women leaders are active in village women's committees, and as Village Women's Representatives, but these institutions are often siloed from village decision-making.

A lot is known about women's political leadership, including that women who are successful in politics tend to have high public profiles, relatively high-ranking titles, and come from well-known and often political families, but less is known about other types of leadership and how these different forms of leadership intersect.

Civil society is an important space for women's leadership and a driver of change.

Legal context

Legislative reform to the Village Fono Act has been highlighted as a potential enabler for women's leadership in local governance.

The '10 per cent' law which enforces a minimum of six women MPs in Samoa's 51 seat parliament, is a significant, but controversial, legal mechanism to support women's leadership. There is limited research on how the law affects women's political and leadership aspirations.

Government's three key policies on gender equality, inclusive governance, and family violence administered through the Ministry of Women, Community and Social Development are strong platforms to prioritize and strengthen mechanisms for addressing barriers against women's access to leadership across all sectors.

The section below examines the contextual factors that enable or constrain women's leadership especially at the national and village levels in Samoa. According to Howard (2019), such contextual factors may include: social structures and norms; political systems; and state gender equality commitments.

2.1.1. Cultural context

Samoa social organization is based around the system of *fa'amatai*. Under *fa'amatai*, the extended familial unit is led by a *matai*, a family member chosen by consensus. *Matai* have significant responsibilities with the family, village, and wider community. At the village level, only *matai* sit on the village council (*fono*), the primary decision-making body. The literature highlights that **even though Samoan women and men have equal rights when selecting a *matai*, the practice is that titles are most often bestowed upon the male**, and often eligible women will prioritize their male relatives in selection processes (Lawson 1996; Meleisea et al. 2015; Ministry of Women, Community and Social Development 2015), a process that also reflects a sister's appreciation and respect of their brothers (Motusaga, 2021). At the time of the 2016 census, just under 10 per cent of the Samoan population held *matai* titles, and only one in 10 *matai* were women (Samoa Bureau of Statistics 2020b). As of 2015, 21 villages did not recognize women *matai* (Meleisea et al. 2015). Of the villages that did have women *matai* title holders, 36 did not have any women participating in village council meetings (Ministry of Women, Community and Social Development 2015).

A person determining eligibility to hold a *matai* title can trace their genealogical ties through either female or male relations, and in principle "there are no bars to full female participation on a basis equal to males" (Lawson 1996, 123). While the proportion of female *matai* has greatly increased since the 1960s, women are still significantly under-represented (Meleisea et al. 2015). Within this, there are differences based on the roles that female *matai* play. For example, research conducted by the Samoa MWCSO notes that while there are relatively few female *matai*, a significant proportion of those who are female *matai* are also high chiefs, "a positive reflection of the high status women are regarded in their families" (Ministry of Women, Community and Social Development 2015, 66). In terms of locality, 30 per cent of female *matai* in Samoa live in Apia, compared to only 16 per cent of male *matai* (Samoa Bureau of Statistics 2020b). As of 2015, it was noted that only around one in 20 village-based *matai* were women (Meleisea et al. 2015), with 22 of the 94 villages in Upolu, and 5 of 73 villages in Savaii having no women *matai* (Ministry of Women, Community and Social Development, 2015, 59).

The **concept of *feagaiga* is central to Samoan culture**, and the balance or complementarity of men's and women's roles is often emphasized. As noted by Afamasaga-Fuata'i et al. (2012, 162):

The gender principle central to the *fa'amatai* is the complementarity of male and female roles. This emanates from the unwritten, but firmly embedded, concept of *feagaiga* (sacred covenant), whereby the brother holds the secular power and the sister upholds the honor and dignity of the family. This bond between brother and sister is a powerful paradigm reflected in many other important relationships in Samoan culture. It is also the tie that gives Samoan women choices in their roles and responsibilities, which continue to be upheld today, including as peacemakers, wealth makers, healers, teachers, and redeemers in the family.

At the village level, however, the extent of the influence that women have in leadership and decision-making does not always reflect this important balance (Meleisea et al. 2015; Pa'usisi 2019). This may be due at least in part to the shifts caused by colonial and missionary influences on ideas of traditional leadership, and perceptions of women leaders in particular (Pa'usisi 2019). Scholarship on gender in Samoa, and particularly the work of Penelope Schoeffel (1979), has highlighted the tension between the high status of sisters in Samoan culture — demonstrated by the concept of *feagaiga* — and the relatively low status of wives in their husband's families.

Matai is the Samoan word for leader, or chief, or even (in the poetic sense) father. Samoan society is organized by family, and each family has its own *matai* titles, which are connected to certain districts, villages and plots of family land. *Matai* titles (*suafa*, literally "formal name") are bestowed upon family members during a cultural ceremony called a *saofa'i* which occurs only after discussion and consensus within the family. All families in Samoa hold *matai* title/s.

2.1.2. Political context

Samoa has two levels of government: national and local (village). The village council is at the heart of Samoa's political system, with Aмоса (2010, 12) describing their role as:

The supreme authority in the village. Its main role is to make rules for the welfare and security of villagers. The same authority also enforces the rules and adjudicates on village members who are accused of violating those rules. It also acts as a mediator to resolve family disputes in the village, especially amongst families who are going through a dispute over land or titles that is before the Lands and Titles Court.

Research conducted by the National University of Samoa in 2015 found that “the system of traditional village government in Samoa presents significant barriers that limit women’s access to and participation in decision-making forums in local government councils, church leadership, school management and community-based organizations” (Meleisea et al. 2015, 11). **Women matai are less likely than men matai to participate in local government.** Reasons for this include formal barriers to participation, such as bans on female *matāi*, as well as informal barriers, such as discomfort with the language used during village council discussions and a lack of confidence in participating in a male-dominated decision-making space (Meleisea et al. 2015; Ministry of Women, Community and Social Development 2015).

Each Samoan village has women’s committees that operate alongside the village *fono*. While **women’s committees are an important social network for women and forum for leadership** (Ministry of Women, Community and Social Development 2015), the “role of the *komiti* has declined in status and importance” over time and its authority is largely derived from the village council (Meleisea et al. 2015, 29–30). Research by Silia Pa’usisi Finau (2017) found that **this structure sometimes acts as a constraining factor on women’s leadership aspirations**, as women’s leadership can be restricted to the village women’s committee with women actively barred from, or discouraged from participating in, village council meetings, the dominant decision-making space in the village (see also Ministry of Women, Community and Social Development 2015): “Women may be leaders among women but they have little direct voice in village government” (Meleisea et al. 2015, 30). Other important decision-making spaces at the village level include school committees, which tend to be male dominated (Meleisea et al. 2015).

Samoa villages have a Village Women’s Representative who works with the MWCS (Afamasaga-Fuata’i et al. 2012). These positions were established by the Government of Samoa in 2004, and have official duties including recording of births and deaths in the village, and acting as a conduit between the village women’s committee and the government (Meleisea et al. 2015). In 2015, it was estimated that around one in four villages did not have such a representative, and those that did were largely excluded from village decision-making processes (Meleisea et al. 2015). In the 2018 Non-Government Organisations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women Shadow Report for Samoa, it was noted that there are no provisions for non-traditional villages to appoint women’s representatives (Samoa Umbrella for Non-Governmental Organisations 2018). Women’s representatives were also paid less than their men village representatives, although the *National Policy on Gender Equality and Rights of Women and Girls 2021–2031* specified the need to amend the old policy to provide for equal pay for women and men village representatives (Ministry of Women, Community and Social Development, 2021a, 17). All representatives now earn ST\$300 each per fortnight. The *Faatuatua i le Atua Samoa ua Tasi* (FAST) government, which took office at the end of July 2021, has brought in new district council arrangements, constituency-level bodies that have been set up to manage government funding for projects. These councils are reportedly to have equal representation of women and men.

While individual women with *matāi* titles have succeeded in formal politics, **historically the number of women in formal politics in Samoa has been far below the global average** of 26 per cent (IPU 2021). No women were elected to the Samoan Parliament in the first three elections after independence (Table 6). Leaupepe Taulapapa Faimaala Phillips was elected in 1970 as Samoa’s first woman parliamentarian and served two terms, becoming deputy speaker in 1973. Since the establishment of Samoa’s parliament in 1962 till March 2021, 16 women had been elected in the history of the Samoan Parliament, excluding those who were unseated in post-election court challenges. Of the 13 who served as MPs in Samoa between 1970 and 2011, just four served multiple consecutive terms, and more than half served one term or less. A key aim of ‘Leadership

and Decision-Making' in the *National Policy on Gender Equality and the Rights of Women and Girls* is to consider further measures for increasing the number of women in parliament. Part of this include revising the quota system, electoral reforms, political party reforms and reviewing measures to increase women *matai's* participation in village councils (Ministry of Women, Community and Social Development, 2021a, 10–11).

Table 6: Women MPs in the Samoan Parliament, 1962–2021 (Ministry of Women, Community and Social Development 2009; Baker 2019).

Start of Term	Women MPs	Total MPs	% Women MPs
1962	0	47	0.0
1964	0	47	0.0
1967	0	47	0.0
1970	1	47	2.1
1973	2	47	4.3
1976	2	47	4.3
1979	1	47	2.1
1982	1	47	2.1
1985	2	47	4.3
1988	1	47	2.1
1991	2	49	4.1
1996	3	49	6.1
2001	3	49	6.1
2006	4	49	8.2
2011	3	49	6.1
2016	5	50	10.0
2021	6	52	11.5

Note: Excludes women who were elected but subsequently unseated in court challenges. The numbers include female MPs serving multiple terms.

There is a wealth of literature on women's access to formal political positions of leadership in Samoa and the Pacific more broadly (see Baker 2018a, 2018b; Fiti-Sinclair, Schoeffel & Meleisea 2017; Meleisea et al. 2015). This literature highlights that women who are successful in politics tend to have high public profiles, relatively high-ranking titles, and come from well-known and often political families. **Less is known, however, about leadership in other areas such as the private sector, church and civil society, and how different types of leadership intersect,** areas where further research would be beneficial.

Advocacy on women's leadership and participation in decision-making is often the responsibility of civil society actors. **Women are prominent as leaders within civil society groups and organizations in Samoa, and non-governmental organizations have been key actors in promoting women's leadership** (Baker 2019; Motusaga 2016). Several civil society initiatives have focused on improving women's access to leadership, particularly in the political sphere. In 2006, the Inailau Women's Leadership Network, spearheaded by the National Council of Women, campaigned to increase women's participation in leadership. Prior to the 2016 election, SUNGO worked with the Office of the Electoral Commissioner to provide voter education at the village level, including on women's political participation (Government of Samoa 2017). The NGO 'Samoa Ala Mai' (Wake Up Samoa) was established to promote women's leadership with key activities including trainings and youth outreach (Baker 2016; SUNGO 2018).

Development partners have also played an important role in promoting women's leadership through collaborative efforts. For example, the Increasing Political Participation of Women in Samoa (IPPPWS) program, jointly implemented by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and UN Women in partnership with the governments of Samoa and Australia, supported women's leadership through training and capacity development programs for women candidates, community outreach, and media campaigns (Government of Samoa 2017). For the 2021 Samoa election, UNDP through the WILS Project supported and provided training and capacity building programs for 20 out of 23 women candidates. The four women MPs who were elected outright were supported by the WILS Project through seminars, courses on campaign strategy and *vaogagana* (language of communication) training. The three next highest-performing women candidates, who are in a position to potentially take up additional seats in parliament to meet the quota threshold, were all supported by WILS programming.

2.1.3. Legal context

There are a variety of ratified and endorsed legal measures that promote gender equality in Samoa. In 1992, Samoa ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, while in 2012 Samoa endorsed the Pacific Leaders Gender Equality Declaration. The *National Policy for Gender Equality and Rights of Women and Girls 2021–2031*, which aligns to the Pacific Platform for Action 2018–2030, provides a framework for progress in this space. Specifically, this framework includes an emphasis on women in public leadership and decision making as a key priority area, with the goal of “improved gender balance in leadership, governance and public life” (Ministry of Women, Community and Social Development 2021a, 16). In 2021, the Samoan Government produced its first *National Policy on Inclusive Governance 2021–2031*, closely aligned with the gender equality policy, but with a focus on “social inclusion at all levels from government and urban to rural and village-based community structures” (Ministry of Women, Community and Social Development 2021b, 3).

Changes to local governance through legislative change have been suggested to support women's leadership. A 2015 study recommended changes to the *Village Fono Act* to: disallow sex-based discrimination in terms of *matai* title bestowal and the right to participate in village council meetings; legally mandate consultation with the village women's committee on village council decisions; and formalize the participation of the Village Women's Representative and the president of the village women's committee in village council meetings (Meleisea et al. 2015, 9). The *National Policy of Gender Equality 2016–2020* included amending the *Village Fono Act* as a key outcome (Ministry of Women, Community and Social Development 2015). The 2021–2031 *National Policy on Gender Equality and Rights of Women and Girls* includes addressing discriminatory practices in villages to ensure constitutional compliance (Ministry of Women, Community and Social Development 2021a).

The Samoan Constitution acknowledges the traditional power structures of *fa'asamoa* within the framework of a Westminster parliamentary system. Voting for election candidates was originally limited to *matai* until universal suffrage for adults over the age of 21 was introduced in 1990. This change was not explicitly framed as a gender issue but resulted in the enfranchisement of a significant number of women (Lawson 1996; So'o & Fraenkel 2005). Voting became compulsory before the 2021 election, in which 69 per cent of registered voters cast their votes. Eligibility to run for parliament in general constituencies was, and remains, restricted to *matai*. The eligibility rules are a constraining factor for women's leadership (see Government of Samoa 2017), as women are less likely than men to hold a *matai* title.

In 2013, the Samoan government passed legislation, known as the '10% law', which mandates a minimum level of women's representation in parliament (Baker 2019). This was the first parliamentary-level gender quota introduced in any independent Pacific Islands country. It is a relatively unique quota system, guaranteeing a minimum level of women's representation, rather than instituting a set number of seats as in the more common reserved seats system used in Bougainville and other parts of the world. In this way the Samoan gender quota acts as a 'floor' rather than a 'ceiling' on women's political representation (Baker 2019). Recent controversy in Samoa over the results of the 2021 election — in which five women MPs were elected outright, although one later stepped down prompting a by-election — and the addition of a sixth woman

MP under the quota has highlighted the challenges of interpreting the '10% law'. **There is limited research on how the '10% law' affects women's political and leadership aspirations, and potential pipelines from community-level leadership to national politics** (Motusaga 2016).

2.2 ACCESS, LEGITIMACY AND EFFECTIVENESS

Summary of key findings — Access, Legitimacy and Effectives

Access to a *matai* title is a key pathway to leadership, and given gendered disparities in access, the *matai* system represents a systemic barrier to women's leadership.

Participation in village governance is an important way to demonstrate leadership.

While access to established networks might be limited by gender, efforts to create high-level women's networks and coalitions have mitigated this.

There have been efforts to transform gendered norms of leadership, and what a 'legitimate' leader looks like. Alternate pathways to leadership have become more visible over time.

The second conceptual category that frames the research explores how leadership is exercised in Samoa, and strategies that women have used successfully to overcome barriers to leadership at the national, village and public sector levels. Key questions are: how do women *access* leadership positions and decision-making spaces? How do they build *legitimacy* as leaders? How do they demonstrate *effectiveness*?

Access to a *matai* title is a key signifier of access to leadership positions — at most levels — for Samoan women (see Meleisea et al. 2015). The *fa'amatai* system is closely intertwined with modern forms of political and community leadership in Samoa. While the proportion of *matai* title holders that are women has increased in recent years, around four out of five *matai* are men (Government of Samoa SDG Taskforce 2020). In the village contexts in Samoa there are barriers — both formal and informal — that limit women's access to *matai* titles, and extend to the spheres of the church, community and local government leadership (Meleisea et al. 2015; Ministry of Women, Community and Social Development 2015; Pa'usisi 2019). Around 17 per cent of Samoan traditional villages do not allow women access to *matai* titles, and a further 14 per cent do not allow women *matai* to participate in village council meetings, a key forum to demonstrate service and establish leadership at the local level (Pa'usisi 2019). The 2021–2031 *National Policy on Gender Equality and Rights of Women and Girls* notes this as a key area for intervention (Ministry of Women, Community and Social Development 2021a). Where women are able to participate in village council activities, they often report that it is not a welcoming environment (Baker 2018a; Pa'usisi 2019). This in turn **impacts women's ability to be seen as credible and legitimate national leaders** (Meleisea et al. 2015; Motusaga 2016; Finau 2017).

Limited access to networks is often cited as a key barrier to women's leadership in the global literature. In Samoa, **efforts to create formalized women's networks have sought to counter this disadvantage**. These have been bolstered by the fact that Samoa has been a positive outlier in the Pacific region in terms of women's representation in the public service, including at senior levels and encompassing a diverse range of status and socioeconomic indicators (Chan Tung 2013; Haley & Zubrinich 2016). In 2019, there were more women than men CEOs (57% versus 43%) in the Samoan public service (Government of Samoa SDG Taskforce 2020). The Women in Leadership Advocacy Group (WinLA), a network of women politicians and senior public servants, has played a role in promoting women's leadership, including hosting workshops on women's political leadership in 2017 and establishing a mentoring program. This highlights the importance of networking opportunities and collective leadership.

More broadly, **there have been notable initiatives to challenge masculinized definitions of leadership and broaden the space available for women leaders** across community, national, public, and private sectors. A key focus of the WILS Project is tackling the systemic and structural barriers to women's leadership and access to decision-making. The Village/District Leadership Development Initiative for Women in the Community (VLDI) uses a transformative leadership approach to support women's leadership and promote gender equality at the village level (Onesemo-Tuilaepa 2019).

The important role of these groups emphasizes the value of understanding leadership in a collective rather than individual sense (Leftwich & Hogg 2007). Coalitions and networks are a key, but understudied, aspect of leadership. A key facet of the developmental leadership literature is understanding the inherently political nature of leadership. Where women's leadership is coded as 'community', rather than 'political', it is often devalued. This labelling of women's leadership activity as 'community' rather than 'political' is sometimes a strategy to get around male resistance to women leaders in order to achieve key (political) outcomes. Gaining an understanding of local definitions of 'legitimate' leadership is crucial to uncovering the gendered dynamics.

2.3. INDIVIDUAL CHARACTERISTICS

Summary of key findings — Individual Characteristics

- Accounts of leadership pathways stress the importance of education, family networks and support, a track record of service to the community, and having the skills to negotiate *matai* and village council politics successfully, but these accounts are predominantly from women involved in formal politics as MPs or candidates.
- A *matai* title is often given in recognition of leadership and service, but not all *matai* are expected to play a strong role in village governance and many women *matai* do not.
- The presence of women leaders is important but not necessarily sufficient to effect change in terms of gender equality.

First-hand accounts of pathways to leadership and strategies to negotiate influence and achieve goals are vital to our understanding of the gendered nature of leadership more broadly. Publicly available accounts of women leaders in Samoa tend to be focused on political leaders. For example, a biographical article about Samoa's first female Deputy Prime Minister, Fiamē Naomi Mata'afa (Spark & Corbett 2020), or the first-hand account from politician Ali'imalemanu Alofa Tuuau (Tuuau & Howard 2019). These accounts highlight the importance of **education, family networks, and being able to successfully navigate *matai* and village council politics.**

Having a *matai* title is an important way of demonstrating leadership within a family and community, but it is not the only way. The **bestowal of a *matai* title is often in recognition of leadership already exercised, commonly through service to families and communities** (Ministry of Women, Community and Social Development 2015). While village-based *matai* are involved in village governance, Meleisea and co-authors (2015, 25) note:

It is now common for families to confer matai titles on people who do not live in the village to recognize their achievements, to elicit their contributions to family activities, or to link overseas, urban and village branches. In relation to the village, matai who do not live there or actively participate in its affairs hold their titles in what is, in effect, an honorary capacity, without playing the local leadership roles of a matai who resides in the village.

While local government is considered to be a vitally important level of politics (Tuimaleali'ifano 2006), in practice **not all *matai* are required or even expected to participate in village governance.** This has important implications for women, as most village-based *matai* are men; women who hold titles tend to be primarily based either in urban areas or overseas (Meleisea et al. 2015). Less is known about the leadership pathways for women who do not have (or do not want) *matai* titles.

The National University of Samoa's Centre for Samoan Studies published a report on women's experiences as candidates in the 2016 national elections (Fiti-Sinclair, Schoeffel & Meleisea 2017). Candidates noted the importance of **demonstrating service at the village level, having the support of extended family, and long-term planning.** As noted above, the broader literature indicates that successful male and female political leaders tend to have deep local connections and networks, strong track records of service delivery, access to resources and leadership experience (Barbara & Baker 2016).

Having the **cultural knowledge and skills to navigate traditional governance structures was seen as important in exercising leadership** (Ministry of Women, Community and Social Development

2015). Conversely, lacking the skills and the confidence to engage with these systems is a common barrier to women's leadership. Ali'imalemanu Alofa Tuuau, who entered Parliament in 2016, noted her challenges in adapting to leadership norms as a woman:

There are three kinds of languages in Samoa ... 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 (Tuuau & Howard 2019, 9).

In the private and public sectors, women have made significant gains in leadership. While more men than women report legislation or managerial occupations in Samoa, the proportion of these roles held by women is increasing (Samoa Bureau of Statistics 2020b). In the public sector, around three in five management positions at the CEO or Assistant CEO level were held by women in 2019 (Government of Samoa 2019), and women's representation in state-owned enterprises as CEOs and board members was also increasing, from 9.5 per cent in 2001 to 40 per cent in 2018 for CEO positions, and from 20 per cent in 2009 to 28 per cent in 2020 for boards (Government of Samoa SDG Taskforce 2020). The ability for women leaders to effect change in terms of gender equality, however, is influenced by many factors; **the presence of women leaders is an important condition but not the sole requirement for substantive change** (Chan Tung 2013).

2.4 CROSS-CUTTING DEVELOPMENT PARTNER RESPONSES

Summary of key findings — cross-cutting development partner responses

- Several past research projects have proposed recommendations for development partners, including around support for legislative reform, training and mentoring programs, facilitation of women's leadership in traditionally male-dominated spaces, and investment in women's economic empowerment.
- These recommendations have largely been based around women's leadership in political spaces, although they could be applicable more broadly.

Several past research projects have proposed recommendations for development partner strategies to promote women's leadership (see for example Meleisea et al. 2015; Ministry of Women, Community and Social Development 2015; Fiti-Sinclair, Schoeffel & Meleisea 2017). These recommendations have largely been based around women's participation in political spaces at the national (Parliament) and local (village *fono*) level. Key recommendations have included:

- Revision of the *Village Fono Act* to facilitate women's participation in village governance.
- Creation of more contextually appropriate training and mentoring programs for aspiring women leaders
- Facilitation of women's participation in leadership structures within religious institutions.
- Economic empowerment programs to increase the capability of women to take on leadership roles; and
- Investment in measures to encourage young women's leadership.

Limited research has been undertaken on the potential of development partners to support women's leadership in Samoa beyond the political sphere.

3. LEADERSHIP & POWER DYNAMICS

Summary of key findings — leadership and power dynamics

Research participants' understanding of leadership was exemplified through the use of Samoan phrases or proverbs including:

- *Tautua* — the path to leadership is through service
- *Inailau a Tina* — the women's row of thatch is complete
- *Faamatai* or traditional leadership structure
- Women's status as *feagaiga* or sacred covenant
- *Pae ma le auli* — women as peace makers
- *Sui faiga ae tumau faavae* and *E togi le moa ae u'u lona afa* — practices are changing and more women are assuming leadership roles. However, this progress is not moving at the same pace in every area.

Power dynamics are important to understanding the context in which leadership is practiced. Power relations in Samoa are complex and context-specific, underpinned by *fa'asamoa*. While traditionally local and national-level leadership has been male-dominated, with women exercising leadership primarily in separate spheres to men, this is changing over time and women are increasingly gaining access to leadership.

Many participants identified village councils as spaces that they perceived as restricted or closed to women's leadership

There was more space for women's leadership at the national level — in the public service including at the most senior levels, as well as in politics — than at the local (village) level

At the family level, many participants noted that power dynamics were weighted towards men as the 'heads' of families

Understanding the intersectionality of women's leadership is critical in devising strategies to support them in the different sectors.

3.1. LEADERSHIP NARRATIVES

Understanding leadership narratives is an important first step in examining leadership pathways for women in Samoa. Leadership is fundamentally about voice, and the ability to contribute to decision-making, and how this was conceptualized by participants was often through the use of Samoan phrases and proverbs. This research highlights some key narratives around what leadership means, how women (and men) exercise leadership, and how leadership norms are changing in Samoa.

3.1.1. *O le ala i le pule o le tautua* — The pathway to leadership is through service

The foundation of leadership in Samoa is service: to the family, community, and nation. Effective leadership at any level was seen as demonstrating service. This was true of both men and women leaders. Having a *matai* title is recognition of one's service or *tautua* to the family and village and is based on lineage to a title. That recognition means that one's service is expected to continue through their leadership roles, hence the saying 'to lead is to serve' as commonly used by *matai* and particularly MPs.

For men and women, they have the same pathway. That is service — *tautua* — starting from the family. (Participant, men's focus group, Upolu)

Being a matai is all the work that you must do service: service to your family, the people that you lead, so of course that notion of servant leadership is always there in being a matai. (Woman matai & government board member)

Service in the village and the church is important if a woman wishes to pursue leadership ... tautua is the path to go on... (Man, church leader).

This theory of servant leadership was seen to apply to men and women equally. How service is demonstrated, however, is notably gendered. Service to the church is a good example of this; women's service to their church was considered by many to be vitally important, yet this service — preparing meals, organizing events and meetings, and countless other contributions — was not seen as public in the way that men's religious service often was. This contrast can be seen in the role of *'faletua'*, the formal term for the wife of a religious leader which can be literally translated as 'house at the back'.

There are diverse and varied ways to demonstrate service. One commonality among the leaders who contributed to this research was that many were serving different communities — family, village, church, civil society organizations, the nation through the public service or politics, and others — at the same time.

Recognizing the **intersectional nature of women's leadership** is key to understanding the dynamics and expectations of their leadership both within and across different sectors and spheres. For example, for women who are government CEOs, hold *matai* titles and are church members, the expectation to lead in the workplace, and actively participate in village affairs and church groups can be overwhelming. It can also be difficult to navigate the pressures of being in a village that rejects women *matai* or a church that dictates where women can or cannot lead. Young women can struggle to attain leadership positions, and to translate their success in leadership in one sector to other parts of their life, and this is sometimes exacerbated by caregiving and other responsibilities. Relevant support systems informed by an understanding of the intersectionality of women's leadership could help address this.

3.1.2. *E au le inailau a tina — The women's row of thatch is complete*

Women are widely credited as hard workers and as *ta'imua* (first to act and initiate things). They are considered to be the backbone of village and family life. Their contributions to the community were widely valued, and although this was not always defined as leadership, by women themselves or by others, it is seen as service.

In our village, women always work together for village development, like looking after our village pool. They organize functions in our village very well. Even in our church, the women's fellowship does a lot more than what we ask of them. So I think that highlights great leadership by our women. (Participant, men's focus group, Upolu)

I think women's leadership is important at all levels because women are doers. With projects my team do in villages for small grants, the ones that are run by village women committees are very successful but the ones that are run by the village council mostly men lose the money somehow and projects don't get completed. (Woman matai & senior public servant)

A leader, to me, is being the first in everything. If you don't move, nothing moves, and people don't move. To be *ta'imua* (first to act) and women are *ta'imua* in families and villages ...As *ta'imua*, women should be regarded as leaders in villages; they are there not just mothers but as matai and leaders of their extended families, representing them in the village meeting. (Man, former MP).

Men's contributions to the community, though — for instance, through service on the village council — tend to be more easily classified as leadership than women's contributions. Women's service to village women's committees or women's church groups, for example, while valued, is not necessarily seen as the foundation for leadership in the same way as men's service.

3.1.3. *Fa'amatai — traditional leadership structures*

Being a *matai* is important. A *matai* title often means an opportunity to have a voice in decision-making — a key aspect of leadership. Women being bestowed with *matai* titles by their extended families is a relatively recent phenomenon. For many women *matai*, however, their ability to contribute to community decision-making is limited for a variety of reasons: because they live outside the village; they hold a lower-ranked title; they do not feel welcome at the village council; or they are intimidated by the language used.

We have a saying 'aua o lona suafa ua vaelua iai' [it was the matai with whom God's name has been shared] so yes I think it is important for a leader to be a matai ... and if you're a woman matai, the same accolades and respect are granted to you, just like the men ... it makes leadership a spiritual thing as well, not just a man-made position. (Man, former MP)

In our village, allowing women to hold matai titles enables them to become leaders of families and then in government. (Participant, men's focus group, Upolu).

The women *matai* who contributed to this research tended to be highly educated, leaders in government and civil society groups, and business owners. All reside in urban Apia, are highly qualified and actively involved in village and church affairs, and some sit on village councils. A number of women *matai* sit on village councils, however, by choice or because of village rule, others do not sit on village councils. Those who do have been *matai* for a long time, or have represented — or are currently representing — their constituencies in parliament. Participants noted that a substantial number of women *matai* live overseas and their physical absence and lack of *monotaga* puts them in a position of disadvantage with no recognition by the village. Some women hold more than one *matai* title and have husbands who are also *matai*, with this — both spouses holding *matai* titles — being an emerging reality among Apia-based families. Other women leaders do not hold titles but have status because of their husband's titles, or sometimes their children's titles. These varied experiences indicate the complex relationship between *matai* titles, leadership, and power in Samoa. This research demonstrated a changing leadership landscape at the village level, albeit slowly, with relatively low recognition of women *matai* in some villages but progress being made in others.

It should be noted, though, that leadership in Samoa is not restricted to *matai*. Not all women — and men — who exercise leadership are *matai*, and there are multiple pathways to leadership.

Being a matai can make one a leader, but you do not have to be a matai to be a leader. (Woman matai & business owner, matai)

Holding a *matai* title is a key pathway but it is not the only route to leadership. This is important in considering women's leadership, because while the proportion of women *matai* does appear to be increasing (Government of Samoa SDG Taskforce 2020), there are still significantly more male *matai* than female *matai*. While women in practice do not seem to have the same opportunities as their male relatives to obtain *matai* titles, there are other routes to leadership, as discussed below.

3.1.4. *Feagaiga and va tapuia — Sacred covenant and sacred space*

The concept of *feagaiga*, or covenant, between brothers and sisters is of particular importance in examining power relations, and women's access to leadership. The brother-sister covenant implies not only equality between the two, but more importantly, the sister is guaranteed protection and provision by her brother. Women have a special status in families and communities due to the *feagaiga*. While she is respected in the sphere of the *aiga*, the same accolades do not hold in other contexts particularly given that the term *feagaiga* has also been transferred to church pastors as a sign of respect for Christianity. In the *feagaiga* brother-sister relationship, men and women take on different, but complementary, roles and responsibilities.

Women are important in our village, as they are feagaiga [special covenant] in families. (Participant, men's focus group, Upolu)

This is sometimes interpreted as women and men exercising leadership in different spheres. Related to this is the *va tapuia* (sacred space) between men and women, which is often used as a reason why women cannot sit on village councils and be involved in decision-making.

I think women are suppressed in a way because of our culture; the culture allows us to be elevated as matai women but also the concept of sister-brother may have suppressed us in a way. (Woman matai & senior public servant).

The concept of *feagaiga* is often considered to be a positive aspect of Samoan culture in terms of gender equality because of the status it ascribed to women. Within this context, however, there are also limits to the spaces that women and men can occupy together, and this has substantial impacts on women's access to decision-making. Latai Latai (2015, p. 95) notes: "The traditional sacred valuation of Samoan women as *feagaiga* gives them important power and influence." This power, however, has traditionally been operational in a different sphere to that of *matai*: "for a *feagaiga* to claim a *matai* title means she has to relinquish her *feagaiga*-ship" (Latai 2015, p. 95). The *va tapuia* is used to delineate these spheres of power and influence, and in contemporary villages can act as a barrier to women's involvement in the more visible exercise of leadership in village decision-making. Yet this seems to be changing over time. One of the researchers involved in the project, herself a *matai* who holds an *ali'i* title and sits on the village council, recounted:

I know that the men matai look first to me as a feagaiga...in my village council when there are things to distribute [such as food or money] the first person to get their share is the matai matua [oldest matai] then they say 'Give the next one to [woman matai]'. I know that they give that priority and respect to me because I'm the only woman matai in the council...It doesn't matter if I've been a matai for long or only recently, they do respect me ... When we have meals at council meetings, the matai who coordinates the serving of meals would say 'Give the tray first to [woman matai]' ... it's because I'm the only woman among them all ... I think the men matai see me first as a feagaiga above everything else ... Let me give an example. Just last week, our council deliberated over a penalty for two men who broke village rules. The two guys were seated in the meeting house and matai were scolding them with strong words...At one point the men matai were saying, 'If it wasn't for [woman matai's] presence here today, you both would get much more severe words including swears. We are using light words now because of [woman matai]' ... There are many examples like that, and for me, to know that you have the respect of the men matai in our village council is quite special. (Woman matai & researcher)

Similar sentiments were expressed in interviews with other women *matai* who are involved in village council decision-making. This suggests that women are increasingly able to bring their status as *feagaiga* into these *matai*-only decision-making spaces.

3.1.5. *Tinā o le pae ma le auli — Women as peacemakers*

Women have a very important role in their families and communities as 'peacemakers', and this is linked to a style of calm and collaborative leadership that is valued.

Women's role as — pae ma auli — peacekeepers are important in keeping families and villages together. Their advisory role is vital in the family and in the village. (Participant, men's focus group, Savai'i)

In my opinion, female leaders are more respected than men ... because we have that role as *augafaapae* [peace makers]. For instance, if you have a good job like myself, they will respect you even more. (Woman matai & senior public servant)

In our village council, women matai's participation has brought some good changes ... especially in the conduct of village meetings. In the past, when women were not in the council, the men matai just say whatever they want to say bad words or not, it didn't matter. But now with the presence of women matai, I think the discussions are better and focused on important issues for the village because women matai's views are recognized and respected by council members. They bring their 'pae ma auli' role in the meeting, advising men matai about what to do when there are difficult issues. It's good. (Man, village mayor).

Being a 'peacemaker', however, is primarily seen as an advisory role, practicing behind-the-scenes influence rather than being seen as a leader. In this way, while women's contributions as peacemakers is highly valued, it is not necessarily perceived as leadership.

3.1.6. *Sui faiga ae tumau faavae — Practices change but foundations remain*

While women have been excluded from leadership roles in the past, there is a sense of progress and change. Overall, most research participants felt that things were changing for the better in terms of women's access to leadership.

These days I think of the saying, 'tumau faavae ae sui faiga' [practices change, but foundations remain] ... with the latest changes in encouraging women's leadership, we see a lot of women leaders such as those in office jobs, being school principals and all those kinds of paid jobs ... even the ministry of police, we have a woman deputy commissioner, a role that was usually held by the men ... so women have become leaders everywhere. That to me is a great thing. It's a good change for our country. But I know that not all men agree. And there are women also who do not agree on this change. But I personally think it is a good thing to have more women leaders in the villages and other parts of our society. (Participant, men's focus group, Savai'i).

In focus groups and interviews, there was acknowledgement of the role of international norms of human rights in changing local norms particularly around women's leadership. It was stressed, though, that this change needs to happen in a way that is consistent with Samoan values.

3.1.7. *E togi le moa ae u'u lona afa — Letting go of the chicken and yet still pulling the sennit*

While progress is occurring, it is incomplete in that women do not have equal access to leadership positions, and it is not moving at the same pace in every area. Women have greater access to *matai* titles than in the past, for instance, yet often they do not have the same opportunities to engage in village decision-making as male *matai*. Norms are changing in the public and private sector in terms of women's leadership but village-level practices are harder to change.

You can see that there are more women leaders in the government today than before. Also more women leaders in government and in businesses, but not so much in our villages. The villages are still led by the men, women *matai* are there but [they have] not much power in village affairs. (Woman business owner).

This dynamic was illustrated by the saying *e togi le moa ae u'u lona afa*, used to describe a state of indecisiveness. The current situation in terms of gender equality and how women were perceived as leaders was characterized in this way: while there was clear progress being made, it was not consistent across all spheres of life, opportunity was not available to all women, and just like the tightening of the sennit which still binds and constricts, the barriers particularly social norms that devalue women's leadership still limit and constrain women's full and equal participation in decision making.

3.2. GENDER AND POWER RELATIONS

Power dynamics are important to understanding the context in which leadership is practiced. Creating space for new forms of leadership necessarily means challenging existing power relations. As the leadership narratives above show, gendered power relations in Samoa are complex and context-specific, underpinned by *fa'asamoa*. Within the village, *fa'amatai* is almost always associated with men who exercise significant power in decision-making, and this extends through to the national level because of parliament's *matai*-only eligibility rule. In this way, the norms of *fa'asamoa* enable male dominance in leadership and entrench patriarchal systems. Cultural change is hard to effect; as Yvonne Underhill-Sem (2011: 17) has written, "What is very clear is that as a way of life, 'culture' is not closely interrogated by those who live it. Culture has a 'taken-for grantedness' about it that it becomes a taken for granted". Yet leadership itself is highly relational and dependent on the cultivation and maintenance of familial and community networks. *Faasinomaga* — identity, expressed through connection to family and village — is a core foundation for legitimacy as a leader in Samoa. *Matai* titles are bestowed by family, and the title holder is tasked with representing the family as a *matai*. While women can and do obtain *matai* titles, the majority of *matai* — in general, in parliament, and active in village decision-making — are men.

Matai is the Samoan word for leader, chief, or even (in the poetic sense) father. Samoan society is organized by family, and each family has its own matai titles, which are connected to certain districts, villages and plots of family land. Matai titles (suafa, literally “formal name”) are bestowed upon family members during a cultural ceremony called a saofa’i which occurs only after discussion and consensus within the family.

Who can exercise power and when depends on the space and form it is exercised in. *Vā*, or ‘space between’, is a Samoan concept that is fundamentally important to understanding power relations. The concept of *vā* “connotes mutual respect in socio-political arrangements that nurture the relationships between people, places, and social environments” (Lilomaiva-Doktor 2009, p. 12). As noted above, power and leadership in the Samoan context is dependent on relationships. *Matai* leadership is constituted by the dynamics of relationships between senior *matai* and young ones, and high chiefs (*ali’i*) and orators. Depending on the status of their *matai* titles, women *matai* are in principle part and parcel of these relationships. In practice many women *matai* hold high chief titles and not orator titles. Being an orator *matai* allows one to lead and conduct public speeches in gatherings of any sort — village, district, government, and church. Orator *matai* are known for being assertive, aggressive, and calculative in the interest of his or her family, village, or district. Orators are literally protectors of high chief title holders. While higher in status than orator *matai*, the high chiefs’ role is mostly ceremonial, but their view or decisions are respected and actioned by the orators. With more women *matai* holding high chief titles the implications for the concept of *feagaiga* as observed in the *matai* leadership circles are that women *matai* are accorded more respect through the consideration of their views during council meetings.

Many participants identified village councils as spaces that they perceived as restricted or closed to women’s leadership. Some villages bar women from holding *matai* titles or sitting on the village council. Others allow women to hold titles but discourage their attendance at village council, citing traditional ‘laws’ or the potential for discomfort if the men present tell dirty jokes or use disrespectful language. However, as noted above, these spaces are not always closed with some villages having a positive view towards women’s participation in these decision-making spaces. It was noted by various participants that women’s participation had improved, or sought to improve, decision-making in village council settings.

My village is positive about women’s participation in the village council meetings. There is great support for women to be leaders in our village which is very good. (Woman matai & senior public servant)

Certainly, in our village here we value women and women matai. I’m happy that there are women matai in the decision-making body of our village. There is a big contribution of women matai in the decision-making process for our village ... their voice is there and they also advice the men matai on how to improve things for the good of the village. (Man, village mayor)

There is no transparency in most things the village councils do and that’s what I saw in the administration of my village council when I first got in. I tried to disclose information and financial statements of the expenses of the school building, but they turned it into the cultural protocols which says, the word of the tuua [most senior orator] goes. I actually don’t like it, but what do I do? I continue to help the chiefs understand there is such a thing called transparency ... Anyway, it’s a good learning experience. (Woman matai & senior public servant)

Perhaps counterintuitively, many participants of this research felt **there was more space for women’s leadership at the national level — in the public service including at the most senior levels, as well as in politics — than at the local (village) level.** Power dynamics at the village level were weighted towards ‘traditional’ forms of leadership, whereas at the national level these dynamics were seen as more flexible and more open to women’s leadership. The private sector and civil society were seen as spaces that were more open and where women could exercise visible forms of leaderships.

At the family level, many participants noted that power dynamics were weighted towards men as the ‘heads’ of families. Many women participants, including those with senior and prominent leadership positions in the workplace, stated a preference for their husbands to act as leaders in the home, noting this was the norm in Samoa. This was reinforced in religious spaces where masculinized leadership norms were strong (although participants observed that some churches were more open to women’s leadership than others). While women play important roles in both families and churches,

it is often as *faletua*, a more behind-the-scenes form of influence. Yet reducing this to a simple public/private or visible/invisible divide is not appropriate in the Samoan context, where these spheres are complementary and mutually reinforcing, and where women can exercise significant power, influence, and leadership even as they are positioned within the 'private' sphere (see Lilomaiva-Doktor 2020). This relational view is applicable to the *faletua of faifeau* (pastors' wives), who play an important leadership role alongside their husbands in churches and communities, and this complementarity of leadership is a key reason given as to why many churches are reluctant to ordain women.

Spaces where women's leadership dominated included women's village committees. These committees were seen to have an important role in the community. While the male-dominated village councils took more of the decision-making role at the local level, women's village committees exercised important leadership in setting village norms and serving their communities. This leadership was commonly conceptualized as collective — while the Village Women's Representative ostensibly plays a leadership role within the committees, they were seen as less hierarchal in their power dynamics than the village councils. These women-dominated spaces have their own power dynamics, and the voices of young women, women with disability, and women who were not either *matai* themselves or married to senior *matai* are often far less prominent including women who have married into the community.

Despite some encouraging trends, women remain under-represented in leadership and experience disadvantage in other major sectors of Samoan society. Cultural, social, and religious barriers, perceptions and unchallenged norms about women's roles and ability continue to hinder advancement to leadership (Meleisea et al., 2015). Limited acceptance of women *matai* in village councils has a ripple effect on the consistently low numbers of women in parliament, given that both a *matai* title and evidence of *monotaga* to the village (often through service on the council) are prerequisites for eligibility to stand for parliament. While church leadership is increasingly involved in discussions to curb violence against women, there has been a lack of progress on the issue of women accessing high-level leadership roles in the church. Its stand on biblical teachings that elevate men as heads of both families and the church continues to influence policy and practices.

Samoa's first *National Policy on Inclusive Governance 2021–2031* aims to improve “the balance of voices in decision-making ... in all sectors including the three branches of government (parliament, executive and judiciary), village and district level government, private sector, civil society and church” (Ministry of Women, Community and Social Development, 2021b: 11). Targeting increased participation and representation of women and other minority groups in village leadership is a key policy goal. The policy recognizes the role of civic education and awareness building in addressing barriers against women and other marginalized groups accessing leadership across all sectors.



Honourable Prime Minister Fiame Naomi Mata'afa with representatives of Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) during International Women's Day (IWD) Celebration 2022.
Photo courtesy of Samoa Observer

4. ENABLING & CONSTRAINING CONTEXT

Summary of key findings — Enabling and constraining context

Factors that facilitate women's access to leadership in the cultural, religious, social, and institutional context of Samoa include:

Samoa cultural values that respect and honor women as sisters and peacemakers.

Changing norms in some villages that increasingly allow the active participation of women *matai* in village council meetings.

Women's educational success, success in business, and success in the public sector and politics which contributes to changing norms of leadership.

A strong legal framework for equal rights, and pathways such as the 10% law for women in parliament.

Women's regular, active, and valued participation in family and village activities.

There are numerous barriers to women's equal access to leadership opportunities. The most prominent barriers were seen as:

1. Women's leadership being placed in a separate sphere to male leadership, with men seen as the final decision-makers particularly in villages and churches .
2. Women's status as *nofotane* (marrying into husband's family) and a lack of leadership opportunities within the villages they reside in as a result.
3. Enduring village norms that do not recognize women *matai*, or do not allow or encourage them to participate in village councils. These include formal barriers such as bans of women *matai*, and informal barriers such as the use of offensive or sexual jokes in village council meetings.
4. Religious norms and church practices that are resistant to women's leadership.
5. Social norms that legitimize and normalize men's leadership, meaning women find it more difficult to prove themselves as leaders.
6. The oratory language of *matai*, with women *matai* who do not live in the village finding it difficult to learn this language, and women *matai* who did reside in the villages often lacking the confidence and support to use it.
7. Gender-based violence is a significant barrier for potential and current women leaders across all sectors.
8. Limited capacity to provide economic resources required to contribute to village obligations.

Enabling and constraining factors refer to the factors that facilitate women's access to leadership, and those that create barriers to leadership. This section is divided into four broad categories which encompass both enabling and constraining factors: cultural context; religious context; social context; and institutional context.

4.1. CULTURAL CONTEXT

Cultural norms that influence understanding of women's status stems from **practices and protocols in different villages and sub-villages**. For this research, an understanding of the term 'village' is an important part of the cultural context. A Samoan village consists of *pitonu'u* or sub-villages. The number of *pitonu'u* in each village depends on the geographic size of the whole village. A typically small village would have one or two *pitonu'u*, and a large one has five or six, potentially more.

A common observation from the research was that each *pitonu'u* has its own *matai* council and system of governance. As such, each *pitonu'u* has the authority to dictate its own norms on the acceptance or rejection of women *matai*. It is quite common to have two *pitonu'u* next to each other, one accepting women *matai* and the other with a rule to reject them. Thus, in one village, different *pitonu'u* can have distinctly different policies related to women *matai*. At the whole village level, the council consists of *matai* representatives from each *pitonu'u*. The decision to accept or reject women *matai* at this higher level is determined by this council.

It was clear that the views of research participants were colored by their own experience in their sub-villages. Women *matai* who are active in village affairs tend to sit on *pitonu'u* councils, but do not necessarily take part in the whole village councils. A notable exception to this rule is women parliamentarians.

Persistent barriers adversely impacting women accessing leadership are underpinned by enduring beliefs that elevate men as key decision-makers across Samoan society particularly in villages, parliament, and the church. Some of the barriers are more prominent at some levels than others: for example, the impact of *nofotane* status is significant at the village level but has no impact on government employment or private sector success. Taken together, however, the acceptance of these underpinning beliefs that restrict women's access to leadership only exacerbates the problem of gender inequality. The barriers that women face are discussed in detail in the sections below.

Samoan cultural norms place women in high esteem within families and broader communities, as evidenced by concepts like *feagaiga* (see Afamasaga-Fuata'i et al. 2012; Schoeffel 1979). **Women's leadership is valued within these cultural norms but tends to be placed in a separate sphere to male leadership**. This is especially true for villages that do not allow women to become *matai* or to sit on the village council:

There are two different arenas where men and women are involved ... it's like in some villages where you have the village of women and village of the men... (Village Women Representative)

Our village has two parts, village for men, and one for women. Men have their own village meetings, penalties etcetera, and the women also have their own meetings which only include leading women [sao tamaitai]. These women can also voice their concerns over a special village issue although they are not chiefs. (Participant, men's focus group, Upolu)

In these cases, women's leadership roles within women's committees, *Saofaiga a Faletua ma Tausi* (groups of chiefs' wives), and *Aualuma* (groups of chiefs' daughters), are recognized and celebrated. In many cases, women's committees, as coordinators of village health and beautification activities, consist of women from *Saofaiga a Faletua ma Tausi* and *Aualuma*. By comparison, men are divided into two groups: the *Saofaiga a ali'i ma faipule* or village council, and *taulele'a*, or the untitled men. When members of the *taulele'a* group become *matai* they join the village council. Of these gender-based groups, only the men's groups tend to progress up the ladder of village authority whereas the women's groups do not.

The gender-based village groups — while aligning to and reinforcing respective cultural and social statuses and roles - do not have equal participation in high-level village decision making. The village council has the power to override other groups' decisions as it is the ultimate village decision-making body.

It sets village rules and *tapu* (taboo) and decides on punishment or rewards. **Having separate gender- and status-based groups is a norm that masks inequalities (gender-based and otherwise) in participation and access to high-level village decision-making and leadership**. Male-dominated village councils can overrule or defy decisions by women's groups, but not the other way around. This norm has endured over generations and remains a critical barrier for women to overcome.

Part of this barrier is played out through the tradition of **complementarity in decision-making**, where women play a significant but often behind-the-scenes role, as highlighted by some participants as important in understanding women's leadership:

We were talking about this [women and leadership] years ago and I remember speaking to a faletua [wife] in a village in Savaii and when I talked about this with her, talking about politics... she said 'why do I have to, that house at the back, le fale le I tua o le fale lea ou ke nofo ai [the house at the back is where I belong], and I do what I need to do making sure everything runs smoothly; my husband sits in the fono, I counsel him, I help him, I talk to him...' So really she has a big huge role and she actually said 'what is going to happen to the family if the two of us want to go and sit in Parliament?' You know that kind of thing so when you think of Samoan women, they can access matai titles but there is that kind of difference ... because right now we have been working in Savaii, everybody is busy in the village, everybody has a role to play within a Samoan family. So like going back, everybody has a role to play in the family. (Woman NGO leader)

Others, however, critiqued this form of decision-making as marginalizing women's voices. While women often contribute to decision-making, it is unclear whether these norms of complementarity allow them to truly play a leadership role and be considered by others as a leader. The tradition of separating women's and men's leadership can act as a constraining factor by restricting women's participation in decision-making (see Finau 2017).

Our culture where only men can talk and discuss issues, and men only ask women when at the end of their discussion. Women tend to be the last people that men ask. So that culture where only men do the decision-making, but us women we are culturally referred to as 'faletua' or 'we're at the back house preparing the food'. So there is no way to say that women did this great decision because we're too busy preparing the food, looking after children, tidying the home. (Woman candidate, 2021 election)

A key barrier identified in terms of women's leadership was **the status of women who are married into a village (nofotane)**. In gender-based village groups discussed in the section above, *nofotane* women married to non-*matai* rarely feature. The exception is their involvement in women's committees' health, beautification, and cleaning activities. While there may be fewer opportunities for leadership in the women's committees, none exists within other village groups primarily because of their social status as women from outside of the village. They are unable to sit on village councils (see Fairbairn-Dunlop 2020), thus limiting their voice in decision-making. They are also especially vulnerable to gender-based violence (see Boodoosingh, Beres & Tombs 2018).

One view that makes it hard is the view of women as teine ole nuu [village girl] versus nofotane [women from another village who marry village men] ... the village gives priority to local village women; or even in families, they may look down on incoming people, tagata fai mai [in-laws] and prefer to appoint leaders from family people and tagata o le eleele [people of the land]. (Participant, young women's focus group, Upolu)

I think it's harder if you are a nofotane ... you are not regarded as a leader in anything besides your own immediate family environment. Although I am now the woman representative for this village, it is through my husband's status as a high chief ... and I have lived in this village for a long time now. (Village Women Representative)

The Samoa *National Policy on Gender Equality and Rights of Women and Girls 2021–2031* highlights the status of *nofotane* as a key issue in leadership and decision-making, noting the issue as an example of the intersecting inequalities that require a gender transformative approach to advancing women's leadership and participation in decision-making (Ministry of Women, Community and Social Development, 2021a). The label *nofotane* is a potentially limiting factor in leadership because of the social status factors, but there were pathways noted: through service, educational and professional opportunities, and access to titles through their own families.

Village councils have a strong influence on community norms of women's leadership. As the supreme authority in the village (Amosa 2010, 12), village councils set norms for women's participation in decision-making through either enabling access to village councils or constraining it through formal or informal barriers (see also Schoeffel 2020). Different villages have different ways of doing things, and so women's status as leaders in the village context varies. In villages that were more resistant

to women's leadership, tradition was seen to be a barrier: what was commonly referred to by male *matai* as 'village rules or *tapu* (taboo)', to excuse not recognizing women *matai*, or not allowing them to sit on the village council:

For our village, women cannot become matai, as in the village history and cultural practices as has been laid by our forefathers. (Participant, men's focus group, Upolu)

Our village is different to other villages ... If a woman becomes a matai the village doesn't recognize her ... there's one woman who lives in New Zealand, her title is from her family here, but she is not recognized in our village. No woman sits in the village council. That's a village taboo, right from the times of our ancestors. (Man, village mayor)

These village-level norms are pervasive even as leadership opportunities have increased in the public and private sectors, and in politics. Women's status as leaders in the village is more influenced by local-level norms than by their individual achievements and positions:

Let's not forget that the faamatai system is dominated by men ... Negatively, the faamatai system allows male leaders to safeguard the territory [of village governance] for themselves and ... they do not want their egos and authority to be challenged by women leaders. That's what's happening in my village. (Woman, former MP)

Villages where women are not allowed to hold *matai* titles, or are barred from sitting on the village council, are in the minority in Samoa (Meleisea et al. 2015; Ministry of Women, Community and Social Development 2015). Even where women are recognized as *matai*, they are not necessarily equal partners in village decision-making:

In our village, the alii ma faipule [men matai] very much uphold the view that they, the men, are the leaders with authority over the village; I'm saying this because women matai do not have a say in village decision making. (Village Women Representative)

There is a mentality among the men matai that we are not worthy to be leaders. For a lot of men, they are okay for women to be matai but not expected to speak and be upfront with issues discussed in the village council ... once all men speak then they think that that was it! They think that decisions are made when men have spoken. (Woman candidate, 2021 election)

Some participants, though, highlighted the supportive environment for women's leadership in their own villages. For some, this was a recent development, but for others there was a history of women's leadership being acknowledged and celebrated.

My village is positive about women's participation in the village council meetings. There is great support for women to be leaders in our village which is very good. (Woman matai & senior public servant)

Our village support women to run for parliament, and women matai are also allowed to sit in the village council meetings ... it hasn't been that long since we accepted women to become matai in the village ... it's less than 30 years. (Man, village mayor)

These stories are evidence that village-level norms of leadership can change through the influence of key leaders, and coalitions that push for gender transformative change, as noted in *the Village Leadership Development Initiative Report* (Onesemo-Tuilaepa, 2019: 9). In the accounts told by research participants, change had generally occurred either through the support of male advocates or through the efforts of women pathbreakers:

[My village] didn't allow women to become matai as the high chiefs back then were too traditional holding on to old ways; until a younger matai became the sa'o [high chief] and one of the seven key matais that make decisions, and he was the one that pushed for a change to allow women matai ... Fa'amatai system is ok but depends on those as village leaders making decisions. (Woman matai & senior public servant)

[In] one particular village is this woman who holds one of the main titles in the village. When the village council meets, they come to her maota [house] because this is where the fono [council] is held, but she couldn't sit in the village council because she is a woman. So she decided that she will change this, so one morning when the men had come for the meeting, she went in the fono and said 'Look this is not a right type of thing; this is my house and you

are coming to me here and you don't allow me to sit in the fono. I think you should change'. She said it to them right there and then, so they had a debate and they said 'Yes okay we'll accept you'. They accepted her and she said for about two or three months she was the only woman matai ... So, the next time she decided that 'Okay I'm going to bring my sisters in' so she said to the men 'Okay, I want to bring other women matais to sit with us here', and the men said yes ... However when she talked to the women matais ... there were about eleven of them and only five decided that they would like to come and sit in the fono. So, you see it is a woman's choice. (Woman matai & government board member)

The first woman matai of our village was [name] ... She was well educated and held high positions in government, and we put her in parliament. She was the role model for young women in our village and that confirms our village's belief that we should accept women matai. At the moment we have close to 100 women matai; some of them live overseas, but we have a good number of them here as well. (Male Village Representative, Upolu)

From the experiences of women *matai*, not all is smooth sailing when they are able to join the council. A key issue in broadening the space available for women's leadership at the village level is **language**. The issue of language has two separate components: offensive and sexual language and jokes used by male *matai* in council meetings; and the oratory language, salutations and tone of speech used formally by *matai* in such settings. The former is often used as a reason why women should not be involved in village decision-making. Women, especially those who are new *matai* and do not have experience in these settings, can struggle with the latter, and this can mean they decline title bestowals, or choose not to actively engage in these formal aspects of the role, continuing to rely on male relatives to represent the family at cultural ceremonies and meetings.

I think the men share dirty jokes so they discourage us women to attend as its not culturally appropriate to have us women there in case we get offended by their jokes. I only go if I really want to go but I mostly don't go, but I do contribute financially. (Woman matai & senior academic)

Even with women who hold important leadership positions, they feel insecure because they have not mastered the oratory language. So they feel low about themselves. (Participant, men's focus group, Savai'i)

Evidence of women matai who confidently deliver speeches during family or cultural ceremonies indicates that change is emerging in this area, particularly in urban villages (see Box 1).

Women *matai* can find themselves in a position where they have the same responsibilities as men *matai*, especially in terms of *monotaga*, but without the same rights as men *matai* to sit on the village council and engage in community decision-making.

Women are allowed to become matai, so we have women matai in our village. They don't sit and join in the village council though, but they do have to pay monotaga [money donation to support village affairs]. Some of our women matai don't join our women's committee — so their voice isn't being heard in both the village council and in the women's group. (Village Women Representative)

Money and other resources are important in demonstrating service as a leader. Given women's socio-economic status and limited control over resources, it can be harder for women matai to make financial and material contributions (*Monotaga*) in comparison to men.

For young women, there were very few opportunities to engage in village governance and decision-making. One FGD participant, one of the few young women participating in the research who held a leadership role in her village, described her frustration as she perceived her leadership was not respected by others:

I'm not a matai but I'm one of the leaders in our village PTA [parent teacher association] for the local school and it isn't easy! Another lady is the chairperson and I'm the vice-chairperson ... one barrier we find as women leaders, is that people don't really listen to us ... we find that people don't listen to us like they used to with men leaders and that is a bit frustrating ... maybe they think we're young and not deserving to be leaders, or maybe [it is because] we are not matai.

In FGDs, younger women express that they felt there were few areas in which their voices were heard and valued in decision-making. While there were examples of young women in leadership positions in the research, they viewed themselves as outliers and acknowledged the generally hostile context for young women's leadership.

'As a young woman leader myself, I'm a board member for [organization] in the Pacific region. I hold two board regional positions and I initiate and lead a lot of activities... I feel that I am a person that somebody can look up to and be a role model for them, because I had good women role models – my grandmother, my mother, and some of the senior women in government.'
(Woman civil society leader)

Box 1: Women Orators

Women Orators

One woman *matai* who is also a Village Women Representative of an urban village shared how she had overcome fear of speaking as an orator at village functions.

I think a lot of women are discouraged from engaging in village ceremonies because of that cultural belief that men are the only ones who can lead. But to me that's not true ... Because in the past few weeks, I stood with a 'to'oto'o' and a 'fue' outside and answer to one of the biggest villages of [my area] as a 'paolo tu' at one of the funerals. There were like 20 matai elders in their 60s and 70s, they looked at me and were probably asking, who's this young lady with a 'to'oto'o' and a 'fue' standing there answering to them. So, they were saying all these hard words and I just looked at them. God gave me the confidence and I think I just proved to those 20 matai that women can do the same thing as them. So, I'm blessed to have that confidence and it's been two Samoan culture presentations that I did that and surprised everyone. I think they love it when women orators speak...

Women orators speaking at big family and cultural ceremonies remains rare in Samoa. What this woman orator did indicates the combined strength of her qualifications, knowledge, skills, and confidence as a leader. She is a village chief's daughter, well-supported by her extended family, a qualified educator, and in her role as a Village Women Representative, she visits all families and engages them in village projects. She aims to run for parliament in the future. This two-way active engagement seems to have underpinned not only her access to leadership but growing influence and success in the village.

4.2. RELIGIOUS CONTEXT

Religious norms that place the man at the head of the family and the church were seen as a key barrier to women's leadership. In many churches the leadership structures resemble that of the village with distinct gender-based groupings and associated roles: senior male pastors who lead and make high-level decision making for the church; other male pastors; senior pastors' wives' groups; and other pastors' wives' group. Youth groups are also gender-based. Each group makes its own decisions applied to its activities, but it is the senior pastors' council that has the overarching authority on different groups determining church policies and major decisions. Perceptions of women as leaders are heavily influenced by traditional Christian ideas (see Pa'usisi 2019).

The church played a huge role, for example it introduced the concept that a woman's place is in the home, we never had that. That came with constraints and in time Samoans took it over as if it is a basic concept from their society. We are now feeling the impacts of those kinds of beliefs. This is why now, so many years later, we say opportunities are not the same for men and women in this country. That has impacted on many things like the lifestyles of people in the villages and what is expected of you to do. (Woman matai & retired senior public servant)

I find men in our church are very traditional that don't like women to preach but see women as cooks and childminders in homes — so that's the suppression at church. It's the way we grew up, the man is always seen as the head of the house. (Woman matai & senior public servant)

Traditions of male leadership mean it is difficult for women to exercise leadership in the church even as they play a significant role in religious life and assume leadership positions within their own groups:

I think women heavily influence the church - they organize everything; without the help of women there'll be no church (laughs). But that's a tricky question because most of the women would say the woman actions a lot of decisions made by the church leadership which are men. I think that is true women have the ability and knowledge to do more in the church as leaders but they are not being provided the opportunity to be leaders. (Woman business owner)

We now have a woman PM, and also we have women MPs, but when it comes to church, it's mainly the men that lead... (Participant, women's focus group, Upolu)

Much of the fiercest contention about women's access to leadership occurs in the village and church. Compared to other sectors persistent barriers to women's ascension to leadership are most prominent at these two levels. To some extent, barriers at the village level intertwine with and are reinforced by religious norms, particularly in villages where only one church is established, and new denominations are banned. In those villages, many aspects of village governance structure also transfer across to the church governance setup. Village high chiefs are simultaneously key leaders of the church besides the pastor.

Leadership in our village has its own structure; so for our village things are set where governance is overseen by the men. This structure also applies to the church ... for us, the village is the church, and the church is the village. We have only one church, there is no other church in this village. So the rule of the chiefs is across the village and the church as well. (Male Village Representative, Upolu)

In talking about this juxtaposition and reinforcement of authority structure across the two sectors, participants noted the extreme difficulty to change such a setup referring to it as *tapu* (taboo). Women *matai* from such villages are not recognized nor allowed to sit on the council.

Religious leaders and institutions are important in shaping norms of women's leadership. This has been demonstrated in past research on the evolution of gender norms in Samoa (see Latai 2015), and is still true today. While participants observed more could be done in this space, there were signs of progress. There are valued spaces for women's leadership in religious institutions, particularly in the role of *faletua*.

I don't think the church's been very strong in terms of the whole gender equality issue. I think the church as an establishment is preserving status quo and a lot of it is status quo of those in power which has mainly been men. (Woman, current MP)

I don't think it's going be easy for Samoa to accept the idea of women church ministers. I don't think we can change the church's view today or any time soon, but to me, I believe it will happen in the future. (Wife of church leader)

Some participants — both men and women — were uncomfortable with women's leadership in religious contexts, even as they were more open to women's leadership in other spaces.

I don't agree with women becoming church ministers ... women are important even as leaders, but I disagree with women to be church ministers. I think the head of the family is also the head in church and villages so men should be church ministers, not women. Women should be advisors that support their husbands; men should lead in churches... wives should put husbands first; a wife is a 'fale tua' — you're a house at the back, as the main support for your husband. I think we should uphold that part of our culture, where women respect their husbands, and not try to overtake them as leaders. (Church women's group leader)

I don't agree that our church should ordain women. I think if the church allows women to be ordained then there will be no one going to church. The honor — mamalu - of the church will be compromised. It is the man as the pastor that is always mamalu. (Participant, men's focus group, Savai'i).

A few church women group leaders see their church constitution and policies as barriers for them accessing organizational leadership roles.

The church's constitution does not allow women to become deacon elder because in the constitution only 'he' is there... we proposed to change it to 'he/she' at one of our church assembly meetings, in the hope to allow women to become deacon elders... but unfortunately it was rejected. Many church policies are also there and very clear on the role men should play and the role women should play. So, the church's constitution is another barrier for women to progress into leadership roles. (Church women's group leader)

There is, however, a shared belief that change would take time and the need for ongoing discussions on gender equality within the church itself is critical.

The more we talk about it and bring it up in our discussions in church circles and gatherings, the more our people understand the importance of gender equality in the church as well. (Church women's group leader & Wife of senior church leader)

Some research participants noted an inconsistency between official church regulations and practices on the issue of women's leadership:

In the church's constitution, any member of the church can be the chairperson, the post I am holding now. This means women can also become a chairperson for the whole of [name of church]. It's only Reverend elders that are being appointed as chairpersons these days, but according to the constitution, any member can be appointed. (Church women's groups leader & Wife of senior church leader)

This suggests there is greater scope for women's leadership than is currently being realized in at least some religious institutions.

4.3. SOCIAL CONTEXT

The traditions of respect for women in Samoan society are a point of pride, and **there is a widely held view that Samoa is more gender equal than other societies**. Samoa's gender-equal traditions and history of women's leadership was celebrated.

You need to know your history — as [a] women's group we would know that women in leadership is not new — it's the lenses and the attitude of our people that whatever comes from outside [Samoa] is better but to me ownership is really with us, the women (Woman matai & senior academic)

You are not just a woman here in Samoa. Whereas, if you live in Western society, you are just a woman. (Woman matai & government board member)

Along with the election of a woman prime minister, equal access to education was highlighted as a key enabler of gender equality and access to leadership (see also Schoeffel 2020).

It is good we now have Fiame as our woman PM; we've always had men leaders so having a woman PM confirms that women can lead as well, not just men. (Man, church leader)

Education is one good factor- I think we're fortunate here in Samoa women have equal access to education. (Woman business owner)

Yet it was clear that in terms of leadership, **there are norms that promote male leadership and delegitimize women's leadership**. The prevalence of these norms means that women have to work much harder to prove themselves as leaders. While the village was seen as generally the most difficult context for women to exercise leadership, these norms were pervasive across different spheres: women with senior roles in the public and private sectors gave examples of when they felt there was a cultural expectation to defer to men, particularly older *matai*, in the workplace.

People judge by what they see and their experience. Most people grew up in families and villages where men are treated as natural leaders ... so people are used to that. (Woman candidate, 2021 election)

We often see men as leaders and head of families, so they're often people's first leader preference — so often men may find it easier to establish themselves as leaders while women in a way tend to fight to establish themselves as leaders. (Woman senior public servant)

Women are expected to prioritize family responsibilities over leadership aspirations, whereas men do not necessarily have to make that choice. In men's focus groups especially, women's leadership was seen as challenging traditional hierarchies in families and marriages.

That motherly thing always defines women leaders too. So it's more challenging for them ... like a lot of people think that if a woman runs and wins for parliament ... they ask 'who is going to look after her children?' ... so already, that extra responsibility becomes an extra label for women before they enter parliament ... they never ask that question for men. (Village Women Representative)

Men may find it embarrassing when the wife as a village leader speaks and pushes on important issues while the husband is silent. (Participant, men's focus group, Upolu)

Men's attitudes to women's leadership were seen as a major factor holding progress back. Jealousy between women was also mentioned as an issue.

People in Samoa treat men and women leaders differently. Yes I think men take our women leaders differently, they don't see them as leaders but they see them as a threat. For example, some men see our current PM as a threat to them because having a female PM is very uncommon. Men think that only a man can be PM, they don't accept the changes that our society is experiencing now, that women can be leaders; it's to do with their ego; the male ego. (Woman business owner)

One big issue is that women dragging women down. If one woman sees another woman of another family becoming successful, then they try to drag her down. (Participant, women's focus group, Upolu)

Gender-based violence was widely recognized as a key constraint against women's leadership, with many participants highlighting it as a barrier. A 2019–20 demographic and health survey found 52.3 per cent of Samoan women between 15 and 49 years reported having experienced physical violence perpetrated by an intimate partner in their lifetime; 18.7 per cent reported that they had experienced it within the past year. One in five women aged between 15 and 49 years reported having experienced sexual violence in their lifetime (Samoa Bureau of Statistics 2020a). Reducing rates of gender-based violence was seen as a critical factor in increasing access to leadership for women.

Violence against women is one barrier for women ... too many husbands still live in the dark ages and they don't understand their wives especially if the wife is well educated, the husband gets jealous. This kind of attitude suppresses women and discourages them to pursue leadership roles. (Participant, men's focus group, Savai'i)

Women's abuse by their spouses is a major problem now in Samoa so it's a barrier for women

especially those who want to get into leadership positions anywhere. One's upbringing in the home is crucial in shaping their personality so they do not become violent men. (Man, church leader).

Nofotane are particularly vulnerable to gender-based violence, although such violence is not limited to any one group of women. In 2018, a women government CEO was murdered by her husband. This tragedy highlights the importance of centering violence prevention in women's leadership initiatives.

4.4. INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

The legal context in Samoa and its protections for women were seen as important in safeguarding women's rights and access to leadership. An example given by Prime Minister Fiamē Naomi Mata'afa was her experience in the court case over the Fiamē title:

I was able to get the title Fiamē in 1977 ... it was quite unusual to receive a title through the court process at 20 years old. You know I was female, and unmarried. These seem to be factors that would be challenging for the court. ... I could tell that the Samoan judges through their body language and how they questioned me that they weren't very sort of happy with my nomination ... when we got copies of the discussions by the bench that was the case, the Samoan judges have said you know she's young she's a girl, unmarried therefore unstable ... the palagi judge then intervened and said those were not the criteria; in fact the criteria were quite different, you know your lineage, your level of support, your knowledge of not only the family but the village and so forth ... so the European judge then said that the grounds on which the Samoan judges based their decision not to appoint me for the Fiamē title, were in fact discriminatory and against the Samoan constitution ... Thank goodness for the constitution, so once he said that it set the way ... and I think fairer criteria were applied. In all those [discussions] what the Samoan judges did was they took that constitutional lens away ... but focused on my gender, that I was a youth ... my marital status and so forth. So yeah that experience for me was probably a fundamental experience of how the law protects your rights as a woman and a young woman.

As Fiamē notes, the Samoan constitutional and broader legal framework establishes important protections against gender-based (and, in her case, age-based) discrimination (see also Spark and Corbett 2020). This was viewed as a vital enabling factor for women's leadership. As with the example of church constitutions above, this is another instance in which the regulatory framework is not discriminatory on its face, but rather it is the perspectives of those interpreting the framework that has the biggest influence on opportunities for women.

Similarly, **the '10% law' was broadly viewed positively** in that its guaranteeing of women's representation in parliament, and increasing of women's opportunities to enter politics, was seen as a good development.

This law has been causing a lot of talk lately. But I think the 10 per cent is a good thing to encourage and allow more women in parliament. I fully support this law. (Village Women Representative)

This law is appropriate. Especially now we see a lot of women in leadership positions in government. (Participant, men's focus group, Upolu)

There was some support for lifting the quota threshold. Participants in both interviews and focus groups questioned why only 10 per cent women's representation was mandated.

My own question is why 10 per cent? Shouldn't we go for 50-50 for both genders. I think 10 per cent is not representative of women's population in Samoa. There should be a higher number. (Woman *matai* & senior public servant)

If we want gender equality, then it should be 50-50 so we can have the same number of men and women. At the moment the 10 per cent is a joke. Why do we set a quota for women and

not for the men? At the *matai* level, men and women are regarded as equal. In parliament, the proportion of women all of a sudden drops to 10 per cent. I don't see fairness in that. (Participant, men's focus group, Upolu)

Those that were less supportive of the law mainly highlighted what they saw as its vague wording and potential to sow discord and confusion, given the outcome of the 2021 election.

Everywhere in the Pacific were applauding Samoa for putting in place this exemplary measure because it was a positive and affirmative action for women ... I think it is an effective law to make sure more women are in parliament. But it is only effective if it is understood well, firstly through the court's interpretation, and secondly, accepted by everyone. But we can see at the moment, the 10% quota is more confusing and less effective. It has caused so much confusion and everybody has come up with their own interpretation. (Woman *matai* & retired senior public servant)

It's a good law based on the need for justice for women ... but I think it's done in a bad motive; there's bad political motive behind [it]. (Woman candidate, 2021 election)

Another issue noted was the perceived lack of respect accorded to the woman MP who took up an additional seat in the 2016–2021 term.

The first woman parliamentarian brought in for the 10 per cent quota in 2016 election, people did not have much respect for her. They teased and commented that she came through the 'window' and she was there just to make up the numbers. That was terrible. (Woman *matai* & government board member)

It is sometimes demeaning and offending women who enter through the 10 per cent quota ... like you are there to make up the numbers. (Woman, former MP)

There were mixed views on the role of political parties in enabling women's leadership. Some viewed parties as playing an important part in promoting women's leadership through encouraging women to enter politics. In the political crisis of 2021, both major parties, though advocating different approaches, sought to position themselves as supporters of women's leadership and political participation. There were concerns, however, that parties had a destabilizing influence and the rise of 'party politics' might have disadvantaged some women leaders and caused division. Given the time period in which the research was taking place, while the political situation was not fully settled (data collection commenced while court processes were ongoing), it is perhaps difficult to draw conclusions on the role of political parties.

The negative impacts of political parties sometimes ruin campaigns for the general election. Women are sometimes suppressed when they join the wrong party. This really disqualifies the saying, 'Actions speak louder than words' because when people vote for the party of their interest, it advantages people who haven't done any work to benefit communities. (Woman, former MP)

What we see is that with the current situation in our political parties... it has even caused disagreement and unrest among families too. Samoa was not like this, but it has caused division in families (Participant, young women's focus group, Upolu)

Interestingly, there did seem to be some support — although not universal support — for law reform or legal intervention to ensure **greater space for women's decision-making at the village level**. Some participants suggested the '10 per cent law' should be expanded to village councils. Others advocated government intervention in villages where women were not eligible for *matai* titles or were banned from sitting in the village council.

This 10 per cent should also be the case with village councils — 10 per cent minimum of women's representation of women *matai* in councils. (Participant, young women's focus group, Upolu)

I'd also like the government to create a law to encourage and make it compulsory for women *matai* to join in village meetings and be part of decision makings. This will open a door for our women to become effective *matai* leaders. We need the government to do this, as it is the only authority above the village council. (Village Women Representative)

Violence against women leaders in the public service was raised as an important concern. While coercion and harassment are managed through the Public Service Commission's (PSC) Code of Conduct (Office of the Samoa Public Service Commission, 2020, 71), there is currently no specific policy related to female (and male) public servants as victims of GBV and impact on work performance (see Box 2). The absence of relevant policy makes it hard to identify and address the issue in this sphere of government.

Box 2: Gender-based violence: The legislative and policy framework

Gender-based violence: the legislative and policy framework

Gender-based violence (GBV) is covered under the Crimes Act 2013 and the Family Safety Act 2013. The former defines GBV as a crime, and the latter specifies the types of protection that victims of GBV are entitled to. In the public sector, the Public Service Amendment Act 2007 is a key legislation governing public servants' behavior understood to be work performance related. Behavior in 'other' spheres of the employees' lives is considered a breach of the PSC Code of Conduct 'if an employee is charged with having committed an offence' (Public Service Commission Act, 2007, 24). As such, the area of GBV involving public servants is implicit in the Act as a breach of the Code of Conduct but only when an employee is charged. The National Policy on Family Safety 2021–2031 places emphasis on the elimination of violence in the family sphere recognizing the associated social, health and economic costs (Ministry of Women, Community and Social Development, 2021c, 5).

4.5. CREATING AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT

Creating an enabling environment for women's leadership means reducing the constraints on opportunities for women to participate in decision-making across all levels of society. It requires acknowledgement of, and work to counter, the structural barriers that women face in pursuing leadership positions. Key amongst them are social norms and perceptions of leadership that prioritize and place higher value on male leadership.

Rather than an individual deficit approach, creating an enabling environment means tackling structural constraints to women's leadership. Many women in Samoa already have the capacity for leadership, but key structural constraints limit their opportunities, including barriers to gaining *matai* titles or to participating in village decision-making. Addressing these barriers is difficult but important work in creating more space for women's leadership. From this research, we have identified a number of potential pathways forward.

Village councils, and in particular senior figures within village councils, are key gatekeepers at the local level. While participants could identify some of the reasons for the acceptance or rejection of women *matai* in particular villages, they noted that full explanations lay with village councils. As village councils have the final say in all matters affecting villages, working with them would be a relevant and effective approach to discussing women's access to village leadership.

Participants highlighted the value of **male advocates, as well as influential women supporters of gender equality**, who can advocate change. A woman who held a *matai* title from a village that previously had not allowed women *matai* recounted the story of how that custom came to change:

[My village] didn't allow women to become *matai* as the high chiefs back then, were too traditional holding on to old ways, until a younger *matai* became the high chief (sa'o) and one of the seven key *matais* that make decisions, and he was the one that pushed for a change to allow women *matai*. (Woman *matai* and senior public servant)

While there was also support for direct government intervention in ensuring women were able to participate in village decision-making, dismantling these structural barriers will likely require engaging with senior community leaders, and future community leaders, on the value of women's leadership. Change will require a long-term and consultative approach, targeting senior *matai* and working with them to overcome doubts and resistance. Other influential actors, such as supportive members of parliament who understand the context and can read the mood of village councils, could be agents of change and lead this engagement at the village level.

Another aspect to creating change at the village level is **sharing stories of success**, like the one above where the younger high chief acted as a male advocate. Participants noted various instances where positive change has been made, including the lifting of restrictions on women sitting on the village council. While each village is different and will require a bespoke approach, nevertheless such villages can be used as potential models and examples of what strategies work in changing local norms and practices.

This research found that religious institutions are some of the most resistant to women's leadership. This speaks to the importance of **engaging with church leaders** on the issue of women's access to leadership. With churches playing such a significant role in Samoan life, opportunities to enhance leadership entry points for women within the church is critical in fostering a facilitating environment for women's leadership.

The prolonged 2021 political crisis presented a challenging context in which to conduct this research, and the mixed views from participants on the role of political parties in enabling women's leadership seems to reflect this, might present a window of opportunity in the way it has foregrounded women's contributions to leadership in the political sphere. There are potential avenues to extend this **in working with political parties across the electoral cycle to promote women's leadership**, although political sensitivities would need to be handled carefully. In terms of institutional change, the *National Policy on Gender Equality and Rights of Women and Girls 2021–2031* recommends the adoption of temporary special measures at different levels to promote gender equality in leadership and decision-making (Ministry of Women, Community and Social Development 2021a), and participants in this research were in general broadly supportive of expanding such measures beyond parliament.



Savaii College student participating in the Mock Election at National Voters Day Event, 2019.

Photo: UN Women/ Jordanna Mareko

5. ACCESS, LEGITIMACY & EFFECTIVENESS

Summary of key findings — Access, legitimacy and effectiveness

Three key points of access to leadership that were identified are having a *matai* title, good networks with other women and the community as a whole, and educational qualifications

- Gaining legitimacy as a leader is defined through three pathways or strategies: *tautua* or service to family and village, success in business and employment, and (to a more limited extent) success in politics
- Key strategies for exercising effective leadership are working within cultural, social and religious norms, practicing inclusive leadership, and working collectively with men.
- While certain leadership pathways are critical in one or two contexts, their value is more limited in other contexts.

Access, legitimacy, and effectiveness encompass the factors — ranging from system processes to individual strategies — that enable and enhance women’s potential to successfully overcome barriers to leadership and to exercise leadership effectively. In examining points of access to leadership, it should first be acknowledged that women (and men) practice leadership in diverse and varied ways across different contexts. Leadership, as discussed above, is conceptualized in many ways and so this makes it difficult to distinguish a clear set of pathways or ‘access points’. In many cases, all Samoans, both men and women, have potential access to leadership. In the *fa’amatai* system, for example, there are few formal barriers to leadership if a *matai* has the support of family. The disparity in the numbers of male *matai* compared to female *matai*, however, highlights that while access may be gender equal in theory, in practice men’s leadership is often prioritized. Access to leadership positions is shaped by social, cultural and religious norms, many of which devalue and delegitimize women’s contributions to leadership, as discussed above.

Many Samoan women are already practicing leadership. In terms of being recognized as a leader by a particular community — be it at the village, church, workplace, civil society or national level — the research uncovered particular points of access for women. **Three key points of access to leadership were identified: having a *matai* title, access to networks, and educational qualifications.** While having a *matai* title was the main criterion for participation in village council and contesting national elections, some villages have *tapu* (taboo) that disallow women *matai* from sitting on village council. At the government and business levels, there were mixed views on whether having a *matai* title was important in accessing leadership roles. Participants either agreed that being a *matai* helps to enhance work status or were of the view that it does not matter. Networks were highlighted as critical at all levels of decision-making, reflecting the relational nature of leadership in Samoa.

Three key pathways or strategies were identified as important for gaining legitimacy as a leader: *tautua* or service to family and village, success in business and employment, and (to a more limited extent) success in politics. This highlights how leadership spaces in Samoa are complex and interrelated: success in one sphere often translates to other aspects of life. This is not always the case, however; women from villages that do not allow women *matai* and young women entrepreneurs noted they found it difficult to ‘transfer’ their leadership skillset from one area of their lives to another.

In terms of women effectively exercising leadership three key strategies were highlighted by participants: working within cultural, religious, and social norms, practicing inclusive leadership, and working collectively with men. It is important to note that these are not the only potentially effective strategies women leaders can employ, but they represent strategies that our respondents noted worked in their circumstances.

While certain leadership pathways are critical in one or two contexts, their value is more limited in other contexts. A good example is having a *matai* title. While women *matai* were found across all leadership spheres covered by the research, the particular value of a title was context (and individual) specific. The importance of a *matai* title in determining access to leadership is paramount in the village and political settings; in government, business and civil society, however, it was much less significant. To examine how these dynamics play out in diverse contexts, this section reviews pathways to leadership across different contexts: village; parliament; government; the business sector; women-led organizations; and the church.

5.1. PATHWAYS TO LEADERSHIP IN VILLAGE CONTEXTS

Having a *matai* title is an important signifier of leadership especially at the village level. It is the sole pathway to participate in village council meetings. Responses from men and women participants overwhelmingly point to the significance of holding a *matai* title and demonstrating active involvement in village activities as key to accessing leadership.

While being a *matai* is crucially important for participation at the highest levels of village decision-making, it is not an easy pathway for many women. At the village level, women *matai* continue to face persistent marginalization. The kinds of barriers faced by women *matai* are exemplified by the accounts below of two former national election candidates. In handling harsh words and treatment from men *matai*, women emphasized that having the courage to push back and knowing the entitlement or power that comes with one's *matai* title are crucial.

In my village I sit in the village council meeting, but you sometimes face challenges; you know there are things the men *matai* say or do that discriminate against me as a woman *matai*. But I don't back down ... I challenge them head-on. That's when we have a scrum as in rugby. I engage with them no matter what. That's why sometimes I'm not popular in my village because I argue with the male *matai*. But I feel that if I don't resist and argue back they will walk all over you. You've got to stand up and you've got to correct them ... that's how things are with our village fono ... the men *matai* are used to me arguing back if I feel something is not right. (Woman, 2021 election candidate)

When I first sat in the village fono, I was told where to sit. And I remember one time in my third seating, I got to the meeting late, and my post was already taken by another *matai*; the meeting was full. So I went straight to the front of the fale and sat at one of the front posts. We had the ava ceremony, and after the ava, the council started to discuss me, saying that I was sitting at the wrong post and that I shouldn't be sitting at the front and all that. They really had a go scolding me. And that's when I challenged them. I said: 'What's causing you to say all this to me? Do you expect me to go and sit on top of that *matai* who is already sitting at my post? He shouldn't be sitting at my post. You should be telling him to get away from my post. In fact, I know my fa'asinomaga [identity] and know that I can sit anywhere I want in this fale. I am a [name of title], and [another title] and [another title]. I am also [another title], the Sa'o Tamaitai [lead daughter] of the village so I can sit anywhere I want.' I challenged them not to look down on me and other women *matai*. You know, I hold three chiefly titles of my village here, so I know where to sit in the arrangements of the village council meeting. But I sometimes feel that I am being unfairly treated by these men *matai*. (Woman, 2021 election candidate)

Within the *fa'amatai* system, decision-making tends to be dominated by men, and some women respondents believed that the system allowed men *matai* to safeguard the territory of village governance for themselves as the sole leaders. Underpinning this was the idea that "men do not want their egos and authority to be challenged by women leaders" (woman, 2021 election candidate). Women *matai* who sit in the village councils (and some men) emphasized the importance of women's participation at the highest levels of village decision-making. A key benefit was the incorporation of different leadership styles into village governance. Yet for this to happen, two key elements were identified: that women *matai* are encouraged and supported by their extended families, especially other male *matai* of their families to sit in village meetings, and that women *matai* have the courage and confidence to participate and speak in village meetings.

While a *matai* title is a key access point in village decision-making spaces, different *matai* statuses have different rights and responsibilities, and this is a part of the complex nuances of village leadership that women need to navigate. Except for daughters of high chiefs, women often do not hold the highest-ranked titles, and this affects how their leadership is perceived particularly in the village council setting. Many women *matai* also do not live in the village, rather residing in town or overseas, and so their ability to contribute to community decision-making is limited (see also Meleisea et al. 2015).

In our village there are many women who are *matai*. But I believe if a woman holds an important *matai* title, then they would be able to sit in the council, and even reach leadership position in government. But women *matai* are given less important titles, those we call *vai-matai* titles ... That's why it's hard for women to join the village council. (Participant, men's focus group, Upolu)

Women in our village can be holders of *matai* titles. But currently all women *matai* now live overseas. There are none here today. This is because families chose those overseas including women heirs to hold their family titles. Then they come, have their titles bestowed, then go back overseas. So what is happening is that there are many women *matai* overseas, but they don't serve or *tautua* their titles in the village. (Participant, men's focus group, Savai'i)

While this is generally true, there are women that do take on senior titles and roles in village decision-making. As Fiame's story above and the quote below demonstrate, women *matai* are often faced with some resistance as 'pathbreakers'. This is an obviously gendered dynamic given men do not face the same challenges attaining such roles, but women 'pathbreakers' can be very successful in achieving and practicing leadership.

But yes, in the villages, I would say, when they see me take on the role as orator, they stare at me like I'm from somewhere else, from another planet because it's the first time for them seeing a woman orator ... but for me, I was happy to let them know that if men can do it, women can also do it. (Village Women Representative)

Many women choose not to hold *matai* titles, often supporting male members of their families to do so instead. This was also observed in other recent research on women and *matai* title-holders (Meleisea et al. 2015; Ministry of Women, Community and Social Development 2015). For such women who participated in this research project, the main reasons given were:

- A lack of knowledge of the *fa'amatai* system and lack of confidence to participate
- An unwillingness to take on the significant financial and cultural obligations it requires in addition to their other commitments
- A belief that men should play this leadership role within their family.

Many non-*matai* women who participated in the research were married to *matai*, and in some cases their sons were also *matai*. For some, being the wife of a *matai* offered a way to contribute in lieu of their own title, although the financial burden of adding another *matai* title was also a consideration.

My brother who is looking after the family has always been pushing me to hold a *matai* title. I said to him, "My husband has 2 *matai* titles and my eldest son also is a *matai*, and I am serving and contributing to these titles. I am happy with that." (Woman senior public servant)

Participants who had decided not to accept *matai* titles did not feel their leadership capacity in other spheres was diminished by their decision, but it did limit their ability to contribute to village decision-making through the village council (where women were entitled to sit on the council). Not holding a *matai* title was not always by choice. It is important to note that family processes to confer *matai* titles are inherently political and involve complicated power dynamics. One participant, whose parents were deceased, reflected that not having close family members to advocate on your behalf restricted the opportunities to attain a title, particularly for women.

Even beyond *matai* circles, women leaders drew on their community and social networks to become leaders. Networks were important for women to access leadership at all levels. Village women's committees were highlighted as good examples of how strong networks and collaborative leadership

produced good outcomes. Active participation in village women's groups, and other village-based groups including school committees and church women's groups, was a key pathway to leadership for non-*matai*.

In villages, there's committees and groups for women [*tina ma tamaitai*] where women can become leaders over women, and they build their social network from there. (Woman *matai* & senior academic)

Part of effective leadership, for many women participants, was collective leadership. This is acknowledgement that in Samoa power is relational and leadership is often dependent on networks. Again, women's village committees were seen as exemplifying this style of leadership.

I think women in the village and their network styles are very nice to be part of. Women in the villages are quite different in their own style to women in urban and formal employment. So women are quite effective in their work. Unless you know each other you can't effectively do projects for the betterment of the village. (Woman *matai* & senior public servant)

In the villages, powerful norms such as *va tapuia* might limit how closely men and women can work together to practice leadership. As noted previously, village-level practices are changing in many places so that women have more opportunities to engage with men in village leadership and decision-making. Part of demonstrating leadership for women was the support of men. This was also true for men leaders, who needed to have support from women. Working collectively was seen as a way of effectively combining masculine and feminine leadership styles. This collective leadership was highly valued.

The women *matai* tend to provide a more balanced view on village council decisions, especially on things like heavy punishments. The women *matai* look at the broader impact on not just the individual being punished but on the family members who will be affected ... in our village here we value women and women *matai*. I'm happy that there are women *matai* in the decision-making body of our village. There is a big contribution of women *matai* in the decision-making process for our village ... their voice is there and they also advise the men *matai* on how to improve things for the good of the village. (Man, village mayor)

Adopting leadership styles from overseas was seen as inappropriate. Instead, leadership was seen as being informed by Samoan cultural, religious and social norms — even if some of these norms (particularly those influenced by Christianity) also have foreign roots. Importantly, it was contextually-based — women leaders were aware that different styles of participation were important in different areas of their lives.

I practice leadership differently in different contexts, I do not use the same models. I am a different leader in my family from when I am in the *mafutaga tina* [mother's groups] in my husband's village. I'm a different leader there from when I'm looking after an institution. (Woman *matai* & government board member)

In [village one], the village does not hold a council meeting without my presence as I am the high chief. I play a different role when joining the village council at [village two] because of my oratory title. In presentation and delivery, I know the different roles I play according to my status, and I also know the words to say and the proper tone of my voice to use from time to time. I participate actively in the villages of [village three & four]. I know that the respect from male chiefs and titles has been overwhelming because I work hard to develop these villages. (Woman *matai* & senior public servant)

Women can exercise leadership effectively by working strategically and creatively within existing cultural, social and religious norms. Key aspects of this are dressing appropriately and using respectful language; making efforts to learn *fa'asamoa* and use that knowledge in exercising leadership; and learning to speak formal Samoan fluently (see Tuuau & Howard 2019). This is important as this knowledge of *fa'asamoa* was highlighted by some women participants as a barrier to leadership for them personally, many of whom were Apia-based and some who had moved back to Samoa after living overseas. Opportunities to learn *fa'asamoa* could facilitate leadership pathways for them.

There are women who are very talented in the *fa'asamoa* ... but some of us who went and got an education overseas lost that opportunity to learn the *fa'asamoa* and all that ... So, I admire

women like Fiame who came back and went back to her village because when I look at her that is a PhD in politics and fa'asamoa. The knowledge and experience she has is something that you do not learn in university. For me and many other women ... we missed that opportunity to learn fa'asamoa ... but the people that stayed back and learnt it from those formative years in their late 20s and 30s those are the ones that harnessed that knowledge. (Woman *matai* & business owner)

When you know who you are, grounded in your own values and understand protocols of your environment, there is nothing to stop you from accessing leadership posts of any kind. (Woman *matai* & senior public servant)

Other key pathways for women's leadership at the village level were educational qualifications or a reputation for being wise, and contributing to the local community in other ways, for example having a successful business.

5.2. PATHWAYS TO LEADERSHIP IN PARLIAMENT

Women politicians were highlighted frequently as examples of successful leaders. The recent appointment of Fiame as Prime Minister was considered to be very important in a symbolic sense, in that it would encourage women's leadership more broadly.

It is easier now with the new government with many opportunities for women, enhancing women to be leaders whereas the olden days it wasn't common for women to be leaders within the village setting. (Participant, young men's focus group, Savai'i)

Women's leadership was seen as important at all levels, including in the political sphere, because of the different perspectives and leadership styles women brought to the table.

Feutagaiga [consultation] is one strategy that many women use — one difference between women and men is that women take a broader view of issues whereas men seem to be focused one-way without considering all sides of a problem. (Woman, current MP)

Many participants noted, however, that women were still under-represented in politics, and this sphere was seen as an important focus for efforts towards increasing women's leadership (see Fiti-Sinclair, Schoeffel & Meleisea 2017; Meleisea et al. 2015).

I think women's leadership is most important at the national level ... you know, in parliament ... that's the highest arena where decisions for the country are made. So, it's important for more women to be there, but at the moment Samoa doesn't have that. Our parliament is dominated by men ... so we have a lot of work to do. (Woman *matai* & senior public servant)

As pointed out by a senior woman *matai*, even with a *matai* title, women face serious constraints in contributing to decision-making at the village and national level:

I think the only area in which the fa'amatai at the moment is impacting negatively is this area when we [women] try to get into Parliament, because the way to get there and the process to get there, over so many years has become a negative process. Women are not accepted to sit in village meetings. And people think that to get into Parliament you need lots of money to buy votes and to do all of this, all that is negative for women, they say. So they say women cannot do that; women don't have the money to run a campaign; women can't pursue a dream to enter parliament. Women can't do this and that... And so that is where the constraints lie. (Woman, *matai* & senior public servant)

Access to the village council is important to demonstrate *monotaga* and thus prove eligibility to run for parliament. Women MPs and candidates for national office were the most active in their village councils of all women leaders interviewed for this project. Competitive candidates also benefited from supportive village leadership, as gaining endorsement from the village council is a significant step in campaigning. Women who entered parliament tended to have high-ranking titles; have influential family connections and the backing of their wider family networks; access to resources to demonstrate *tautua*; and/or have a track record of success outside politics, for instance as a successful entrepreneur.

5.3. PATHWAYS TO LEADERSHIP IN THE GOVERNMENT SECTOR

The government sector was seen as leading in the facilitation of women's leadership. Women's ascension to leadership positions in the government sector in recent decades has become a key symbol of success for gender equality initiatives. By 2020, the proportion of women in public sector leadership roles was 57 per cent, including 30 per cent of Chief Executive Officers. Of all Chairs of Government Boards, 10 per cent were women (Government of Samoa SDG Taskforce 2020). In 2021, women directors in government boards increased from 29% in the previous year to 33%. Of the 76 women who applied for government board membership in that period, 46 were successful. Currently, two of the six women chairs of government boards participated in WILS leadership training. The emphasis on women's participation in the public service, backed up by gender inclusive policies, have been important in creating space for women's leadership and are potential models for other areas.

Many heads of ministries are women. In the government, it is women who are now leading and occupying these positions. (Participant, men's focus group, Savai'i)

...you only need to look at the government...there are so many women leaders in the ministries...not only that but the ministries that were used to lead by men, like the LTA [Land and Transport Authority], Post Office and the Housing Authority...all of those are now led by women. So, it's a great...the government is setting a good example there (Village women Representative)

In government, being a *matai* in and of itself is not a direct pathway to leadership appointments. It is however a benefit in that it demonstrates family support and recognition of one's leadership or achievements. There was a strong consensus that as women heads of government ministries and in other senior public servant positions, having a *matai* title reinforces work status and seniority, providing more recognition and respect from staff, other officials and community members. It commands the respect of colleagues in the workplace and reflects the respect and trust one's family (owner of the title) has for the title holder. Senior women in government spoke of how being a *matai* was a positive thing. Conversely, not having a *matai* title was seen to limit career prospects at the most senior levels.

Being a *matai* is an advantage in the sense that you will be able to earn work colleague's respect ... and voice a concern within a village council, in cultural activities and also in church. Being a *matai* brings a sense of confidence and status that make you as a senior government official a respected and effective leader. (Woman *matai* & senior public servant)

It's a positive thing ... because people get to acknowledge you especially with my status as a CEO. Having a *matai* title ... people respect you more and take you more seriously than a CEO without a *matai* title. (Woman *matai* & senior public servant)

Being a *matai* will add great value to being a leader in government, like in my position [as CEO], but [it is] not a critical requirement ... it does add value because of our culture and context expectations when you deal with villagers. (Woman senior public servant)

On the other hand, having a *matai* title is not a necessary precondition to accessing leadership roles in government and other industries. Some women leaders interviewed felt they did not need a *matai* title to do their jobs effectively and to gain respect in their positions, considering leadership in the workplace as separate to leadership in the family and village contexts. Having a track record of excellence in their roles, and demonstrating capability for leadership throughout their careers, was seen as more important than a *matai* title for gaining senior positions in the public service.

I'm not a *matai*, and being a *matai* is not a requirement for me to be one in this role as a CEO ... so there are no barriers there for me. The nature of my job sometimes requires me to deal with *matai* people, so often I use my family's *igoa ipu* [extended families' special names used during *ava* ceremonies] ... as I don't have a title and I don't want to become a *matai*. (Woman senior public servant)

Most women heading government ministries today have *matai* titles. By comparison, the smaller number of women who held similar appointments in the 1980s and 1990s tended to not have *matai* titles and were known throughout their career by their first names. As expected, other pathways such as educational qualification and family support are seen as more critical pathways for women in government than obtaining a *matai* title, and some women senior public servants did not accept a title until after their government leadership appointment.

Having good networks was an important point of access to leadership in the government sector. A supportive network of colleagues and supervisors was crucial for advancement in the workplace. Established networks for women leaders at senior levels, some of which were supported by development partners, were highlighted in interviews as important tools for access and effectiveness (see Barbara & Haley 2014). Interviews highlighted, however, that men find it easier to access leadership networks and this is a key barrier for women's leadership.

Samoan women are fortunate compared to other countries in the Pacific ... but we still struggle because men leaders make it easier for other men to become leaders. That happens for women too, but we don't do it because we are women ... we encourage and support other women to go on and become leaders because they are our relative, friend, or relative of a friend or you come from the same village, you know ... all those other layers that add to our connections. Those connections can provide pathways to leadership no matter if you are a man or a woman. (Woman *matai* & senior public servant)

Respondents noted, however, the rising proportion of women in senior levels of the government sector and on government boards as a positive sign that access to networks was improving for women. Many respondents reported they had benefited from leadership training, with one advantage being this training often provided access to new networks of women in the public service.

An inclusive leadership style was a key pathway to effective leadership. Part of inclusive leadership was being consultative — bringing in different stakeholders, views, and experiences into decision-making. While this strategy was reported by both men and women participants, it was seen as a style more associated with women's leadership.

I do not know all the other women, but my own experience I have always appreciated women for their wealth of knowledge, for their intelligence, for the calmness that they bring to any situation. And so therefore the strategies that were implemented had to do with consultations just to ensure that what you were doing were along the correct path. (Woman *matai* & government board member)

In terms of working within social norms, for women leaders this meant understanding what is expected of women in leadership. It meant taking advantage of positive perceptions of women's leadership, particularly in that women are kind, caring and nurturing as leaders, to progress their own leadership ambitions.

Another factor is women's natural empathy is something that men leaders don't have. Women leaders tend to spice their leadership style with empathy, a bit humor as well; and I think the talkative nature of women also helps in bringing confidence as they lead. (Woman government board member)

Women leaders in government were still very involved in other spheres including village life, some mostly through *monotaga*, and some including active participation in village affairs. They also tend to be leaders in church, on boards, and non-government organizations.

I am residing at [village], serving as a deacon in a church, and still doing my *monotaga* (monetary contribution) for my villages. I also attend *faletua ma tausi* (women's) meetings. I continue to engage in my village affairs. (Woman *matai* & senior public servant)

5.4. PATHWAYS TO LEADERSHIP IN BUSINESS

Women are seen as good business leaders, both in village settings and nationally, and this was a recognized and valued form of leadership. Women entrepreneurs were often highlighted as examples of good women leaders in FGDs and interviews. Success in entrepreneurship can also lead to other leadership opportunities: access to *matai* titles and the related access to village decision-making, and also political success. For example, Mulipola Anarosa Ale Molio'o, the first woman Minister of Finance in Samoa, entered politics after a long and successful career in business.

I think women developing small businesses, individually or in groups in villages can reflect good leadership by women. (Participant, men's focus group, Upolu)

In the private sector, women business owners who have *matai* titles tended to be those with established businesses with many years of experience. For them, *matai* titles were generally bestowed following their business success. They were more receptive to holding a *matai* title as offered by their families than younger non-*matai* women with new businesses. For women business owners, accepting the *matai* title expressed their sense of responsibility toward their extended families and the need to be involved in and lead family affairs.

In my own family, I initially didn't want to take up the *matai* title because I had enough on my hands, my business is running well and really, no need to be a *matai* ... But there were many people in my family wanting me to become the chief ... I was a leader before I became a *matai*, you know, I run my own business. But I'm glad I have the title to try and get my extended family back together ... Our family was being broken and we lost some lands as a result ... so as a sa'o [highest family chief] I wanted to bring my family back together and sow love and not being selfish and greedy. (Woman *matai* & business owner)

Being a *matai* makes you even more credible especially in business circles; it gives you a strong sense of identity. You feel that your family, through the title, is with you and supporting you and you know your responsibilities extend beyond the business ... to your extended family as well. It also gives you that capacity to network and [be] connected to the right people ... you know where you come from, you have influence. (Woman *matai* & business owner)

Among the young women business owners, who were non-*matai*, questions emerged about the relevance of having a *matai* title and the *fa'amatai* system was critiqued as a patriarchal system that favored men over women.

I don't understand the *fa'amatai* system and it's old fashioned. Well a *matai* title can be given to anyone these days; it's just that you need approval from a *matai* with a higher status than you, but I don't understand it fully. Sometimes it doesn't make sense to me ... There are parts of *fa'amatai* that are known to disadvantage woman; for example, women can't join or talk during a *matai* session to share their ideas about the community ... But in the presence of men *matai* the women really don't have a chance to announce what they have in mind, for example on things related to village development or something like that. (Young woman business owner)

We know that some villages do not allow women to hold *matai* titles, and I think as long as that exists, we'll always have an issue with women accessing leadership roles in villages and in politics ... Even when women are given *matai* titles, they may not have the same opportunities as men to voice their opinions in village affairs. (Young woman business owner)

Young women entrepreneurs, while successful in their business endeavors, do not necessarily have the same opportunities to exercise leadership in other facets of their lives. Social norms of leadership that prioritize men, particularly in the village setting, were noted, but caregiving responsibilities were also highlighted as a constraining factor.

One element of women's leadership involved working together with men, including actively creating spaces where women and men can work together. This was seen as somewhat easier in non-traditional spaces such as business, as well as the public sector and politics. At the highest levels of the public and private sectors, working collectively with men meant socializing with them as work colleagues to network and get to know them. Working collectively as an effective strategy relies on strong networks, speaking to the relational nature of leadership. The male-dominated nature of many spaces means that women may have more difficulty creating and maintaining these networks than

their male colleagues. For some women leaders, creating such valuable networks meant ‘behaving like men’.

When I was one of the branch managers of [bank], there were monthly functions of commercial banks where people at the managerial level got together to socialize. I was the only female amongst the males who called themselves ‘the boys’ club’. It was good to be involved in such gatherings as I behaved like them; for example, I drank with them, joked with them and danced with them on some occasions. At the time, I did not see any barriers. (Woman *matai* & former private sector leader)

Educational opportunities were important in establishing success as a leader in the private sector, as was access to resources — both financial, and in terms of networks. Both younger and older entrepreneurs acknowledged the importance of family support in their success, with younger women also benefiting greatly from mentorship and leadership training opportunities.

5.5. PATHWAYS TO LEADERSHIP IN WOMEN-LED ORGANIZATIONS

There were two key leadership trends observed in women-led organizations. On the one hand, women *matai* holding presidency or executive roles are an emerging reality. On the other, young non-*matai* women leaders were typically found within newly established social organizations. With the latter group, having a *matai* title is not an important consideration or personal preference as it is not viewed as crucial to their leadership aspirations. Young women who were leaders of social and professional organizations shared a strong view that one can be a leader without a *matai* title, particularly in newer and less hierarchical organizations. Other participants also observed there were young people without *matai* titles who were acting in leadership roles.

I am a leader without a *matai* title and when we started our organization there were no *matai* at all ... so being a *matai* is not a major thing for our organization. I think it is more suited to others in government for example. (Woman civil society leader)

Civil society was seen as an enabling context for women’s leadership (see also Motusaga 2016). Civil society was the space in which young women’s leadership, and the leadership of women with disability, was most prominent (see Box 3). For young women, a key benefit of the civil society space was access to women leaders who can act as role models. Leadership training was identified as a pathway to leadership for young women in civil society organizations.

One underexplored avenue for leadership is women in sports. Sports organizations — either women-dominated, such as netball, or male-dominated, such as rugby — can provide prominent and meaningful leadership opportunities for women. Sports can also be a mechanism for broader social change in terms of norms of leadership. Lakapi Samoa, a program that involves women as trainers in rugby within schools, is an example of an initiative that can potentially change mindsets on women’s leadership.

Box 3: Women with disability and leadership

Women with disability and leadership

Particularly for women with disability, having a good education is a significant leadership pathway. This, combined with a supportive home and work environment, helps in building confidence to lead organizations and work involving people with disability.

Leadership opportunities are not abundant within the disability space, and hesitancy to take up work in the government or business sector remains a challenge. Safety and challenges related to work performance are important concerns. For the women who participated in this research, holding a *matai* title was not considered that important in their work.

My education and the beginning of my working life ... It was hard because of my disability ... I am glad to be working in the disability organization. I imagine it would be lots of challenges for me if I was working in a busy govt ministry or business. I would probably struggle to finish tasks on time compared to other staff. I'm not sure if I would be selected a leader there ... For me my strongest support is always my family. There was the expectation in my family that you can't afford to fail. For me and my sister failure was not an option. So I really thank and acknowledge my parents for their support. (Woman leader with disability, Apia)

It's probably more difficult for a woman with disability to become a leader ... you need to work twice as hard as the women leader without a disability. (Woman with disability, Apia)

I know that people look down on me because I'm a woman and that I look a bit different to others because of my disability ... it used to discourage me, you know I was cautious and didn't want to make mistakes in case I'm laughed at. But that is no longer the case. I'm very happy with my job and have the courage to speak up. I get a lot of support from my work colleagues which helps a lot... On the matai thing, I have always supported my cousins and other relatives who want to become a matai. For me, maybe one day I will be confident enough to become one. (Woman with disability, Apia)

5.6. PATHWAYS TO LEADERSHIP IN THE CHURCH

Within the church, there were many examples of women's leadership. The vast majority of these, however, were cases in which women derived authority through their status as pastors' wives. As *faletua*, they had significant roles within the church and their leadership was recognized — in FGDs, the most common example of women leaders given were *faletua*. Yet as discussed above, the word *faletua* suggests limits on leadership opportunities, as this leadership is intrinsically tied to the status of their husbands.

It was noted that the perspectives of *faletua* were more integrated into women's policy machinery in the past, when the MWCSD proactively engaged with *faletua* in their advisory committee structure. It is important to note that these were political appointments made by Cabinet at the time as *faletua* were seen to be playing an influential role in villages through their respective parishes. Over time, new positions such as the *Sui o Tamaitai* (Village Women's Representatives) were created under the MWCSD and these took over responsibilities related to village women affairs and development.

Within the church, collective leadership was again seen as the most effective form of leadership. Church women's groups are some of the oldest and most established women's networks in Samoa, and are important in that they include — or have scope to include — diverse groups of women and women's perspectives.

Traditionally we women can become effective as leaders by developing our own mafutaga tina [women's groups] and we can also give a lot of support to our main church. I know for our church has the most funds and is the major force behind church developments. Women are the main donors. So, women's roles in groups tend to be very strong as we support each other so we're very effective in our own groups rather than being with men. (Woman candidate, 2021 election)

Working within religious norms is something that many women leaders highlighted as a practice they engaged in. This included utilizing references to God and spiritual life in their leadership capacity. It involved using the complementary gender roles — for example *faifeau/faletua* — to exercise leadership in religious spaces without disrupting or transgressing norms of leadership. It also involved working in existing spaces in churches that allow for women to become leaders. Examples of these include the high-level women's groups in the mainstream churches of the Congregational Christian Church in Samoa (CCCS), and the Methodist Church in Samoa. While some participants did speak critically about the lack of visible women's leadership within religious institutions, others felt these norms needed to be respected, but that women could exercise influence in decision-making, and indeed leadership, working with rather than against them. This does not preclude broader social change; indeed, insiders "are aware of and can exploit 'cracks' in social norms in ways that outsiders cannot. This awareness is particularly important when gender equality is the primarily objective" (Roche et al. 2018).

Where women and men reported they were trying to promote change in their churches and increase opportunities for women's leadership, they highlighted the importance of having church leaders who are supportive of, or at least open to the idea of, promoting gender equality. As church networks are often closely related to family and village networks, support from family members and the wider community is also paramount. Many of these attempts were in early stages, but lessons emerging included the value of change from within — initiating internal discussions on the subject of women's leadership, led by senior leaders in the church community, and supported by male allies.

The **inclusion of men** in gender programming was highlighted as a very important component. This is already part of programming, and researchers noted that in villages where gender equality workshops had been run previously, participants seemed to have a good base of knowledge on gender issues. One potential gap noted by participants is a concerted effort to target village leaders who play a key role in setting village-level norms on inclusion.

To have programs that target the top, those who are leaders in the village, to educate their minds about the development of women. Funding is vital in order to carry out these programs. There is a need to change the mindset of people and how they look down on women. To shed light on this issue to change prejudice and how people look at women. (Participant, men's focus group, Savai'i)

5.7. INCREASING OPPORTUNITIES FOR LEADERSHIP

Access, legitimacy and effectiveness in the context of leadership are all affected by gender relations and power dynamics: the opportunity to exercise leadership is not the same for men and for women. As this research revealed, it is also mediated by status (especially access to a *matai* title), age, disability status, and other factors. Yet a diverse range of Samoan women are successfully practicing leadership in different spheres, and their experiences provide models and potential strategies for future leaders. From this research, a range of considerations emerged in terms of increasing opportunities for leadership for women.

The research emphasized the value of **facilitating networks and supporting collective leadership**. The women involved in the research were well-networked and engaged in their different communities; the key is using these existing networks to promote leadership. Part of this may be focusing leadership capacity building efforts on groups rather than individuals. Given the added difficulties young women face in practicing leadership, how to bring them in to networks needs to be considered. This could be achieved through formal mentoring programs or more informal ways of encouraging cross-generational networking.

The value of practicing *feutagaiga* (consultation) as a leadership style was highlighted. Being consultative was seen as an important part of being an effective leader. The participants who spoke about this leadership style had learned it informally, through observing the leadership practices of others. Yet there is potentially scope to **incorporate *feutagaiga* principles into leadership training**.

Finally, the stories told above reflect how diverse and varied women's leadership experiences are. While factors like having a *matai* title are important, they are not the only pathway to leadership. Yet when discussing access to leadership in this research, *matai* titles dominated as a theme. This suggests more needs to be done in **telling the diverse stories of leadership** — how women have succeeded in different spheres, including the public service, boards, non-governmental organizations, volunteer organizations, business, and in other spaces.

Research also noted the need to **improve access to leadership trainings and mentorship** for women from diverse backgrounds as well as the importance of training in oratory language and engaging current and emerging leaders to shift social norms.

6. INDIVIDUAL CHARACTERISTICS

Summary of key findings — Individual characteristics

Specific individual characteristics were identified as important including:

- A track record of service to the community
- Having a high status, broadly defined, in village and family
- Success in education
- Respect and humility
- Honesty
- Having strong family support
- Confidence in one's ability
- Having religious faith, particularly expressed through work in the church.

While these individual characteristics are seen as important and valuable, they do not exist in a vacuum, and many women with leadership capacity are limited in their access to leadership because of the broad systemic issues that exist.

Focusing on individual characteristics that women leaders possess, and that were considered valuable for women leaders to possess, can illuminate potential pathways to leadership. In this research, there were a range of individual leadership characteristics that were observed as important. While these characteristics can broaden leadership pathways for women, they will not necessarily result in success in obtaining and exercising leadership where structural barriers still exist.

6.1. SERVICE TO THE COMMUNITY

Leadership and service are two concepts that are fundamentally linked, so it makes sense that a **track record of service to their community** was considered highly important as a characteristic of a leader. It was seen as necessary both by self-identified community leaders and by those who did not consider themselves leaders. Service to the community was seen as the foundation of leadership for both men and women leaders.

I help out a lot to those that need my help. That's one way to make sure that people know you and what you can do for them... When they know that you can do this and that for the village, then they respect you and ...when you ask for their support, they give it. (Village Women Representative)

The most important factor for women is to serve the people of her village and church. (Participant, men's focus group, Savai'i)

Tautua refers to one's service to her family, village, or church expressed in the form of regular participation in meetings and activities, provision of food and other resources including development opportunities for improved wellbeing.

Yes. I am a leader because I have witnessed fruits of my work. If I were to sum up my life, it's a life of service. A leader needs to value the significance you bring into the service of your family, village, church, work and the country. (Woman *matai* & senior public servant)

I am a servant. In all my duties and work I am serving family, village and others. So if serving others means leadership, that's me. (Village Women Representative)

Tautua is expected to continue even after one becomes a *matai* and is a mark of a good and committed leader. Money and resources can be important in demonstrating service.

Being a *matai* is expensive and my purse is always empty because I give so much for the extended family [laughs]. (Woman *matai* & senior public servant)

I think supporting the economic empowerment of women is just as important as accessing leadership. When you have money that will contribute to you becoming a leader because as a leader you need to make financial contribution required by the village. That is important especially for a woman *matai* ... If the woman is unable to provide financial contribution she is [not] considered a good leader. (Woman civil society leader)

For successful men leaders as much as for women, *tautua* is the foundation of leadership, leading to the view that no differences exist in men's and women's leadership strategies. Yet in interviews and FGDs there was broad acknowledgement that in the village context women and men do not have equal opportunities to be leaders. A key example of this is in the political sphere: if an aspiring candidate has not demonstrated *monotaga* to their village, they cannot run for parliament. Important to consider, however, is the influence of the male-dominated village councils on determining this. The validity of *monotaga* is determined by senior men and this perspective may not place high political capital on the ways in which women serve their communities. In addition, there are often differences in the capacity of female and male *matai* to meet their expected financial and material contributions to the village.

6.2. HIGH STATUS

Having a **high status** was a valuable leadership trait. What 'high status' meant, however, varied according to different leadership contexts. Sometimes it meant having a high chiefly title; in others, having the qualifications and authority to lead in a workplace; or having the status of being born into a village and the right to speak and play a leadership role based on that. For women participants, high status in one context did not necessarily translate to a different context.

I am a *matai* and I hold a *sa'o* title from my village ... I am also a wife of another *matai* who also holds a *sa'o* title in his village, we spend a lot of time there, in my husband's village. My role in my husband's village is as his *faletua*. It's a different role altogether. I am my own master as a *matai* in my own village. Those are completely different but I understand those roles very well, in terms of what is required. I have no problems or issues transitioning from one role to another, this can happen in a day. In the morning you're the *sa'o* of one village and in the evening you're the wife of another *sa'o* of another village. This is one of the issues that women in leadership in Samoa should understand is that kind of understanding of the roles and what you do. (Woman *matai* & government board member)

It's like a check and balance kind of thing ... and it really depends on the context whether you are in the family, extended family, church or work environment ... your status varies accordingly. (Woman *matai* & senior public servant)

This fluidity in status is inherent to *fa'asamoa* — status is relational and dependent on your relationship to different groups. Status in all contexts is intrinsically linked to *tautua* (service).

6.3. EDUCATION

Education was seen as very important, and one area in which the playing field was level in that girls and boys had the same opportunities and access (see Schoeffel 2020). This was considered an important prerequisite for leadership particularly in the public sector. For other areas of leadership, especially at the village level, formal education was seen as less important but it was still necessary to be able to demonstrate wisdom as a leader.

Another factor is your education and your achievements in that area. That's definitely a significant factor that will determine whether you'll become a leader. I think it's harder for women with minimal education to proceed to leadership roles, unless perhaps if she's married to a chief. But if a woman has minimal education, and family is not well established, then I think most of her time is mostly taken up raising a family so she may have limited access to leadership roles. (Woman candidate, 2021 election)

A woman may feel confident to pursue leadership roles if she's well educated ... the word *sufi* or *tauanau* [persuade] implies another person persuades and encourages someone to do something ... so if I'm aware that a woman such as my wife is well educated and very experienced, I should encourage her to become a leader. (Participant, men's focus group, Upolu)

Having a high educational qualification was one of the most common leadership pathways across all contexts. Most woman leaders had tertiary qualifications, often from overseas institutions. This is an area in which gender inequality is less pronounced at a societal level, with girls and boys having equal access to education. Access to higher education, however — and particularly the opportunity to study overseas — is delineated by access to resources and family support.

6.4. SHOWING RESPECT AND HUMILITY

A good leader, according to participants, showed **respect and humility**. This is especially true of women leaders. Prominent women politicians including Fiame Naomi Mata'afa and Jacinda Ardern were given as examples of respectful, humble leadership.

You can learn so much from school about the theories on leadership, but one needs to be humble to be a leader and that's not learnt through theories; leaders must learn to admit if they're wrong too. (Woman *matai* & senior public servant)

I respect Fiame because she is a high chief — *tamalii* — and she is respectful and humble. (Participant, men's focus group, Upolu)

Jacinda also did the *ifoga* [Samoan practice to seek forgiveness] to Samoan and Tongan people for the dawn raids by New Zealand government on islanders — she is a humble leader. (Participant, young women's focus group, Upolu)

6.5. HONESTY

It was seen as important for leaders to be **honest**. Women leaders were expected to prove themselves non-corrupt and act in a way that was above suspicion. It was suggested that women leaders are judged more harshly than men leaders in this way. It was also put forward as an area in which women could be better leaders than men, as they were perceived as more ethical. Some men's focus group participants suggested women leaders who are not married might be more honest and less corruptible.

I think women leaders often try to be truthful and honest in their decisions; men however tend to be biased especially when money is involved. (Village Women Representative)

6.6. FAMILY SUPPORT

As with service to the community, **family support** was a key foundation for leadership for both men and women (see also Fiti-Sinclair, Schoeffel & Meleisea 2017). Many women leaders noted they played leadership roles within their families which prepared them for leadership in other spaces. Others reflected that observing their own parents in leadership roles had been important leadership training for them.



Women celebrating at the Professional Program for Aspiring Women Directors graduation.
Photo: UN Women/ Jordanna Mareko

If women have a strong support network there can guarantee their success. You can take up leadership courses but if the support network is missing women will still struggle. (Woman civil society leader)

The family plays a big part in supporting girls into becoming a leader. Everything starts from the home, so leadership too starts from home — that's where good parent-daughter relationships start. Then at the extended family level, there has to be that support there too for young women to thrive as leaders. (Male, former MP)

I think if your family has always served in leadership positions in the community, it tends to have a natural effect on you that you aim to continue that service in leadership roles. (Woman candidate, 2021 election)

6.7. CONFIDENCE

Confidence was another factor in leadership capability. Participants noted many women who have the capacity for leadership might not put themselves forward for these roles, often because of social norms of male leadership. It was important that women demonstrate the confidence to assume leadership positions (see also Ministry of Women, Community & Social Development 2015). Some women leaders noted that while they had the confidence to access leadership positions in some spaces, they lacked it to pursue opportunities in other spheres, especially in cultural spaces.

I am a leader already in my own home — and I don't need a *matai* title to be a leader, even at work. For me I am scared to speak in the oratory language when sitting in the village council. I don't feel confident doing that. (Woman civil society leader)

I think some women are not brave enough to voice what is wrong and right or challenge the authority when things are not right ... Lack of confidence is another barrier. (Woman *matai* & senior public servant)

Confidence as a key characteristic was frequently raised as important for women leaders, often in regards to being able to challenge discriminatory practices publicly. It is important to note, however, that men benefit from a structural bias that prioritizes male leadership, and so do not need to confront such practices themselves.

6.8. RELIGIOUS FAITH

Strength in **religion and faith** was a valued characteristic in both men and women leaders. For women leaders who participated in the research, their faith was often a central part of their leadership journey. Many leaders in various spaces held roles in the church: as deacons, heads of women's groups, or other positions.

I would acknowledge first of all the fact that I was taught very early by my parents to follow the teachings of the Bible and teaching me the kinds of habits that I should acquire in having a strong spiritual life. That is something that is very important and that is something you do not acquire overnight it takes a long time. My parents teaching me to be spiritually strong and because of that you become mentally strong. (Woman *matai* & Govt Board member)

I am a leader because I believe that it is my calling from God. (Woman candidate, 2021 election)

6.9. SUPPORTING WOMEN TO BECOME LEADERS

This section has highlighted some of the individual characteristics considered most important for leaders. While many of these characteristics were seen to apply to women and men equally, in practice they are gendered. Even among women it is not an even playing field as circumstances such as age, family background, and access to resources can impact on opportunity.

A 2015 study on women *matai* and leadership found:

There is a need for women to undergo a fundamental ‘identity shift’ when it comes to leadership, they need to acquire the confidence, skills, and personal capabilities to become leaders in their community. However, this will not happen in a vacuum, men and women together can work to change the perceptions of the community towards women in leadership (Ministry of Women, Community and Social Development 2015, 11).

As this quote highlights, social norms on leadership are a major determinant of leadership opportunities, and an individual deficit approach — which focuses on upskilling individual women — cannot succeed in the absence of wider measures. In addition to the other considerations noted in the previous sections, however, this research has illuminated some areas that may be important for future programming on women’s leadership.

Firstly, **celebrating women’s service to the community** is important in setting up the foundations for leadership. In Samoa, service and leadership are intrinsically linked, yet aspiring women leaders can face significant barriers in demonstrating service to their communities. For example, serving on a village council is often a primary method of demonstrating *monotaga*, yet many women are restricted from participating either through formal rules or informal unwelcoming behavior from male *matai*. As well as the important work of confronting these barriers, more could be done in highlighting the many ways in which women serve their communities and publicly recognizing this work as leadership.

Secondly, more work could be done in empowering women to **speak the language of leadership**. The research showed that a key component of lack of confidence for women is unfamiliarity with oratory language (and for some women, a lack of knowledge of the *fa’amatai* system more broadly). Building on efforts that are already underway in this space to encourage and support women to master oratory language, such as *Vaogagana* courses, will help equip women for leadership.

7. CROSS-CUTTING DEVELOPMENT PARTNER RESPONSES

Summary of key findings — Cross-cutting development partner responses

- Understanding of development partners' support was primarily that they facilitate and fund leadership training and, perhaps to a lesser extent, economic empowerment programs for women.
- Women's leadership initiatives were seen as targeting educated, urban-based women.
- Suggestions were given on the need to expand leadership training to include women in villages, to involve the church, and to create training programs that were more targeted, contextualized and in-depth.
- One area of potential improvement was in development partner coordination.
- There was a strong sentiment that future programming on women's leadership should be locally-led.
- Collaboration with local educational institutions to offer formal leadership training programs was suggested.
- Inclusion of the church, and greater inclusion of men, in women's leadership programs should be considered in development partners' work.

7.1. UNDERSTANDING OF THE ROLE OF DEVELOPMENT PARTNERS

A common understanding of development partners' support to increase women's access to leadership relate to **facilitating and funding of leadership training programs** and, perhaps to a lesser extent, **village-focused economic development opportunities**. The role of UN organizations and other development partners programs in promoting gender equality was recognized. These efforts were seen as contributing to a broader public awareness and dialogue on the value of women's representation that had real impact. There were conflicting views about the perceived focus from development partners on the political sphere. Some participants felt the focus was appropriate as the under-representation of women in politics was particularly pronounced compared to other areas. Others felt there was too much effort given towards improving women's access to politics, which could be directed to other spaces.

Maybe the development partners just need to strengthen what is they are already doing...I think it's not so much of an absence of consideration of women to become leaders but... perhaps we need more visibility of how programs by development partners have resulted in more women leaders in different sectors. Like for example, at the moment there are a lot of women leaders in government; why is that? Is that because of the development partners' support and programs? I don't think so. I think we just happened to have a lot more women who are qualified for these positions...I mean I think more needs to be done for village and the church to have more women leaders there. (Woman senior public servant)

There is a widespread perception that there is a lot of money in the space of promoting women's leadership — which was seen mostly positively, although some men's focus groups reported a sense that men were 'missing out'. **Women's leadership initiatives were seen as primarily targeting educated, urban-based women.**

I know that the UN organizations conduct leadership training for women who want to run for parliament. That is good but it only targets that small number of women, most of them live in Apia, and I don't know if the training talks about how women should work to getting into the village council or not ... you know that's the first step. (Man, church leader)

There was a strong sense that programming on women's leadership should be **locally-led**. Understanding the local Samoan context and taking an 'insider' approach to changing norms of leadership were seen as critical to the success of women's leadership initiatives.

I always believe that while they would have perceptions about what should be done, they should enable us to make the decisions that we would like and then support us to put those decisions into practice, to achieve those decisions in terms of practical realities. I have always said that to our development partners. While you may give us the money, help us to achieve this so that at the end of the day we can say wholeheartedly that this is ours. It was not something else imposed by the development partners. (Woman *matai* & government board member)

There was a lot of support from both men and women for more investment in village-level programs and for enhancing leadership initiatives within existing programs. One suggestion was that village-level projects incorporate more requirements for gender-equal leadership and project management, to enhance opportunities for women and men to work together in equal roles.

I think development partners could have more programs targeting women — but need to be careful that they don't end up creating a group of elite women ... so there has to be an inclusive approach, including women that really need the programs, like women in the villages. I know most of their programs target a specific group of women but no clear inclusion of village women. Although they may be helping women, they are at the same time could be creating a gap between elite women leaders based in Apia, and village women leaders. (Woman senior public servant)

7.2. CURRENT DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES IN WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP IN SAMOA

In terms of effectiveness of existing strategies by development partners, views on training programs were mixed. While some participants who self-identified as leaders reported positive and beneficial experiences of leadership training, others felt **training programs could be more in-depth, contextualized, and targeted to address structural constraints**. Some participants mentioned the tendency to hold these sessions in English limited their accessibility and relevance; others related their experience of training as rushed, with complex topics and issues compressed into one- or two-day training sessions. Participants noted these training programs focus on individual women and do not necessarily engage with structural constraints, including barriers to gaining *matai* titles or to participating in village decision-making.

I believe these trainings have empowered a lot of women to pursue leadership roles ... I think these trainings are very successful. Like for our board meeting say 10 years ago, we only had about 20% women, but now, the last board meeting we had, there was almost 50% women present ... at the moment they're more generic in their training approach; but if they narrow it down and target a handful of women, and perhaps provide upskill training that would encourage them more into leadership path. (Woman, government board member)

A common response was that trainings are concentrated in the urban area and there is a **need to shift the focus to rural villages**, and particularly to target non-*matai* women, as well as men. While initiatives to increase opportunities for women's leadership in the public sector, private sector and in politics have been seen as quite successful, leadership training was viewed as prioritizing Apia-based, mostly professional women compared to village-based women. There was a sense that in villages more could be done to promote women's leadership.

I think we need to have more leadership training programs for village-based women — not so much for the urban women because they have better access. We need to train more women in rural areas to be aware of their rights, that they can be leaders as well. Training can help women and give them the courage to become *matai*. (Woman *matai* & senior public servant)

The key to all this ... there should be enough funding to carry out leadership and educational programs in villages. I think there are women in villages that can become leaders, you can be educated but if you don't have the support of your family, village, and district then leadership cannot happen ... Partners should do educational programs and activities that motivate

and drive women to pursue leadership roles. Activities not only to support women see their potential as leaders, but also activities for men to understand and appreciate women leadership. So there needs to be a lot of education for women leadership to be encouraged in village settings. (Man, former MP)

One area of opportunity noted was **involving the churches** in women's leadership programming. Churches have a strong influence on norms of leadership, and were noted as some of the more resistant organizations to women's leadership.

Even in dioceses, development partners should work together with interested church groups to do presentations that teach our people about the possibility of having women church ministers. The theological college holds a camp for church ministers once a year. I think that's a great opportunity for the college lecturers to talk about women leadership in church, raise awareness on gender equality we already see in government and everywhere else, and I think it's about time the church considers women as leaders as well. (Wife of church leader)

One area in which participants noted development partners' strategies could be more effective was in **coordination**. There was a sense that some sectors were oversubscribed in terms of development partner attention, which led to duplication and a lack of value for money. In other areas in which women's leadership could be improved, there was relatively limited attention and funds available.

I think the best kind of support they can do is things like scholarships — they've had so many programs violence against women for women in politics & women in public life, which I don't really think has made a lot of impact. That's why I say they need to rethink where it is they need to make investments for women. That's why I said things like scholarships is probably the best, and other opportunities that expose women to prospects that help them. (Woman, current MP)

7.3. CONSIDERATIONS FOR DEVELOPMENT PARTNERS

The critiques of development partner approaches above, while not surprising, do not necessarily reflect the evolution of the women's leadership space and the new initiatives that are being put forward, in particular by WILS. There seemed to be limited awareness, for example, of the Village Leadership Development Initiative (VLDI), a locally-led leadership development program that is delivered at the village level in the Samoan language. This suggests more work could be done to **increase the visibility of the work that WILS is doing in the women's leadership space**.

For future training, there are some important considerations put forward on how to **rethink training to be more context-specific and impactful**. The value of Samoan language sessions, longer sessions, and broader scope that can encompass discussion of structural barriers as well as individual capacity-building, were all highlighted. There may be opportunities to co-design workshops with local women's groups and aspiring leaders to ensure material is most relevant to particular contexts. Leadership training that is targeted, suited to local village contexts, and informed by the women who live there and their particular aspirations, is the most likely to be successful.

In terms of opportunities for further support, suggestions include more **collaboration with local educational institutions and villages** in delivering the message on women's access to leadership. Youth were seen as an under-served group and enhancing opportunities for leadership for young women (and young men) — perhaps through working with educational institutions — was seen as important.



Women's organisation advocating for women to be empowered to lead.
Photo courtesy of Samoa Observer

8. FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS: LEADERSHIP PATHWAYS OF WOMEN IN SAMOA

This research investigated pathways to leadership for women in Samoa, with the goal of understanding the barriers that hinder women's access to leadership roles across different levels of society and to identify innovative strategies to support and encourage an increase in women's access to leadership. Building on previous research in this space, it presents new findings based on original data collection carried out in 2021.

The research finds **women's access to leadership roles in Samoa is not uniform across all sectors of Samoan society** and **challenging the underlying norms and belief systems that disadvantage women remains a big undertaking**. Despite resistance to women's leadership, however, opportunities were seen to be increasing in the public sector, business, and women-led organizations even as leadership opportunities at the village level and in the church are more limited. It is clear from this research that positive change for women in leadership is not due to a single factor but a combination of factors including proactive government policy, the resourcefulness of aspiring women leaders, educational success, assertiveness and courage, supportive families and networks, and active participation in community life.

One of the most pervasive barriers to women's leadership is the established beliefs and practices that leadership is a male prerogative. Uprooting these norms would involve a combined effort of not only advocacy groups, support of development partners, and the government, but also village and church leaders. At the moment, this effort is primarily viewed as coming from the government, civil society & development partner-supported programs only. Direct engagement and awareness training with village councils and church leaders would help strengthen the drive to enhance women accessing leadership.

This final section will highlight nine key considerations for future programming on women's leadership.

8.1. CREATING AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT

Creating an enabling environment means tackling structural constraints to women's leadership. This research highlighted that women in Samoa are already acting as leaders, and demonstrating leadership capacity, in all areas. While women's leadership opportunities are increasing in some spaces — notably government, the private sector, and civil society — opportunities at the village level and within religious institutions are more limited, a fact more related to strong norms of male leadership than the presence and ability of women leaders. Rather than an individual deficit approach that focuses on capacity-building — assuming women lack the capacity for leadership — the key focus should be structural barriers, and working to change social norms and perceptions of leadership that prioritize and place higher value on male leadership. Participants expressed frustration that existing strategies to increase women's leadership in Samoa did not focus enough on these structural barriers. One suggestion was to **conduct a gender equality audit of village by-laws**, which could highlight common discriminatory practices within existing by-laws and identify villages which are more open to women's leadership.

8.2. RECRUITING ALLIES/ ADVOCATES

To progress change, advocates are needed: influential men and women who are willing to be advocates for the cause. At the village level, senior chiefs who are key gatekeepers of local-level decision-making need to be open to women's leadership. In religious institutions, church leaders need to be too. Change will require a long-term and consultative approach, and women and men who are influential, supportive of women's leadership, and willing to act as agents of change, will be needed to lead this process. Potentially, **civic education could be a primary focus of engagements**

with village and church leaders, creating an accepting platform for women's leadership training. Yet such initiatives cannot be 'one size fits all', and should be tailored for each specific context: villages and churches have their own distinct norms and ways of doing things that should be considered. Having advocates who understand the particular context they are working in is crucial.

8.3. CONFRONTING GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Gender-based violence as a critical barrier for women accessing leadership needs to be integrated in the broader national campaign against all forms of gender-based violence. Much of the current campaign focuses on the elimination of violence in the family sphere, and **efforts should also focus on workplaces of government and business sectors**, ensuring processes to manage cases of perpetrators or victims of workplace violence are in place and enforced. Potentially the church as a respected institution in the country, could play a leading role through different parishes, in teaching, acknowledging, and preventing violence as a barrier to women becoming leaders in all sectors. With extensive awareness programs and training at the village level, potentially village councils together with relevant government ministries and civil society groups like the Samoa Victim Support Group (SVSG) could be effective platforms to open new, and support existing pathways for women to access leadership. SVSG's primary focus on *nofotane* in villages could be supported in terms of training on rights practiced in a village context. More research on violence against women in politics, and online harassment as a form of gender-based violence, would help to illuminate the links between gender-based violence and women's leadership and potential access points for intervention.

8.4. TELLING THE DIVERSE STORIES OF LEADERSHIP

Women accessing leadership is a complex landscape consisting of diverse stories of enduring struggle and success. While challenges remain, positive change is occurring, and we need to share the stories of success and the diverse pathways to leadership that are emerging. Where village rules and norms have been shifted to allow women leadership opportunities, lessons can be learned that may apply elsewhere. The experiences and strategies of women who are actively involved in decision-making in their villages can inform leadership initiatives. Likewise, there are many different pathways to leadership and while a *matai* title is important, it is not the only path. Telling the diverse stories of women's leadership in contemporary Samoa **via a dedicated online portal, with associated campaigns in traditional and social media**, would be an effective way to highlight the many pathways that are available to women. With growing online access particularly among young people, the online leadership stories could potentially inspire young women and girls for future leadership roles. Another suggestion was a dedicated day to highlight and celebrate women's business leadership.

8.5. RECOGNIZING WOMEN'S SERVICE AS LEADERSHIP

It is clear from the research that women are seen as the backbone of Samoan family and community life. Women are renowned as hard workers and *ta'imua* (the first to act and initiate things). Yet these efforts are rarely recognized as leadership, and women's acts of service are not necessarily seen as the foundation of leadership in the way that men's acts of service are. Celebrating women's service to the community is important in creating pathways for leadership. In Samoa, service and leadership are intrinsically linked, yet aspiring women leaders can face significant barriers in demonstrating service to their communities. As well as the important work of confronting these barriers, more could be done in highlighting the many ways in which women serve their communities and publicly recognizing this work as leadership. Part of these efforts could be **promoting awareness of service contributions of *nofotane* and other marginalized groups**.

8.6. RETHINKING TRAINING AND MAKING IT MORE VISIBLE

This research revealed a perception that training efforts primarily targeted educated, urban-based women and were not as relevant to rural communities. There also seems to be limited village awareness of leadership training. While there is space to make training more impactful, **innovative programming that is already happening should be celebrated and made visible**. There is scope to build on efforts that are already underway: to encourage and support women to master oratory language; to support women to become board members; to engage with villages and rural women; and to deliver context-specific programming in Samoan language. There was a strong sense that training would be most valuable to village-based women if it took place in the village. Leadership training that is targeted, suited to local contexts, and informed by the women who live there and their particular aspirations, is the most likely to be successful.

8.7. STRENGTHENING ENGAGEMENT WITH THE CHURCH

Engaging church *faletua* and local and regional women theologians in the broader framework to promote women's leadership is important. Participants suggested there may be scope to **engage *faletua* more in women's leadership activities** and advisory committees of government and potentially effect change in church structures in this way. Gender equality training could be offered specifically for administrators and key leaders of targeted/mainstream churches. Potentially, **training of targeted church leaders could be led by Samoan women theologians**. Their involvement in potential revision of theological studies curriculum will be critical. There may be scope to engage with regional faith-based organizations in this work.

8.8. RECOGNIZING LEADERSHIP IS COLLECTIVE

The research highlighted the value of networks in creating pathways to leadership. This is especially important in a context where leadership is conceptualized as a collective endeavor. Efforts to increase women's leadership, therefore, should focus on community. Focusing efforts on groups rather than individuals could strengthen networks that are important in promoting women's leadership. **Incorporating the principles of *feutagaiga* (consultation) into leadership training** will also contribute to effective leadership.

8.9. PRACTICING INCLUSIVITY

Bringing marginalized groups, including young women and women with disability, along is crucial to expanding the space available for women leaders in Samoa. How to include young women in leadership networks should be a priority. Youth are an under-served group and **enhancing opportunities for leadership for young women (and young men) — perhaps through working with educational institutions, and supporting the efforts of existing youth advocacy groups — is important**. With a growing number of young women entrepreneurs, work can be done in establishing how to support and enable their leadership aspirations. Women with disability are excelling in leadership in some sectors, but **more work is needed to create pathways for leadership for women with disability within the public service, the private sector, and decision-making spaces at all levels**.

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ANNEX A — HOWARD'S FRAMEWORK OF FACTORS AFFECTING WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP

ENABLING/ CONSTRAINING CONTEXT

- Social structures and norms
- Political regime and party structure
- State commitment to gender equality
- Advocacy strengths of civil society
- Market and private sector norms
- Influence of international actors

ACCESS, LEGITIMACY & EFFECTIVENESS

- Connection to influential networks and gatekeepers
- Social mobility and opportunities to leverage status
- Freedom to participate in community and public life
- Access to informal and formal spaces for decision making
- Demonstration of community benefits from leadership activity
- Trust and respect
- Confluence with other change or political processes

INDIVIDUAL CHARACTERISTICS

- Skills and literacy
- Confidence and resilience
- Knowledge and preparedness
- Capabilities
- Material resources
- Voice, articulating with confidence in influential forums
- Strategic-mindedness (ability to weigh up costs and benefits and take risks when worthwhile)

Source: Howard. E. 2019. 'Effective support for women's leadership in the Pacific: lessons from the evidence', *Department of Pacific Affairs Discussion Paper 2019/1*, Australian National University, Canberra

ANNEX B — PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET (ENGLISH)

August 2021

Talofa lava.

As a senior officer in government/organization/company, you are invited to take part in the Leadership Pathways for Women in Samoa Study that will be conducted in Samoa from [Date to be confirmed]. The study is part of on-going efforts from the UN Women and Women in Leadership Samoa project, to understand pathways of leadership for Samoan women focusing on enabling factors and barriers and strategies for improvement. The goal is to help strengthen the facilitation of current and future female leaders across Samoa from village to national levels.

What does participation in the research entail?

The study involves interviews and small group discussions with representatives of stakeholders in Samoa and will be conducted by a team of researchers from Samoa and Australia, under the guidance of an Australian-based research company, Sustineo (www.sustineo.com.au). You are invited to be part of an individual interview which will take about one hour and will be facilitated by a member of the research team. (or you are invited to be part of a small group discussion, which will take about two to two-and-half hours. The discussion will involve a small group of women/men/youth from the same village, where you can share your views and experiences on the subject of Pathways to Leadership for Women in Samoa).

The discussion will be facilitated by a member of the research team. You are encouraged to share your experience with others in the group. Please note that the discussion is not a test, and you do not need to worry about giving the wrong answer. We are seeking your honest opinions and please talk freely with others in the group. The questions relate to your understanding of:

- what a leader is
- what makes a female leader in Samoan society
- barriers to and enablers for women in leadership positions in Samoa
- what needs to be done to encourage and support women in leadership in Samoa

Depending on your consent, the discussion may be recorded.

Confidentiality

Your answers and opinions will be treated in a strictly confidential manner and please know that whatever information you provide will never be used against you in anyway. If what you share with us is used as a 'quote' in the report, we will use a pseudonym (another name) so no one will know it was attributable to you.

Use of information and Storage

The information collected from the small group discussions will be used to create a report on Leadership Pathways for Samoan Women. Any information that you provide to us will be de-identified and stored in a secure password-protected computer.

Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal

While we would greatly appreciate your kind participation in this study, it is entirely voluntary and you may withdraw or decline to take part at any time. If you are uncomfortable with a question, you do not have to answer. You do not need to provide an explanation for your withdrawal and this will not result in any negative consequences for you.

Thank you very much in advance for your participation in this study. If you require further information or have any concerns or questions about the study, please contact us using the following information:

Asenati Chan-Tung, Senior Researcher at Sustineo.

Email: asenati.chantung@sustineo.com.au

Faafetai tele lava.

ANNEX C — PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET (SAMOAN)

Aokuso 2021

Talofa lava

Talu ai ou tofiga fa'a-ofisa-sinia i le malo/fa'alapotopotoga/kamupani, ua vala'aulia ai lau susuga e fa'aali sou finagalo i le su'esu'ega fa'atatau i ni Auala e ono avea ai Tama'ita'i ma Ta'ita'i o Samoa (Leadership Pathways for Women in Samoa Study), e fa'atautaia lea i Samoa mai le [aso e fa'amautuina atu]. O lenei su'esu'ega o se vaega o galuega fa'aaauu ale UN Women, fa'apea le Women in Leadership Samoa project, ina ia malamalama atili ai i ni auala e avea ai tama'ita'i Samoa ma ta'ita'i. E fa'amamafaina e le su'esu'ega ni vaega e una'ia ma fa'aleleia atili ai nei auala, poo ni vaega foi e ono fa'alavelaveina ai. O le fa'amoemoe, ia saga fa'amalosia pea le fa'aaogaina o ta'ita'i tama'ita'i i Samoa nei ma a taeao, e amata mai i nu'u seia o'o i pulega fa'a-le-malo.

O a ni vaega e fa'atinoina pe a auai i le su'esu'ega?

O lenei su'esu'ega e aofia ai fa'atalatalanoaga fa'apea fetüfa'aiga i potopotoga laiti ma nisi o sui mai fa'alapotopotoga lagolago i Samoa, ma o le a fa'atautaia lava e le au su'esu'e mai Samoa ma Ausetalia, i lalo o ta'iala a le ofisa o su'esu'ega, Sustineo, Ausetalia. Ua vala'aulia lau susuga e te auai i nei fa'atalatalanoaga pe a ma se itula, ma se tasi o le au su'esu'e. (Pe vala'aulia foi lau susuga e auai i fetüfa'aiga i se potopotoga laiti pe a ma le lua i le lua ma le afa itula). O nei fetüfa'aiga o le a auai ai se vaega itiiti o tama'ita'i/ali'i/autalavou mai se alalafaga e tasi, e fefa'asoa'i ai silafia ma tomai masani e uiga i ni auala e ono ai Tama'ita'i ma Ta'ita'i o Samoa.

O nei fetüfa'aiga o le a fa'atautaia lava e se sui mai le vaega o su'esu'ega. E talosagaina lau susuga ina ia fa'asoa mai lou tomai masani e ala i fetüfa'aiga. Fa'amolemole ia utagia mai foi, o nei fetüfa'aiga e le ose su'ega e ono fa'apopoleina ai i sesë se tali. Ua na ona fia fa'amautu o lou finagalo moni, e ala i lou finagalo fa'asoa ma isi foi sui auai i fetüfa'aiga. O fesili o le a tu'uina atu, e fa'atatau i sou lava taofi e uiga:

- o le a le uiga ole ta'ita'i
- e fa'apefea ona avea se tama'ita'i ma ta'ita'i i le sosaiete o Samoa
- o vaega e ono fa'alavelaveina ai pe fa'amalosi'au ai tama'ita'i i tulaga fa'ata'ita'i i Samoa
- o ni vaega e ao ona fa'atinoina e fa'amalosia ma lagolago ai tama'ita'i e avea ma ta'ita'i i Samoa

O le a pu'eina ma fa'amauina foi nei fetüfa'aiga, pe a e finagalo malie i ai.

Malupuipua

O au tali ma finagalo fa'asoa mai o le a matuä malupuipua lava ma e fia fa'ailoa atu foi fa'amolemole, o a lava fa'amatalaga e te fa'asoa mai, o le a le mafai ona toe fa'aaogaina i se auala e ono tete'e atu ai i lau susuga. Afai foi matou te fa'aogaina i se ripoti se vaega na e fa'asoa mai, o le a matou fa'aaogaina se isi igoa e ese mai i lou suafa, auä le malupuipua o lou finagalo sasa'a mai.

Fa'aaogaina o fa'amatalaga ma le Teuina

O fa'amatalaga uma e maua mai i fetüfa'aiga i potopotoga laiti o le a fausia ai se ripoti fa'atatau i auala e ono avea ai tama'ita'i ma ta'ita'i o Samoa. Soo se fa'amatalaga e te tu'uina mai i ai matou, o le a lë fa'amauina ai lou suafa ma o le a teu malu foi i se upu fa'alilolilo i masini (password).

Ofoina e auai ma toe Fa'ama'amulu

E ui i lo matou talisapaia o lou finagalo malie e auai i lenei su'esu'ega, o se maliega e ofo fua mai e aunoa ma se totogi ma e ia te oe foi le faitalia e fa'ama'amulu pe lë toe auai ai i so'o se taimi. E ia te oe foi le sa'olotoga e te lë tali ai i se fesili ua le talafegai i lou finagalo. E le mana'omia foi lou tu'uina mai o se fa'amatalaga pe afai e te fa'ama'amulu, ma e le avea foi lea ma mea e ono afaina ai lou tagata.

Fa'afetai tele mo lou finagalo e te auai i lenei su'esu'ega. Mo nisi fa'amatalaga poo ni fa'afesili e uiga i lenei su'esu'ega, fa'amolemole fa'afeso'otai mai le sui su'esu'e ua taua i lalo:

Asenati Chan-Tung, Su'esu'e Sinia, Sustineo —

Email: asenati.chantung@sustineo.com.au

Fa'afetai tele lava.

ANNEX D — EXAMPLE LETTER OF INVITATION

Date _____

Honourable [MP]

Address

Apia

SAMOA

Afioga e,

I would first like to convey my warm congratulations on your recent election win. This is an enormous milestone for Samoa and inspiration for the country's future leaders.

Second, I am writing to invite your Honourable to take part in the Leadership Pathways for Women in Samoa Study that is being conducted in Samoa from 10 August to 3 September 2021. The study is part of on-going effort by the UN Women and the Women in Leadership in Samoa (WILS) Project to further understand pathways of leadership for Samoan women. It aims to identify enabling factors, barriers, and strategies to support women's access to leadership roles in villages, the church, the public and private sectors, and civil society groups. The goal is to help strengthen the support mechanisms for current and future female leaders across Samoa from village to national levels.

The study involves interviews and small group discussions with representatives of stakeholder groups in Samoa and will be conducted by a team of Samoa-based researchers, under the guidance of an Australian-based research firm, Sustineo (www.sustineo.com.au). Your Honourable is invited to be part of an individual interview which will take no more than one hour and will be facilitated by Alo Dr Silia Finau from the National University of Samoa, assisted by Fuimaono Tautalaaso Taulealo.

Background

In December 2020, the UN Women engaged Sustineo to design and implement the above study. It involves the conduct of key interviews with relevant Members of Parliament, female leaders in government, the business sector and across selected villages in Upolu and Savaii. The interview questions relate to your understanding of:

what a leader is

what makes a female leader in Samoan society

barriers to and enablers for women in leadership positions in Samoa

what needs to be done to encourage and support women in leadership in Samoa

Based on the consultations, Sustineo will develop a report which will be submitted to the UN Women Office in Apia.

Research Approval

Approval for this study has been obtained by the UN Women team in Samoa in consultation with the Women in Leadership Samoa Steering Committee. The approval is attached for your perusal.

Benefits of participation

An interview with your Honourable will provide relevant insights into women leaders' broader experiences in village and national politics. Your view and experience would be invaluable in designing relevant programs to support current as well as young and upcoming female leaders. The interview is a treasured opportunity not only to appreciate your leadership experiences but to receive invaluable advice for effective strategies for Samoan women leaders.

Confidentiality

While keeping participants' identities anonymous is a common research practice that Sustineo strongly adheres to, we believe that there are unique benefits when perspectives of key national figures such as your Honourable are publicly shared. We would like therefore to ask your permission for disclosure of your interview responses as part of our final report. This will mean what you shared with us can be used as a 'quote' in the report. We sincerely hope that this meets your approval. If it is your preference, we would be happy to confirm any quotes attributed to you, prior to any report being made publicly available.

Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal

While we would greatly appreciate your kind participation in this study, it is entirely voluntary, and you may withdraw or decline to take part at any time. If you are uncomfortable with a question, you do not have to answer. You do not need to provide an explanation for your withdrawal.

About Sustineo's Team

Sustineo is an Australian based research consulting firm. The name Sustineo means 'to sustain' or 'uphold' and this sentiment is embedded as a core part of our company's ethos. Established in 2010, Sustineo prides itself on combining research excellence with an acknowledgment of culture and context. Due to COVID-19 restrictions Sustineo's team leaders, Dr Asenati Liki-Chan Tung, and Dr Kerryn Baker, are unable to travel to Samoa. They will however continue to involve remotely working closely with the Samoa-based researchers as identified in the attached Research Approval.

Thank you very much for your support and if needed, we would welcome the opportunity to discuss this project further with your Honourable.

Yours sincerely,

Tom Sloan
Chief Executive Officer
Sustineo Pty Ltd
32 Thesiger Circuit
ACT 2600, Australia
W: Sustineo.com.au

ANNEX E — CONSENT FORM

I / Participant understand the information about the *Leadership Pathways for Women in Samoa Research* which was explained by the researcher, that my questions and concerns about the project have been addressed to a satisfactory level, and that I / Participant understand withdrawal from the Study is possible at any time.

Researcher to tick relevant box:

Noting the above, I / Participant agree to participate in the project. YES NO

I / Participant understand that any information provided will be kept confidential and de-identified on an individual basis in reporting. YES NO

Consent for participation is given through:

Oral Consent

Written Consent

Participant Name and signature:

Date:.....

Researcher's signature :

Date:

ANNEX F — RESEARCHER CONFIDENTIALITY FORM

I have been given a full explanation of this project and have been given an opportunity to ask questions.

I have discussed the research protocols with the team leaders, and I understand what will be required of me as a researcher working on this project.

I agree to abide by the research protocols established by the Sustineo Team Leaders, Dr Kerry Baker and Dr Asenati Chan-Tung, including, but not limited to the naming of the project; strict use of pseudonyms for participants; separation of real identities from pseudonyms; obtaining participant consent; and all other protocols detailed in the Ethics section of the Team training.

I understand that all data, information, or opinions provided to me must be kept confidential and that I must ensure that this information is not divulged in conversations, draft reports or publications of the findings.

I understand my responsibility to securely store all data collected for this study and that final copies of this will be kept electronically only by Sustineo Team Leaders in a password-protected computer.

I understand that if I require further information or advice, or have any complaints related to this confidentiality agreement I can contact the Sustineo Team Leaders.

By signing below, I agree to abide by the confidentiality requirements specified in this agreement:

Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Please complete this form and return to Sustineo Team Leaders before data collection activities.

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