

Born leaders: supporting women matai in Samoa

Samoa Leadership And Decision-Making

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In Samoa, each family has its own matai title holders, which are leadership or chiefly titles. This provides a unique opportunity for women's empowerment and leadership initiatives in Samoa to support women matai to strengthen their leadership skills.

'To be a leader is to work together as a team, understand your values as a person and to believe in yourself that a change can be made, even when it seems impossible, for the betterment of our communities,' said Mulitalo Falenaoti June Kolotita Oloialii Ailuai, of Lotofaga District, who is a matai title holder involved in the Women in Leadership in Samoa project.

Matai can have expanded opportunities to participate in decision-making structures, such as in fonos (village councils). But only five percent of village-based matais are women and many villages do not recognise matai titles if they are held by women.^[1]

Leadership in Samoa, particularly political leadership, takes long-term commitment. The pathway for women to parliament is through the fono and via the matai system because only those with registered titles can stand for elections.^[2] Developing leadership skills for matai is increasing women's ability to take on leadership roles with confidence.

Pacific Women is supporting the Women in Leadership in Samoa project to improve the leadership abilities of young people, including new matai and young women. The project is a joint initiative between UN Women and UNDP, in partnership with the Government of Samoa and Pacific Women and with support from local partner organisations.

Between September–November 2019, the project's Village Leadership Development Initiative provided five training programs for 131 people (74 women, 52 men and five fa'afafine^[3]) from 50 villages. All respondents said that the program increased their leadership abilities.

A young woman participant, Aliitasi Sua from Aiga ile Tai District, shared: ‘This training is the first time for me to stand in front of youth from other villages, elderly, the trainer and I feel so good when I talk and I see them listening to what I’m saying. I want to keep sharing my thoughts.’



Women at their title bestowment in Vaimoso. Photo credit: Women in Leadership Samoa / Jordana Mareko.

[1] Meleisea, L. et al, 2015. ‘Political representation and women’s empowerment in Samoa,’ Centre for Samoan Studies, National University of Samoa.

[2] Meleisea, L. et al, 2015. ‘Political representation and women’s empowerment in Samoa,’ Centre for Samoan Studies, National University of Samoa.

[3] Fa’afafine are people who identify as having a third-gender or non-binary role in Samoa, American Samoa and the Samoan diaspora.