

FIAMĒ NAOMI MATA‘AFA: SAMOA'S FIRST FEMALE
DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER

CERIDWEN SPARK AND JACK CORBETT

ABSTRACT

In March 2016, Fiamē Naomi Mata‘afa was the first woman appointed to the position of deputy prime minister of Sāmoa. Following in the tradition of *Pacific Islands Portraits*, we provide a short life history of Fiamē, including her lineage, education and political career. Drawing on a mixture of oral history interviews and newspapers, we explore key themes central to Pacific politics, including gender, but also, title, political parties, the role of the international community, and modernization. Our contribution is significant because while the region has a rich tradition of life history writing, the main subjects of this literature are Melanesian men. In writing about a Polynesian woman leader, we address both geographic and gender imbalances.

Key words: Sāmoa; female politicians; Pacific Islands; life history writing; Fiamē Naomi Mata‘afa

INTRODUCTION

In March 2016, Fiamē Naomi Mata‘afa was appointed to the position of deputy prime minister (henceforth DPM) of Sāmoa. The first woman to achieve this level of seniority in Sāmoan politics, Fiamē’s appointment is also rare in the Pacific Islands region, widely known to have some of the lowest levels of female political representation in the world.¹ Since this time, commentators, locally and internationally, have been generally positive about Fiamē’s appointment with some saying that it heralds possibilities for other women in the region,² and others calling it ‘a huge step forward ... [for] gender equality’.³ In what is described as her first media interview after being appointed, Fiamē said that she was ‘not surprised’.⁴ This article explains the response she gave on this occasion.

A focus on the life of Sāmoa’s DPM enables the examination of themes that are central to Pacific politics, including, but not limited to, gender, title versus personality, the importance (or otherwise) of party politics, the role of the international community, and modernization.⁵ There is also merit in a study of Fiamē’s life that is not narrowly confined to political themes. In many senses her life is ‘exceptional’: she is ‘the sole holder of one of Sāmoa’s highest ranking titles and is a direct descendant of three of Sāmoa’s four paramount titleholders’⁶ and she has a remarkable record of achievements which outstrip the majority of male politicians not only in Sāmoa, but also the region.

In this article, we pursue these two intellectual agendas in concert. Presenting an initial portrait of this leading political figure, we also examine issues of importance for the study of gender and the historical record, such as how Fiamē became the DPM and what her appointment means to Sāmoans and internationally. To provide this account, we draw on in-depth interviews conducted with Fiamē, as well as her friends, colleagues, family members, constituents, and media observers.

While there is a great tradition of political life history writing in the Pacific, much of it is focused on subjects from Melanesia.⁷ Sāmoa has been noticeable by its absence. The publication of Tuila‘epa Sa‘ilele Malielegaoi’s memoir in 2017 is the first book-length life history by a Sāmoan politician. Prior to that the only roughly equivalent texts are collections of speeches and writings by Misa Telefoni Retzlaff and Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese Ta‘isi Efi, and a portrait of similar length to this one, about former Prime Minister Afioga Va‘ai Kolone.⁸

Alongside the concentration of Melanesian subjects, political life writing is dominated by male authors men. Indeed, outside Papua New Guinea, the only woman political leader to have been written about at length is Tonga’s Queen Sālote.⁹ As a subject, Fiamē is thus doubly significant: her life intersects in important and often unacknowledged ways with the key events that have shaped Sāmoan politics over the last three decades, while also offering the opportunity to consider questions about gender and political leadership.

Our description and discussion of Fiamē’s life and career follows in the tradition of *Pacific Islands Portraits*;¹⁰ while not a ‘full’ biography it relies on similar sources and narrative style.¹¹ Because the subject is a contemporary leader we rely on oral history interviews with Fiamē, including an interview conducted by Jack Corbett in Apia in 2011, and five interviews conducted by Ceridwen Spark (three in Apia in March 2017 and two in Melbourne in June 2019). These involved asking Fiamē questions about her parents and childhood, education and career, including her role as DPM. The first author also conducted a further 35 interviews between March and November 2017 with Fiamē’s friends, colleagues, journalists, leaders in the public service and civil society, and staff in donor organizations. These included interviews with people in and around Lotofaga, Fiamē’s village and the base of her constituency, including *matai* from various villages, women from the village committees, and church leaders. Unless otherwise stated, the quotations below are taken from

these interviews. While Fiamē is referred to by name, everyone else remains anonymous. We also draw upon Fiamē's 2011 interview with Ian Johnstone,¹² and articles about Fiamē in the *Samoa Observer* and other newspapers.

It is important to note that while our interviews were conducted in English – our native language – it is neither the first language of Fiamē nor the majority of those with whom we spoke. It is overwhelmingly the case that people speak most truly and comfortably in their mother tongue. Capra writes: 'To be human is to exist in language. In language we coordinate our behaviour, and together in language we bring forth our world'.¹³ It is impossible to quantify precisely the ways in which this affects our findings, but we do acknowledge that it impacts on them, and the world we have 'brought forth'. That we were not able to conduct the interviews in Sāmoan points to the significant related issue of our position as outsiders.¹⁴ There are merits and pitfalls to being an outsider in any research and these are likely magnified when it comes to researching and writing a biography.¹⁵ The task of writing someone's life is inevitably personal – even more so than other research. As outsiders to the culture of the person we are writing about, we encounter gaps in knowledge and understanding that we do not always recognize. While a detailed discussion of these issues is beyond the scope of this article, we acknowledge their overall impact on our portrait and some of the limitations they impose. We concur with Hanlon, who says of his biography of Tosiwo Nakayama, that he hopes it will not be the only one.¹⁶

We also note that our article relies heavily on interview material. As with our status as outsiders, there are merits and pitfalls to this. Drawing extensively on interviews, however, has the advantage of allowing Fiamē's voice and the voices of those who know her best to come to the fore in what is the first scholarly account – albeit brief – of her life. Because this portrait is part of a larger project, the ultimate aim of which is a full biography, we will soon be in a position to situate her life through reference to a wider range of sources.

The portrait proceeds as follows. Our chronological narrative starts with Fiamē's origins, education, career, and marital status. We then provide an account of her becoming the DPM, analysing how this happened and what it means – to her, to her people, to Sāmoa, and in the region. In our conclusion, we reiterate the significance of documenting Fiamē's life and achievements, particularly in light of the paucity of biographies about women leaders in the Pacific.¹⁷

BECOMING FIAMĒ

Origins

Naomi Mata'afa was born in Apia in 1957 – five years before Sāmoa became independent from New Zealand. She possesses unparalleled 'traditional' chiefly and political lineage, described by one of her mother's relatives as an 'impeccable family base'.¹⁸ Fiamē's paternal grandmother was the sister of Malietoa Tanumafili I, which makes her a close descendant of at least two of the four paramount titles that have been recognized as being of paramount rank since the late 19th century. Fiamē's mother, La'ulu Fetauimalemau Mata'afa (1928–2007) is from the Petaia family, renowned in 20th-century Sāmoa for the numerous family members in churchman or senior official roles. She was one of six daughters and four sons born to Le Mamea Matatumua Ata, a leading educator and thinker who helped to frame the Sāmoan constitution, and Faalelei MasinaLupe.¹⁹ As Fiamē said of her maternal grandfather, not only was he her 'first adult friend', he grasped the 'power of the pen'.²⁰ Noting that Le Mamea was 'the first Sāmoan registrar for internal affairs and what they called island affairs', Fiamē recalls his strong commitment to the idea of public service. All of his children gained scholarships to study in New Zealand and La'ulu (her *matai* title), his eldest daughter, became a teacher after completing her degree at Victoria University in Wellington.²¹

La‘ulu was a formidable and highly accomplished person. Fiamē describes her mother as an ‘action girl’, stating that once her mother had ‘read a situation ... she would go for it’.²² Educated in New Zealand and known for her strong commitment to women, La‘ulu was president of the National Council of Women from 1980–95. She was also a politician and diplomat, getting elected to Sāmoa’s parliament after her husband (and Fiamē’s father’s) sudden death in 1975. La‘ulu was then re-elected for a second term and later served as consul general and then high commissioner in New Zealand. Reflecting her passionate commitment to education in the Pacific she was also the first pro chancellor of the University of the South Pacific.

Fiamē’s father, Fiamē Mata‘afa Faumuina Mulinu‘u II, was Sāmoa’s first prime minister, serving the country in this role between 1959 and 1970, and again between 1970 and his death in office in 1975 at the age of 53. The son of Mata‘afa Faumuina Fiamē Mulinu‘u I, a leader of Sāmoa’s pro-independence Mau movement, he came from a long line of high-ranking chiefs. The Mata‘afa title is that of a paramount chief, one of the quartet of titles known as *Tama-a-Aiga*. The Fiamē and Faumuina titles are also high-ranking individual titles. Fiamē Mata‘afa Faumuina Mulinu‘u II and, consequently, Fiamē are also descended from Malietoa, another high-ranking title. Because of the links between traditional politics, chiefly status and national politics, one research participant said: ‘[Fiamē] was born into a family of chiefs. Her destiny was always going to be politics and I think she will be there for a lifetime’.²³

Another, discussing Fiamē’s heritage, confirmed this:

Fiamē [...] grew up in a very fabulous household where there were lots of political discussion from the father, who was a very high-ranking chief. And a mother who was a very dominant woman, as Sāmoan women are. And then [there were] all the external people always coming into their house for conversations from overseas and

wherever, so she grew up in [a] cosmopolitan, ... very politically alert, aware and debating household.²⁴

Fiamē is aware that this heritage has been valuable for her political career. Indeed, Schoeffel and co-authors discuss her status as an ‘exception’ in light of the fact that while women may become *matai*, few convert this into careers as politicians because, even when holding titles, they are unable to gain the necessary influence in village politics.²⁵

Fiamē says that while observing politics first hand as a child, she absorbed ‘the whole idea of service’ and always knew that she was ‘interested in politics’. But she learned from her mother that, first and foremost, politics is about relationships.

I think what I learnt through her ... is that perhaps from the outside people think that you’re respected, you’re revered, whatever, because of your title. There is definitely that element because that’s what the system is [based] on, but what my mother taught me mostly is that it’s actually the relationships that really make that strong. And so it’s a real earning thing, as opposed to [an] entitlement thing.²⁶

In other words, while family origins matter, they do not in themselves guarantee success.

While she had the ‘extra advantage of being around politics’, it was when she moved home from New Zealand to become ‘the quintessential Sāmoan *matai*’ that she learned both ‘that politics is a profession’ and that ‘you have to do it properly’.²⁷ In this sense, while Fiamē could be seen as embodying the elitism said to characterize Sāmoan history, her understanding of how a *matai* should act, combined with the reduced social proximity inherent in a society of Sāmoa’s size, renders problematic a simple distinction between ‘elite’ and ‘ordinary’ people. Sāmoan politics is inherently personalized and status alone does not necessarily translate into electoral success. High-ranking politicians regularly lose to those of lower status and the typical explanation is that they do not maintain a close relationship with

their constituency.²⁸²⁹ Thus, while we acknowledge that Fiamē entered the political field with advantages of birth, these alone do not explain her decades-long career.

Education

When it was time for Fiamē to attend school her mother sent her to the local school near their home in Apia. After she was seen ‘marching around holding a stick looking like I’m one of the teachers’, her mother decided that it was not a ‘good idea for the chief’s daughter’ to behave in this way.³⁰ Consequently, La‘ulu took Fiamē to another school ‘further down the road’ that was bigger and with a greater mix of children – Malifa Government Primary School. In Fiamē’s words, she went from ‘being the kingpin to being the outsider’.³¹ Fiamē reflects that this was one of the first lessons her mother taught her about leadership:

That was a big learning experience about, not only who you are, but how you relate to people in different circumstances and socialization. My mother was a bit like that throughout my life, she’d just pick at me and give me little life lessons.³²

Thus began a series of thoughtful interventions by La‘ulu, the purpose of which was to ensure her daughter gained the best possible education. As noted above, this included earning her leadership position, rather than being designated a ‘kingpin’. The most significant of these was the decision to send Fiamē to boarding school in New Zealand. Knowing that she could not afford to pay the fees with her husband’s political salary, La‘ulu started a banana plantation on the family land at Lotofaga. The income this generated paid for both Fiamē and Fiamē’s first cousin, Pam Sua (*nee* Petana, the daughter of La‘ulu’s younger sister, Suia Matatumua Petana), to attend Samuel Marsden Collegiate School in Wellington, New Zealand.³³ Fiamē left for New Zealand at the age of 11. According to a relative, Fiamē’s father did not want his ‘baby’ to go and had to hold back tears every time they spoke on the phone.³⁴

At boarding school Fiamē's cousin Pam, who remains very close to Fiamē and now works as her campaign manager, took the role of caring for her. They were the only Sāmoan girls at the school and Fiamē says there was only one other 'brown girl'. When some students in the boarding house started teasing Fiamē and Pam about their English, Pam punched a student, causing a black eye. Fiamē says that the matron called them aside and suggested that 'they shouldn't really hit people', while also telling the white girls, 'for every action, there's a reaction'.³⁵ Pam, the more introverted and homesick of the two, eventually returned home before completing her schooling, but Fiamē took part in all the school had to offer, from sport and drama to public speaking.

In 1976, Fiamē commenced a degree in politics and law at Victoria University in Wellington, which by now felt like her 'home town'.³⁶ However, early in 1977 she 'got word from home that court cases for my father's title were due so essentially I came back home because I was involved in those processes'.³⁷ Describing the intensity of this time, Fiamē notes:

[The title] wasn't handed to me as I explained, it's open to the extended family. It was very contentious, it was very competitive. For the particular title 'Fiamē', there were 21 candidates for the title. We all went off to court, and we all got interrogated through that process. Most of the other candidates were interrogated for half an hour and that was considered really long. For me, it was a whole day and a half. I don't think there has been any other time, including my political career, where I have been so focused on anything. I was totally in the zone of that whole process.

We had this very lengthy interrogation in the court process. I could tell that they didn't like me. If it was left to the Sāmoan judges, I wouldn't have gotten the title, and it was really due to the veto power of the New Zealand judge that was there.

At the time, it was a very unusual thing to have happened for a 20 year old to have been given a title, and a title of that rank.³⁸

Fiamē's perception that the judges were unenthusiastic about a young woman being awarded the title is confirmed in Meleisea's account of their reasons for choosing other candidates.³⁹ The expatriate judge who overruled them also made 'the astonishing ruling that the three high titles Fiamē, Faumiina, and Mata'afa, should never in future be held by a single incumbent, since Fiamē is an heir of the other two titles'.⁴⁰

After finally being awarded the Fiamē title in 1978, Fiamē returned to New Zealand to continue her degree.⁴¹ About a month later, she was summoned home. As she puts it:

After that all settled I went back to New Zealand. I thought I'd finish my degree. I was there for a month, and I got a letter from the Lands and Title Court that some people in my family were taking me to court for being an absentee title. ... And I mean they [the family members] didn't win but I was told privately by the court that they'd gone out on a limb to give me my title, and if I was serious, I should stay put. So I'm probably the only *Matai* ever in Sāmoa that has been given the hard word to stay in the country. ... It was such an unusual case. To award a very high title to a young girl. ... it was just the price I had to pay for being unusual.⁴²

In the court case through which Fiamē sought the title, the case against her, as summarized by the judges, was: 'She is only *20 years old*, she seems *overly influenced by her mother*, she is *female* and she is *unmarried*'.⁴³ Such objections seem to conjure the spectre of an 'unruly feminine' character, one deeply antithetical to the male-dominated world of politics. This is perhaps because the judges knew what was at stake; to a great extent and ever since, the title of Fiamē has allowed Fiamē to transcend many of the constraints of conventional gender roles. It is interesting to bear the judges' perceived limitations in mind as we turn now to consider Fiamē's unmarried status.

On Not Being Married

In Sāmoa, as in the Pacific more generally, in addition to being overseas educated, women politicians tend to have powerful male patrons. Indeed, women who get elected are often widows, especially of former politicians.⁴⁴ Most are older and if they have children they are adult. In addition, many are professional women, as, for example, President Hilda Heine from the Marshall Islands, who has a doctorate and is a leader in the field of education.⁴⁵ Few are single and virtually none are childless.⁴⁶ Thus in some ways Fiamē is exceptional, however, in her traditional status and familial connection to politics we can identify the common denominators with other women who have succeeded in Sāmoan politics, namely that: ‘most of them have held ranking titles and have come from families that have had some association with politics’.⁴⁷ Summing up the place of women in politics in Sāmoa, Schoeffel and co-authors write:

[w]omen *matai* are more likely to be widows, unmarried, or married to husbands outside the cultural ‘*fa’asamoa*’ system, which is why most of the women who have been elected to parliament over the past 50 years were (or are) unmarried, widowed, or married to non-Samoans.⁴⁸

Perhaps what is thus most interesting about Fiamē is not that she does not have a husband, but that unlike the other women who get elected, she has never had one. While it may seem salacious, it is important to indicate the range of views as to why this is so. Some of those we spoke with suggested that this was a political decision. One friend and former colleague for instance, said: ‘She gave up close relationships with men and never married because these things could not fit with her career’.⁴⁹ Another spoke about Fiamē liking ‘the high life’ with one person describing her as ‘a very strong supporter of the minority communities [including] the lesbian and gay community’, saying this is ‘who she hangs out with’.⁵⁰ Discussing sex and gender in Sāmoa, Schoeffel notes that while

awareness of the possibility of woman-to-woman sexuality ... has trickled into public consciousness from overseas with returning migrants and the increasing importance of mass media, it is generally considered to be something unlikely to occur in Sāmoa , and if it does, is vehemently disapproved of.⁵¹

While Sāmoan societal mores are changing, it is fair to say that the category of ‘lesbian’ remains largely undiscussed as does the subject of homosexuality more generally.

Whatever her reasons, and putting aside the speculation of others, in Fiamē’s own view being unmarried has ‘served [her] well’:

Because in men's eyes, if you're married, they understand that because they're married as well. Right? And their perception is they're the head of the family and the wife is under their control. So their association with the married women, they sort of understand But with me, all they're getting is me. ... So when I first got in, I was 27. Right? How do you pitch the relationship? First and foremost, I always make sure they understood I was Fiamē. Not in any uppity sense But I would always make sure to call them by their titles and behave accordingly. The message there was “I expect you to reciprocate”. ... I was 27, so of course the boys would try their luck. So I've never made friends in parliament. Because I've been very conscious of that.⁵²

In our assessment, Fiamē’s own account most closely echoes Schoeffel and co-authors' explanation of ‘the marriage factor’. They note: ‘There is no role for the husband of a *matai* and the imbalance in status between a woman *matai* with an untitled husband is anomalous and therefore socially problematic’.⁵³ Elsewhere, Schoeffel has written extensively about the dual statuses of Sāmoan women – high as sisters (particularly in highly connected families) and low as wives.⁵⁴ As Fiamē herself points out, wives come ‘under the control’ of their husbands. Were she to marry a Sāmoan man, it is difficult to know how this could possibly advantage her career and status. This explanation of why Fiamē has never

married was also offered by one of her oldest friends who said ‘maybe it’s because of the title’.

While being unmarried has benefits, Fiamē’s childlessness is sometimes construed as an indication that she cannot understand the lives of most Sāmoan women. One interviewee observed that while the ‘first criticism of Fiamē is that she was born into privilege’ the other one is that ‘she’s not a mother’.⁵⁵ Fiamē herself said that the subject of her not having children has only come up once directly in the context of her political career. During a cabinet discussion about who should be medivacked or not, a colleague suggested that Fiamē would not understand about having sick children because she is not a mother. Her response to that colleague was as follows:

“[The love of children] that’s not what we’re talking about. We’re here as ministers of government, and it is our business to determine the policies. So whose child are we going to send and whose child are we not going to send? And how do we decide that? We decide that by policy, so let’s keep the discussion where it should be”. That was it. It never came up again.⁵⁶

This verbal exchange is instructive for thinking about how Fiamē’s unmarried status may have impacted her career. It also affords insight into the way in which she approaches her role as a parliamentarian – her focus on issues is pragmatic and reasoned, and she is not easily swayed by personalities and emotions. Concentrating on the work of decision making about policy, she thinks of her role in terms of work and service. For female and male politicians, identity categories ought to matter less than their credentials and the authority they have been given to represent their constituents. Fiamē knows this – her presence in the Sāmoan parliament presents an opportunity for others to catch up.

CAREER

Entering Parliament

In 1985 Fiamē stood as a candidate for the Human Rights Protection Party (HRPP). The HRPP was formed in 1979 in opposition to the then Prime Minister Tupuola Efi, one of Sāmoa's highest-ranking *tama a 'āiga*.⁵⁷ In 1982, the HRPP won government and has been in power ever since, with the exception of a brief period between 1986–7, which coincided with Fiamē entering parliament. Though it was a tumultuous time, Fiamē recalls it fondly:

I began to make traction in the party in that time, because when you are in opposition ... you have to do a lot of reading, and I have to say that many of my colleagues ... don't really do a lot of reading.... So, ... I was sort of then becoming one of those people who was actually picking up government on things “okay, this is what you are saying in this document, and this is what you say here, you are contradicting yourself ...”, so I suppose in some ways that was quite useful for me as a politician being in opposition.⁵⁸

During this period, Fiamē also took on a junior whip role within the party which gave her the opportunity to get to know her fellow members.

I was very conscious that when I got in I wanted to be busy doing something other than chasing after things for my constituency. ... So ... I was looking for other things ... one to increase my knowledge, and two, to keep me occupied. So, the thing was, getting into parliamentary committees, it's very significant. That was my first term.⁵⁹

The HRPP was re-elected in 1988. Fiamē actually lost this election, but was installed after the winning candidate was ruled ineligible by the Land and Titles Court because he was not registered. The case remains contentious and is cited by Iati as an example of the HRPP's undue influence over the court.⁶⁰ Specifically, Iati notes that the winning candidate, Fata Siaoisi, who was stripped of his title when the court reopened his case after the election - thus paving the way for Fiamē to regain the seat - ultimately won the legal battle to have it

reinstated. He did not, however, regain the seat. Fiamē recalls coming second as a good reminder ‘never to take [getting elected] for granted’.⁶¹

A key initiative in this term was the development of parliamentary undersecretaries (now associate ministers). Fiamē recalls that:

[The] gender thing came in ... the public works guys didn’t want me and ... they gave someone else the women’s stuff, then that minister didn’t particularly want a young woman ... underfoot.... So, I kept on pestering and I think the only one who understood what was going on with me and who could actually manage me, so to speak, is the current prime minister, he was the minister for finance then. So, he sort of said, “Alright I’ll take her” [laughter] and he gave me a job.⁶²

That job was parliamentary under-secretary for finance and entailed chairing a commission into the Value Added Goods and Services Tax (VAGST), which became one of the most significant reforms undertaken by the HRPP during this period. This role allowed Fiamē to develop the reputation she had demonstrated in opposition: being prepared, capable of mastering her brief and interrogating the evidence.

After the 1991 election Fiamē expected that she would be in line for a cabinet post: So, I felt, okay, I have done six years and I have done my stuff. If this guy doesn’t give me a portfolio I am going to be totally pissed off and see what the other guys are doing ... Well, fortunately he did!⁶³

Much to her surprise, Fiamē received the education portfolio. Initially, she was panicked by the news:

So I’m going “Oh my God”, ... because I don’t have kids ... I’m ringing my cousins who are married and have kids [they said] “Oh we heard on the radio, congratulations, we are really excited” and I said “Yeah, hey, can you guys come over now, I really need to talk to you I have this really big problem” and they said “What problem? You

have just been made a minister?” So I said “No I have got a really big problem”. So they all turn up and say “What’s going on?” and I say, “So how does this education thing work? What classes, what year do you get in, how are your kids?” ... So they said “Calm down, have a cup of tea, the kids do this and they do that, and the school system sucks on this side, and it sort of works on that side, and these are the challenges and that sort of thing”.⁶⁴

Fiamē’s sense of being inexperienced did not last long and she continued to develop her reputation for being hard working, strategic and active in her portfolio responsibilities, as many of those we spoke with noted:

As a minister, Fiamē has a really methodical way of getting across her portfolio. She surrounds herself with people who will take things forward, gets to know senior people, strategic planning and reading into relevant subject matter. She has an amazing intellect and commitment to work.⁶⁵

Fiamē served as minister of education (which later included sports and culture) for 15 years and during this time achieved significant milestones. These included overseeing reforms that led to the renovation and rebuilding of approximately 19 schools as secondary colleges to give rural children improved access to tuition and replacing the previous selective admission system for secondary education. A further two stand out because they involved expanding the fledgling National University of Sāmoa (NUS) and laying the foundations for the inaugural 10-year strategic plan for education.

Fiamē was initially sceptical of the idea that Sāmoa needed a national university – her mother was the first chair of the University of the South Pacific (USP) and was opposed to the idea that Sāmoa needed a national institution. Ultimately, however, she was persuaded by the political argument that a homegrown institution was an important marker of national sovereignty. While the university was established in 1984 by an Act of Parliament, Sāmoa

had been seeking funding from the Japanese government to develop it. Fiamē recalls how she won them over:

Poor PM, he had been going off to Japan and every year he would come back, “No joy” as he would say. So I had a look and it was piles and piles [of paperwork] ... I thought “Man this is someone’s pipedream”, a huge university, layers of academia... [but] there was no rationale, why do we need a university, where does it connect into [primary and secondary education] ... so I said to my [adviser] “Can you bring me the policy?” and he said “We don’t actually have a tertiary policy” I said “What!?!” [laughter].⁶⁶

Fiamē called the Australian High Commission which funded a consultant, the founding Vice Chancellor of James Cook University, Ken Back, to write the policy and business case. This led to the production of a 20-page policy and a 30-page proposal. Fiamē recalls:

I gave it to the PM, and he said ... “I usually go with much more paperwork”. I said “Yeah, and well, I’m trying to save you luggage” [laughter], no I said ... “The problem has been you have said that you want a university and that’s on the political side but you haven’t had the technical support, so this is the policy document that gives it a rational approach, and this is the proposal”. And he said “Oh, do you think it will be okay?” and I said “It will be okay” and he went off and he came back and he said “They said yes!” [laughter]. So, I said “Oh great”.⁶⁷

The strategic plan was developed amidst considerable crisis. In 1990 Sāmoa was hit by Cyclone Ofa and in 1991 by Cyclone Val, with the latter considered one of the worst storms in a century. The devastation provided an opportunity to review the sector, with assistance from the World Bank, which ultimately undertook to develop and resource a new plan.

Over the years, Fiamē has taken on many regional and international responsibilities including, towards the end of her time in the education portfolio, becoming the pro-

chancellor and chair of USP. In this role, she followed in her mother's footsteps, becoming known for key interventions, including leading the development of an umbrella student body. Also internationally, Fiamē was elected to the UNESCO Executive Board on the back of a push to get regional representation and a Pacific voice inserted into its decision making:

I tell you, I reckon that [international politics] is the meanest level of politics, you know, you really get to see the ugly side, and there is no finesse, it's sort of like "Okay if you want this then you will have to do that". So, you know, you are getting all of the different blocs moving around doing this, and I'm thinking "How do you run consensus? Real, meaningful consensus". So, you know, I am full of admiration for people who move onto that next level....⁶⁸

Fiamē has worked with the Commonwealth on the vulnerability index and as the Pacific regional representative on the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians (CWP) Steering Committee of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association. Despite experiencing some frustration in these roles, she recognizes that taking part matters:

For small countries it's really important that those sorts of organizations and institutions are around to try to keep things together and have a little bit of a level playing field. I mean it's never level but at least there's some effort in terms of global interaction.⁶⁹

Fiamē has also acted as the Pacific representative on a global taskforce to deliver climate services, served on the advisory panel of the Pacific Leadership Program and was chair of the board of the Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development programme. Her interest in women's issues is longstanding and in Sāmoa, she is the chair of the National Council of Women, another role in which she has followed her mother's footsteps.

Between 2006 and 2011, Fiamē became the minister for women, community and development. Aware that this is the portfolio most likely to be given to a woman and perhaps not taken as seriously as others, Fiamē nevertheless again took the opportunity to be ‘a fixer’:

The women’s ministry is a lot like those mini social sectors ... nice to have, show the world that you care about women and people with disabilities, but it doesn’t really ... get ... given resources. So when I got there ... because it was essentially a social cluster ministry, so it had women, youth, it had the village communities, then they added the disabled sector, and it was all very siloed. So the first thing we did when I got in was to say, “Okay, you’re all acting these ways, but we’re one ministry”. So we actually had to create a vision about what this ministry is and what it’s supposed to do... [and] then structure a vehicle that could really deliver on all those silo pieces that they had.⁷⁰

In 2011, Fiamē was again reappointed, this time to the Ministry of Justice and Courts. She says this was a new challenge in that she had to deal with the separation of powers. But she responded with characteristic straightforwardness:

[The] chief justice were very sort of touchy about this operation. ... I said, “I understand perfectly. But what you need to also understand is I hold the purse, so if you want to do something you need to talk to me, and just because of this supposed separation that doesn’t mean we don’t talk. We need to talk. The separation is our spheres of action. I don’t interfere in your sphere of action, you don’t interfere in my sphere of action. But we need to talk about the resourcing”.⁷¹

Discussing her observations of having worked with Fiamē to assist with the development of a strategic plan for the ministry, a friend said that, despite the power she is

perceived to hold, Fiamē ‘doesn’t micromanage’.⁷² Rather, she actively encourages people to express their views, enabling them to take the lead.

In a lot of ways, it’s difficult for people, staff that is, because you’re so used to this hierarchy of power, to ... think, “Wow, she’s leaving us to our own devices”, more or less, but it’s not a very typical Sāmoan way of doing things. ... I felt [it] was a very positive thing which I hope will continue and I think that’s how Fiamē operates anyway, and something that I would like to see other ministers adopt.⁷³

Since the most recent election in 2016, Fiamē has been the minister for natural resources and the environment (NRE), a role she describes as ‘absolutely humungous’.⁷⁴ Because of the challenges presented by climate change in the Pacific Islands, there is also substantial funds a lot of money attached to this portfolio. After reading and getting a sense of things in her first year, Fiamē decided to focus on ‘water and waste’, which are ‘crucial issues for a small country’.⁷⁵ Her appointment to the NRE role, alongside that of DPM, reflects the esteem in which she is held and the trust the PM has in her abilities and expertise.

BECOMING DPM

After the 2011 election there was speculation within the HRPP as to who would succeed Prime Minister Tuila‘epa, then in his late 60s. He had hinted that he would step down prior to the 2016 election.

I think it all started when we heard through the grape vine that the PM was going to step down the next election ... I think that is when everybody started to see who is going to take over the leadership and that created friction with the party....⁷⁶

In 2011, long-serving DPM Misa Telefoni Retzlaff also retired. Misa’s retirement left a vacuum within the HRPP with numerous prospective candidates emerging, both for the DPM role but also as the potential successor to Tuila‘epa. Two were considered front runners:

Fonotae Nuafesili Pierre Lauofo, who ran unopposed in 2011 and who would eventually become DPM, and Faumuina Tiatia Liuga, who had been part of the cabinet since 2001 and became the minister of finance in the 2011 government.

Both men were, however, subsequently embroiled in serious scandals. Faumuina was accused of misappropriating public funds and resigned in 2014. Fonotae was charged, without conviction, of interfering in a police matter involving a fellow HRPP member of parliament, Muagututagata Peter Ah Him, in the same year. Consequently, by the end of 2014 it was clear to many HRPP members of parliament that:

Faumuina is totally not on our list. Fonotae is now involved in some minor issues ... If it's proven, then [he's] totally out of the list as well. So we might as well get him [Tuilaepa] back and continue to do his non-democratic ... one-man band.⁷⁷

Ultimately, this situation prevailed, with Tuilaepa continuing as prime minister, winning the 2016 election by a record margin (35 seats initially, with 12 independents joining the HRPP to create a majority of 47 out of 50 MPs). Neither Fonotae nor Faumuina were appointed to cabinet. Instead, Fiamē, the only MP who had been in every Tuilaepa cabinet since he became prime minister in 1998, became deputy leader of the HRPP and then DPM.⁷⁸

Previously Fiamē was rarely mentioned as a potential successor to Tuilaepa, in part because it was unclear whether she wanted the job. Fiamē says that if Faumuina had been appointed to the role of DPM, she 'would have walked away', noting 'there was real division ... quite a number of us that were very unhappy so it began to cause real rift in the party'.⁷⁹ In the end Fiamē won the vote 21:19 and was appointed DPM.⁸⁰

'Not Such a Big Step'

While recognizing that others in Sāmoa and the region see her appointment as a victory for Pacific women, Fiamē says she did not go into politics to become DPM or prime minister. She says that for her it has always been more important to contribute to the

ministries than to hold such a leadership position, claiming her view was ‘if that happens, it happens’.⁸¹ Indeed, she describes being DPM as ‘constraining’, saying she has to be careful about not being seen to oppose the prime minister and commenting, ‘That was the mistake the last guy made’.⁸² While Tulia‘epa tends to ‘be the face of the party’ and ‘go-to everything’,⁸³ Fiamē prefers not to spread herself too thin. But a young woman who is active in the local women’s movement commented that Fiamē is committed when she does attend events. Discussing the women’s candidacy workshops run in the lead up to the election, she said: ‘For someone who was acting prime minister for two days [to] make the effort to actually turn up and be there during the whole time, that shows how committed she was’.⁸⁴

Many of those with whom we spoke gave their response to Fiamē’s appointment as being ‘about time!’⁸⁵ But Fiamē has another story, saying she resisted the DPM appointment because her constituency is next to the current prime minister’s. She said: ‘They’d all been trying to get me to be deputy for yonks and I always said no [because] ... [in] the Sāmoan way it would seem really greedy if we were holding the top job and the second job’.⁸⁶ It appears that in 2016 these concerns were outweighed by Fiamē’s desire to ensure party stability during what she saw as a period of ‘transition’. Noting that the current prime minister is ‘heading toward 80’ she perceived the need to be ‘a ‘bridge between the newer ones’ and the ‘old guys’.⁸⁷ In addition, she says that the fact that the party majority ‘just keeps on getting bigger’ entails the need to work harder ‘to ensure that things are above board’ and to achieve things ‘other than just staying in power’.⁸⁸ Only time will tell whether the HRPP’s dominance will continue after the current PM has stepped aside.⁸⁹

Because of her family background, people tend to assume that Fiamē has always aspired to be prime minister. As one of her friends said, ‘People have misunderstood her as someone who’s trying to emulate her father’.⁹⁰ But Fiamē herself describes her father’s story

as a possible disincentive. When interviewed at 53 (the same age as her father when he died in office), she said:

[M]y Dad died when he was 53, I saw how he aged. So I understood that it does take it out of you, and I have seen the other leaders that have come through. So to be quite frank I think it's not something that you would really want to do unless you really, really want to do [it].⁹¹

While ambivalent about becoming DPM, Fiamē has no doubt about her capacity to perform in the role and in part this assurance comes from her family background. As she stated: 'I'm accustomed to it [senior leadership], I know what it looks like, I understand ... with other people who have held the job'.⁹²

Even more than family background, Fiamē's confidence comes from her long history as a parliamentarian and minister. This is evident in her account of her response to the media, when asked how she felt about being appointed to the role:

I don't know what you expect me to say. But if you're asking me about the position, then what I have to tell you is that do you know that I've been in parliament over 30 years and I've been in cabinet. So which position? I've acted as prime minister at different times. So, this is not such a big step. It's nothing that I'm unaccustomed to. I feel perfectly fine about it.⁹³

Fiamē's response reveals her views on being a woman in the role. Commenting that the journalists asked her how she 'felt' and not what she thought or was going to do, Fiamē sees her appointment as reflecting her expertise, knowledge, and years of experience, rather than her gender. Nevertheless, as is the case with other women politicians around the world, this does not mean that others, including journalists, voters and other parliamentarians, have forgotten about gender or are likely to do so as long as the 'norm' that politicians are male persists.

If Fiamē herself expresses ambivalence about aspects of being DPM, the opposite is true in her constituency. According to some interviewees, among many Sāmoans, particularly older ones, her high-ranking title matters more than her status as DPM. It is clear that her constituents in her village of Lotofaga place great value on the title of Fiamē. But they also see her being DPM as an entirely natural and appropriate progression for someone with her family background and there is widespread delight that she is elevating Lotofaga and the constituency by being in this role. This was evident in conversations with the male *matai* in Lotofaga and the neighbouring village. As one put it:

Since Fiamē has worked there, in parliament, for nearly forty years and since her dad was prime minister, [in] the village, the constituency, we're all proud and we're so happy that she's the deputy prime minister.⁹⁴

Another said they all support her 'because she put our village right to the top of our government'.⁹⁵ Members of the women's committee in Lotofaga echoed this view with one stating that while everyone in the village was 'really happy', the women's committee were especially so 'because [the] women's committee is her first priority in the village'.⁹⁶

Beyond Fiamē's constituency, the reception is more mixed. According to one man who works in the media, women in the village are likely to view her as 'just another politician'.⁹⁷ This was supported by a woman active in candidacy training who said, while 'there are women who look up to her, there are women who [don't think] she's representative of many other women'.⁹⁸ However, most concurred that 'a lot of women are happy about it', commenting '[s]he's had to be very political, to be able to be there'.⁹⁹ Another said: 'It gives all of us Sāmoan women hope and an inspiration to become something greater and to achieve these leadership roles in future'.¹⁰⁰

Among her fellow female parliamentarians, being a woman was of secondary importance to Fiamē being a stabilizing and capable leader with the capacity to take the party

and Sāmoa forward. This is encapsulated in the following statement of another long-serving female parliamentarian:

I'm really, really very happy that she has become the DPM, in the sense that I feel very comfortable that we have the leadership of Sāmoa in place. I don't see anybody else at the moment that can take on the leadership of Sāmoa after our current PM, and we need to be assured of that leadership for the stability of our country. So that's one main reason why I'm very, very happy that Fiamē is now the deputy, because she's capable and smart and sensible. ... Her being a woman ... I think to me that's secondary.¹⁰¹

This perspective was echoed by many we spoke with during the course of this research and is encapsulated in the comment from one observer that the response in Sāmoa was 'more, "Fiamē's got this position" not "A woman has got this position"'.¹⁰²

Fiamē's profile in the region has been raised by her promotion to DPM. In response to the question of how Fiamē should be remembered, a New Zealand-based Sāmoan said it should be 'in terms of her regional contribution [and]... as a trailblazer of the region', adding, Sāmoa is not the worst of the countries in terms of gender equality. And I think from some of the other countries that are probably several decades behind Sāmoa, I think seeing someone like Fiamē certainly gives them a lot of hope around some of their own objectives.¹⁰³

Another was more cynical saying: 'from the PM's point of view, [it was] just a purely political decision to show the Pacific Islanders that he is serious about gender equity'.¹⁰⁴

CONCLUSION

Through our portrait of Fiamē, we have begun to address a significant gap in the study of political lives in the Pacific, hitherto dominated by life histories of Melaneisan men. The

life history approach is valuable given current attempts to promote women's political participation in the Pacific. We have offered an account of a powerful individual who has to some extent transcended the conventional boundaries of gender to become a highly respected leader, both in Sāmoa and in the region. It is important to note and to further explore how Fiamē's high-ranking title has enabled her ascendancy – but is not available to the majority of women. At the same time, by outlining the hard work involved in becoming DPM, we have demonstrated that titles and status do not determine electoral success. Certainly, family background or prestige alone are not enough to obtain such a distinguished post. Rather, Fiamē's story, while revealing the advantages of birth, demonstrates the value of the slow and steady engagement required to forge the reputation necessary to succeed.

Our portrait also illustrates that the fortunes of women politicians – even the most powerful, well-connected and capable ones – continue to be shaped by powerful men. As a senior woman working in an international donor organization put it: 'The way the system works is that the man speaks and then that's what happens'.¹⁰⁵ In the case of Sāmoa, the person who many say has the most power to make or break the careers of all around him, including Fiamē's, is the current prime minister, Tuila'epa.

While some may view Fiamē's appointment cynically, seeing it as a purely political move on the PM's part, at a regional level Fiamē's appointment does matter – Sāmoa is seen as a leader in relation to the development goal of gender equity. While in Sāmoa being Fiamē and being a capable parliamentarian and minister appear to matter more than being a woman, in the broader circles of regional and global politics Fiamē's appointment to the role of DPM is read as a victory for women and a sign that Sāmoa and the region are emerging into a new, more progressive phase of politics. If Sāmoa was once seen as conservative, it is now perceived in the region as 'assertive and outspoken' due in large part to Tuila'epa's leadership over more than twenty years.¹⁰⁶ The extent to which the PM is invested in

maintaining this image will be one factor influencing whether or not he anoints the amply qualified and capable Fiamē as his successor. As a Sāmoan man we spoke with, put it: if Fiamē becomes the PM, ‘that would be progressive Sāmoa’.¹⁰⁷

Ceridwen Spark – Social and Global Studies Centre, RMIT University, Melbourne.

ceridwen.spark@rmit.edu.au

Jack Corbett – Faculty of Social and Human Sciences, University of Southampton.

J.Corbett@soton.ac.uk

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