

**11th Women Ministers and Parliamentarians Conference
Asian Forum of Parliamentarians on Population and Development
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Madame Chair and Honourable Members of Parliament.

It is indeed a blessing for me to join this distinguished panel to provide insight into the work of the Tongan parliament towards increasing the political participation of women.

I am very proud to be here as Tonga's only woman parliamentarian, elected in this current parliamentary term. At the same time, I have only recently assumed this position since July of this year in a bye-election, so I am still in the process of learning and enjoying it tremendously.

I am only one woman out of a total of my fellow 25 male colleagues. I have also become a member on the Standing Committees for Social Services, Environment and Climate Change and Population and Development.

I am also one woman out of a total of only 8 women parliamentarians ever to be in the history of Tonga's parliament, since it was established in 1875, 6 who were elected and 2 appointed.

Now, I am only one, but I have no doubt in my mind, that there is still a lot of room for more women and I am grateful that this session appropriately addresses how we can increase the participation of women in the political arena.

For Tonga's frameworks, Tonga's Constitution supports the equal participation of both men and women to become Members of Parliament, as in Clauses 64 and 65. Any Tongan subject, 21 years and older, who is not an imbecile or disabled and who has lived in the constituency for 3 months within 6 months of the elections, is eligible to be a parliamentary candidate. The Constitution also provides the numbers and representation in parliament (for 9 noble's representatives and 17 People's Representatives). Tonga also has laws such as the Electoral Act and the Legislative Assembly Act which are to the same effect.

In terms of policy, Tonga's national development plan, the Tonga Strategic Development Framework II includes initiatives to improve gender equality so as to engage both men and women in decision making. Tonga also has a Gender Development Policy, only recently in place in 2016, which explicitly recognizes the unequal participation of women in parliament and initiatives to counter this.

But in observing and in assessing these frameworks, we can see that the political participation of women in Tonga still remains very poor. The question is, are these frameworks enough? Are they practical enough?

To continue, there are many barriers as to why there are not more women in parliament.

Firstly and perhaps the strongest barrier, is that there is a strong mindset against

women being in parliament. Tonga is traditionally a patriarchal society where decision making generally rests with the male as the head of the family. There is a strong expectation that a woman's place is only in the home. Also, because there have historically been only 8 women in the history of Tonga's parliament, there is very scarce experience and exposure of women to parliamentary positions. Society therefore is more accustomed to men as parliamentarians. They are more familiar with male voices in parliament. In addition, there is very little research on Pacific women in politics. Much of the information that we know is general knowledge but it is not researched and documented properly so that it is used as evidence based information.

Secondly, women are not voting for women. In Tonga's latest census in 2011, about 50% of the population was women. When Tonga held its latest General Elections in 2014, a record total of 16 women contested the elections. This in itself was a huge achievement. But the result? No female candidate was successful. At times we often shift the blame to men as the culprits for these barriers but if women voted for women, there would be higher chances of more women MPs. We need to explore why women are not supportive of women candidates.

Thirdly, the political will for women's political participation has generally been unstable – sometimes it is strong, other times it is weak. In 2014, Tonga's parliament at its own initiative supported a Practice Parliament for Women, clearly manifesting strong political will. We have MPs who attend and support gender equality conferences which are perhaps our only way of sensitizing MPs towards this issue. I believe that the political will needs to be stable and iron- fist strong and in unity, to drive this agenda. And this is extremely vital because to amend or change the existing frameworks would require going through some major political hoops. For example, to amend Tonga's Constitution, there is a lengthy and complicated process for amendments which requires passing the amendment bill three times in parliament and a unanimous decision of Cabinet before royal assent.

Lastly, women are not confident to contest the elections. There are major sacrifices involved. Financially, money to pay for campaigning. As candidates, they are now under the scrutiny of the public eye and social media and that can be a brutal experience. Many women don't have the support of their husbands, their families and their communities. They have no access to candidate training, campaigning skills. They have no mentors. Many of their potential mentors are men but perhaps they are not confident to seek help.

But here, we find ourselves today. What can we, as parliamentarians do?

Firstly, we need to drive the strong political will. To do this, we need to support legislation and policies that will lead to the greater political participation of women. And frankly, this means supporting bills for reserved seats for women in parliament, as Samoa has done. After I entered parliament in July this year, I had submitted a motion for two reserved seats for women. This motion was just passed in Parliament just last week. I am currently working on a private bill for reserved seats for women in Parliament. I have also directly spoken with many of the Members to get their views and I am enthusiastic that there will be support. Tonga will have to start somewhere, even if we start small.

Secondly, as parliamentarians, our mandate is to pass the Government's budget. We need to ensure that there is a sufficient budget to support the implementation of legislation and policies in place. In this current budget, \$2.6million is allocated to the Women's Affairs Division out of the Ministry's \$44m. This budget will ensure that the Gender Policy is implemented. But is it enough? Our small governments face financial constraints all the time. However, we as parliamentarians are in a good position to mobilize financial and technical assistance from international donors and parliamentary associations such as AFPPD.

Thirdly, we as men and women parliamentarians, can become mentors and encourage more women to contest the elections as most feel discouraged and not confident. We have a wealth of experience in campaigning, engaging with the public and in understanding the roles and responsibilities of MPs. Let's make the extra effort to spend time with our people and help them to understand the world of our work.

Lastly, we as parliamentarians need to be visible on supporting women in politics, face to face with our constituencies and on social media. If we are to challenge the mindsets that are barriers to women, we ourselves are the best ambassadors to do this. We are in a good position to increase the awareness of the public and the communities on the importance of supporting women in parliament.

To conclude, as a parliamentarian, I am humbled to serve in paving the way for more women and for young girls to sit in this position because I truly believe, there is nothing that is impossible in achieving our vision of women actively engaging as leaders and as parliamentarians.

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