

The Pacific region is (in)famous for its low numbers of female members of parliament (MPs) (Baker 2014). In response, policymakers and academics are increasingly asking whether temporary special measures (TSM) could alter this trend, if they are appropriate, and what form they should take. Since ratifying the international Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women in 1999, Tuvalu is one of a growing number of countries considering TSM as a way to boost the representation of women in parliament. In this *In Brief* we canvas some of the options being contemplated and consider how a process of institutional reform might take place.

## Women's Representation: The State of Play

Only two women have been elected to parliament (currently made up of 15 members) in Tuvalu since independence in 1978. The first, Naama Latasi, wife of the former prime minister Sir Kamuta Latasi, served Nanumea constituency from 1989 to 1997, and the second, Pelenike Isaia, won a 2011 by-election in Nui constituency after her husband, Isaia Italeli, the sitting member, passed away. These examples are, however, exceptions to the prevailing view that men are the most suitable parliamentary candidates.

A similar dynamic is at play at the local level. With some exceptions, since the 1997 Falekaupule Act the final decision-making body (the Falekaupule) on many of Tuvalu's eight inhabited islands has been dominated by male members, namely elders, *matais* (heads of each clan) and chiefs. The Act was designed to decentralise authority for island affairs and so the Falekaupule assumes many of the responsibilities previously undertaken by the central government (Panapa and Fraenkel 2008). Customary norms, including decision-making via consensus, usually prevail in the Falekaupule but the continuation of these traditions, which contained some protections for women, are now cited as reasons for restricting women's participation at this level.

Women do get elected to the Kaupule, the working or executive arm of the Falekaupule, on some islands, although rarely in large numbers.

The Kaupule has 6 members and it is unusual if more than one is a woman; some islands have no female members at all. Once elected, the influence of women in these circumstances is often curtailed by their marginal position, both in relation to the Kaupule but also to the male-dominated Falekaupule. As a result, many of these representatives feel that important development initiatives that might benefit women — particularly those that relate to households — are overlooked or ignored by their male colleagues who prefer different projects, such as those relating to infrastructure. Given the tightly knit nature of Tuvalu's island communities, and the preference for consensual decision-making, it can also be difficult for women in the Kaupule to openly disagree with their male colleagues, who are often relatives or kin. The Kaupule does appoint working committees and women can play a more prominent role in these settings (Kofe and Taomia 2006), and may even be called upon to report to the Falekaupule in some circumstances. But, despite important differences between islands, and the notable achievements of some exceptional women, the overall picture reveals numerous barriers to active participation.

## Temporary Special Measures: Examining the Options

Given the barriers that exist at a local level, including the widely held view that island councils should be a bastion of culture and tradition, increasing women's representation at the national level is seen as the most viable short-term option for Tuvalu. However, national politics remains heavily island based. In such circumstances the design of TSM becomes crucial. Aside from those modelled elsewhere in the region (like Samoa's 'best loser' quota or the three reserved seats used in Bougainville since 2005; see Baker 2014), a number of options are currently being canvassed by government, women's groups and other interested parties in lieu of nationwide consultations.

**Option One:** Provide an additional seat for women from each of Tuvalu's eight islands. There are a number of reasons why this is potentially problematic, including the added cost of eight new members

in a country with significant fiscal constraints. But the main argument against is that it would cause significant alteration to the established pattern of politics in Tuvalu where there are no political parties and coalition formation is complex and fragile (see Panapa and Fraenkel 2008).

**Option Two:** Add two seats for women to the existing legislature elected from across the entire country. This option gets around the cost problem by causing minimum additions to parliament. However, it might disappoint those who want to see a substantial increase in the number of female representatives. Also, as elsewhere, it risks entrenching a view that these are the *only* two seats for women and so they should not contest open seats. This option is also likely to advantage women with a national profile — most likely urbanised elites — who are able to generate support both on Funafuti and the outer islands. Moreover, because these two women would be the only nationally elected representatives there is concern about their potential to accrue substantial legitimacy as prime ministerial candidates, thus disadvantaging men who are only able to receive votes from a much smaller constituency.

**Option Three:** Add two seats for women to the existing legislature but restrict them to Funafuti, the capital. On one hand, the advantage of this option is that it gets around many of the problems discussed above. More than half of Tuvalu's population lives on Funafuti even if many are required to vote on their home islands, and so women MPs would provide additional representation to this urban electorate. On the other hand, such a process would similarly advantage elites, and risks excluding the outer islands entirely.

### The Future of Temporary Special Measures: Opportunities and Challenges

The current government, and the Prime Minister, Enele Sopoaga, in particular, has publicly backed TSM and has initiated a consultation process whereby the views of all islands will be canvassed. As elsewhere, TSM attracts opposition from both men and women, and so gaining widespread support is vital. Aside from its intrinsic attractions, this procedure is particularly significant in Tuvalu where island councils play an important scrutineering role on legislation before the

parliament. Consequently, without widespread popular support, any proposed TSM is likely to flounder due to the sensitivity and complexity of gender issues in Tuvalu. The advantage of a broad-ranging consultation process is that, if endorsed, TSM would have a groundswell of popular support unseen in countries like Samoa, for example, where recent TSMs carry the stigma of being initiated at the prime minister's whim. The disadvantage is that the process is costly, time consuming, and strong opposition could see the proposal shelved indefinitely.

Putting the consultation process aside, the introduction of TSM legislation in Tuvalu is also seen to be largely contingent on the survival of the current government. Elections are due in early 2015 and should the make-up of the parliament change — a likely scenario given the usual rate of turnover — there is no guarantee that new members will support the introduction of TSM. Consequently, sensitising MPs and citizens to the possibility of TSM remains an ongoing challenge for activists who want to see change on this issue.

### Author Notes

*Asita Molotii is Director of the Tuvaluan Government Gender Affairs Department and is in charge of citizen consultation on TSM. Kerry Baker is a PhD candidate with SSGM and Jack Corbett is a research fellow at Griffith University and a visiting fellow at SSGM. This In Brief is based on interviews with a range of Tuvaluan stakeholders including the prime minister, members of parliament, the National Council of Women and several Kaupule members.*

### References

- Baker, K. 2014. Explaining the Outcome of Gender Quota Campaigns in Samoa and Papua New Guinea. *Political Science* 66(1):63–83.
- Kofe, S. and Taomia, F. 2006. Advancing Women's Representation in Tuvalu. In *A Woman's Place is in the House — the House of Parliament*. Research to Advance Women's Political Participation in Forum Island Countries, Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat.
- Panapa, P. and Fraenkel, J. 2008. The Loneliness of the Pro-Government Backbencher and the Precariousness of Simple Majority Rule in Tuvalu. *SSGM Discussion Paper 2008/2*. Canberra: State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Program, The Australian National University.

