



Women's Candidate Training in the COVID Era: The 2021 Tonga Election

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In late November 2021, 38,500 electors went to the polls across the 36 inhabited islands of Tonga. None of the women who stood for election were successful. In this In Brief we consider the mode of delivery of activities in support of women who chose to contest the election in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. We share the discussions of a locally organised candidate reflection session held during the campaign period to highlight the value — and, to privilege — Tongan women's experiences in contesting an election.

The 2021 Tonga election

Historically, the Tongan parliament has been one of the world's most male dominated, frequently composed of only men. Discounting the rule of Queen Salote from 1919 to 1965, just 10 women had taken their seat in the national parliament (six elected; four appointed), prior to the 2021 elections (Howard et al. 2022). In part, the over-representation of men has been facilitated by the inclusion of reserved seats for male nobles (Corbett 2015).

In the 2021 election, of the 75 candidates vying for 17 seats in the Legislative Assembly, 12 were women, a decrease by three on the number of women candidates standing at the previous general election in 2017. The new parliament will comprise 17 directly elected (male) members, nine (male) nobles and others appointed by the cabinet, as provided for by [the landmark changes to the constitution in 2010](#). Of these appointments, one (the minister for foreign affairs) is a woman (effective 28 December 2021).

Given that two women were elected in 2017, the return to a parliament composed almost exclusively of directly (and indirectly) elected men understandably sparked some debate and [reflection in Tonga](#).

Electoral assistance in a pandemic

A key component of gender and elections programming (globally, but also in the Pacific) has been in the form of candidate training on the assumption that this form of capacity-building helps women win elections (for a discussion on common donor-driven interventions see Palmieri and Zetlin 2020). With Tonga's borders

closed, activities usually organised by the international development community in support of women's parliamentary representation took on a more localised flavour. In part, this reflects a trend towards more locally led development in the Pacific (Roche et al. 2020) and the need for locally informed [gender sensitive political economy analysis](#) in the lead-up to elections.

In the absence of international guest speakers or workshop facilitators training women to run as elected officials, a local partnership group — the Fi-e-Fi-a'a Fafine Tonga, or FFFT, of which one of the authors is a member — organised a safe space in which women candidates could come together and reflect on their experiences so far, and share their experiences of campaigning with each other.¹ This pre-election reflection session for women candidates held on 8 October 2021 presented an opportunity for women to tell their stories in a light-hearted, informal way, without formal lectures and presentations on 'what to do'. In fact, the members of the FFFT, themselves experienced in running for political office, predominantly listened, contributing to the discussion sparingly with their own interpretations and lessons.

During the session, women candidates provided a series of insights into election processes, which up to that point they had found to be instructive, but which clearly did not lead to electoral success. As we show below, these insights were nevertheless innovative, even when they foreshadowed significant obstacles to electoral victory.

A personalised approach to campaigning can be welcome in the village. Some women candidates shared their experience of campaigning door-to-door, visiting every home in the village, just to say hello and introduce themselves, and personally invite householders to their campaign meeting. Others noted that rather than calling meetings (to which people might not come) it was more effective for candidates to attend regular village group meetings, whether it be meetings of weaving groups, tapa making groups, youth groups, or the local police supporters. Making the time to call in to community groups was seen as a more personalised form of campaigning.

Women candidates can work through community influencers. Some women candidates strategically created multiple campaign teams comprised of classmates and influential people from each one of the villages in their constituencies. In some cases, these influencers had deeper knowledge of, and access to, the community than the candidate. One independent candidate carefully curated her campaign committee to include men and women representatives with affiliation to both key political parties. Women candidates also shared their experience of asking town officers (government representatives in each village, attached to the Prime Minister's Office) to announce their village meetings as a means by which to seek their endorsement of the event.

Campaigns can be run cost-effectively. Without the advantage of the more significant campaign resources of incumbents, women candidates could not afford to take out advertisements in local TV, radio or print outlets. Live streaming and frequent posting on Facebook, however, was considerably less expensive and still reached many voters. The diaspora also proved useful for some women candidates who asked contacts overseas to engage with their families and friends back in Tonga in support of their campaign.

Voters' key policy concerns can be researched and responded to during the campaign. One woman candidate shared her experience of preparing a series of presentations on a key issue raised by voters in her electorate, namely, constituency funds allocated in the national budget for each member of parliament. She researched the total amount of the fund and how it had been spent, and then gave this presentation to multiple groups across her electorate.

Treating other candidates with respect can be important to voters. All the women candidates agreed that the voters expected them to maintain respectful relationships with all members of the community, including rival candidates. Women candidates found that an adversarial approach to politics was not considered appropriate behaviour for women.

Conclusion

The opportunity for women electoral candidates to come together, take stock of the campaign, learn and listen from each other, and reflect on the effectiveness of their own strategies is important. Such lessons are worthwhile for women candidates all over the world. In Tonga, however, the session — held at the last minute, a little over a month before the general election — proved that safe spaces can be created locally, and that there are strong local mentors ready and able to support women. The members of the FFFT provided positive reinforcement and validation to each candidate, and an environment in which they were able to evaluate, and re-strategise campaign tactics, where necessary.

That these women did not ultimately win their electoral contests should not be taken as a reflection of the efficacy of the support mechanism itself. There remain intractable barriers to women's political leadership in Tonga that require long-term strategies to resolve, similarly informed in local knowledge of legitimised customs and practices.

We note, instead, that the space provided by the FFFT in the lead up to the 2021 election allowed women to laugh at some of the more peculiar aspects of campaigning — their husbands' concerns; the local jokes — without the fear of an 'international expert's' judgement or misunderstanding. The international development community has much to learn in terms of supporting local actors in national electoral processes.

Author notes

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Endnote

1. FFFT is supported by the Balance of Power program, implemented in Tonga (among other countries and regionally) since 2019 and is funded by the Australian Government.

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