



# Gender, Place & Culture

## A Journal of Feminist Geography

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cgpc20>

# No (wo)man is an island – socio-cultural context and women’s empowerment in Samoa

Klara Persson, Kristina Zampoukos & Ida Ljunggren

**To cite this article:** Klara Persson, Kristina Zampoukos & Ida Ljunggren (2022) No (wo)man is an island – socio-cultural context and women’s empowerment in Samoa, *Gender, Place & Culture*, 29:4, 482-501, DOI: [10.1080/0966369X.2021.1873744](https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2021.1873744)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2021.1873744>



© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 20 Jan 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 2757



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 2 View citing articles [↗](#)



OPEN ACCESS



# No (wo)man is an island – socio-cultural context and women’s empowerment in Samoa

Klara Persson, Kristina Zampoukos and Ida Ljunggren

Department of Economics, Geography, Law and Tourism Studies, Mid-Sweden University, Östersund, Sweden

## ABSTRACT

This paper revolves around women tourism entrepreneurs in the Pacific island nation of Samoa where an ancient way of living (*fa’a Samoa*) co-exists with colonial heritage and a growing tourism industry. By adopting a perspective sensitive to socio-cultural specificities, we examine the ways that the socio-cultural context *both enables and impedes* the empowerment of women managing tourism accommodations. In this venture, we draw on an ethnographic field study in the rural island of Savai’i, including semistructured interviews as well as informal conversations with locals, observations and the participation in everyday practices. We pinpoint and discuss the main sources of power and power-relations that women entrepreneurs need to command in order to run their businesses. Finally, we conclude that no (wo)man is an island, as we are all part of, and depend on, intrinsic social structures for our welfare.

## ARTICLE HISTORY



Received 3 November 2019  
Accepted 4 December 2020

## KEYWORDS

Communal society; development; empowerment; female tourism entrepreneurs; Samoa; women tourism

## Introduction

Several observers (Cole 2018; McKinnon et al. 2016; Johnson 2015; Tucker and Boonabaana 2012) have stressed the need to consider the complex socio-cultural and religious contexts in analyses of development processes, gender equality and women’s empowerment. Indeed, both scholarly and practical understandings of these phenomena seem to depend on our ability to move beyond ‘simplistic and fixed ideas of women’s “economic empowerment” [...] and to consider more fully the cultural complexity and the shifting dynamics of how gender norms, roles and inequalities affect, and are affected by, development and poverty reduction outcomes’ (Tucker and

**CONTACT** Kristina Zampoukos  [kristina.zampoukos@miun.se](mailto:kristina.zampoukos@miun.se)  Department of Economics, Geography, Law and Tourism Studies, Mid-Sweden University, Kungälvsvägen 4, Östersund 831 25, Sweden  
This paper is based on the data collection of an under-graduate thesis conducted by two of the authors as a final project of their bachelor studies in Human Geography.

© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group  
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

Boonabaana 2012, 438). In this paper, therefore, we examine the ways that the socio-cultural context *both* enables *and* impedes the empowerment of women managing tourism accommodations in Samoa, a country where tourism is rapidly growing amidst ancient codes of living and colonial heritage.

More specifically, our task in this paper is to unpack the complexity of Samoan society and culture, to understand how these women entrepreneurs juggle the social structures and cultural practices, thereby reproducing and even reinforcing some of them, while changing others. This also leads us to delve into the nexus of empowerment, power and agency (Batliwala 1994; Cornwall 2016; Ahmed 2019), to disentangle what sources of power these women need to access and/or control in order to run their businesses, and what key power-relations are at play in the Samoan socio-cultural context. Even though we focus mainly on the economic empowerment of these women, we recognize that in Samoan society, the economic, social and political powers are entwined. Similar to the approach of Gupta (1998) and Gidwani (2002), we perceive the Samoan context as the result of multiple and intersecting local and non-local relations, past and present trajectories. What is more, we align ourselves with Johnson's (2015, 1413) definition of culture as the 'set of social norms and practices, belief system, everyday way of life, and physical materials that a group of people use to define themselves collectively', thus bringing attention to both material and non-material aspects of culture.

In Samoa, the material dimension translates into land ownership – land being collectively owned and decided upon by extended families – while the immaterial dimension corresponds to *fa'a Samoa*, the Samoan way of living and understanding, which is highly present in everyday life. Furthermore, women's empowerment does not necessarily correspond to individual independence (economic or otherwise), nor are the objectives of women running tourism accommodations solely tied to profit-making for the benefit of the individual and her closest family. Rather, *fa'a Samoa* and the interlinkages between gifting (*fa'alavelave*) and the social, cultural and economic advancement of the extended family (*aiga*) are the primary driving forces behind the entrepreneurial activities of these women.

The paper is divided into five principal sections. The first section gives a presentation of Samoan society and culture in order to contextualize the study's findings. Secondly, we present the conceptual framework, mainly revolving around 'empowerment' and 'agency' as conditioned by socio-cultural structure and practice. We then turn to discuss the methods used, followed by a presentation and analysis of our findings. We conclude by pinpointing the main sources of power and power-relations that women entrepreneurs need to command in order to run their businesses.

### *Samoa society – colonial history, Christianity, cultural heritage and current way of life*

Samoa is a Polynesian island nation in the South Pacific Ocean, with an estimated population just above 200,000 people (Samoa Bureau of Statistics 2016), the majority of whom live on the two biggest islands – Upolu and Savai'i. In 1962 Samoa became the first Polynesian country to gain independence after a history of colonization and external superintendence. In comparison to many of the other Pacific island nations, the colonization of Samoa was rather brief (Thornton, Kerlake, and Binns 2010). Germany was the colonizing country from 1899 to 1914, after which New Zealand took over the administrative control (Iati 2013). To this day, the bond to New Zealand remains very strong.

In 1830, Christian missionaries arrived to Samoa, an event with repercussions that have persisted until today (Brash et al. 2012). The people of Samoa readily adapted to the faith of the new settlers, and an overwhelming majority of Samoa's population has embraced Christianity (Macpherson and Macpherson 2011). The contemporary importance of Christianity is reflected in the Samoan constitution (1960) which declares that 'Samoa is founded on God' (Meleisea and Schoeffel 2017). Apart from the religious aspect, the constitution rests on a combination of traditional governance and imported democratic principles (Iati 2013). For example, Samoa employs a Westminster parliamentary system at the national level, while engaging in traditional decision making in the *fono*, the village council, at the local level (Bodoosingh, Beres, and Tombs 2018).

*Fa'a Samoa* means 'the Samoan way'. It is the foundation of the Samoan society and identity (Lilomaiava-Doktor 2004; Cahn 2008), and broadly denotes the Samoan values and behaviours highly present in everyday life. An important aspect of the *fa'a Samoa* is the respect for and duty to the family, as well as to the village and community. The emphasis is on communal co-existence (Fairbairn-Dunlop 1994; Stewart-Withers 2011). Today, *fa'a Samoa* revolves around three main elements, namely the *matai* (family and village chiefs), the *aiga* (the kinship group or extended family), and the Christian church. These components form the basis of a socio-spatial order particular to the Samoan society, also emphasized by the saying; 'o Samoa o le atunu'u ua'uma ona tifi', which translates to 'Samoa is an already defined society'. This means that all people know their place and understand their duties and what is expected from them (Stewart-Withers 2011, 173).

The *aiga* is a vital part of the Samoan society. It consists of several family members living in the same village or household, taking care of and looking after each other. It is common that couples, their children, and some in-laws share the same roof. All Samoans must contribute and be of service to the collective welfare of the *aiga* (Lilomaiava-Doktor 2009; Brash et al. 2012), and

for many Samoans, the aiga and the family duties come before any other priorities in daily life (Cahn 2008). Regardless of age and gender, people who have income-generating jobs often contribute their salary to the matai, who distributes it among the members of the aiga and to the church (Stewart-Withers 2011).

Village residents are divided in accordance with a hierarchical system, based on titles. Although traditionally, only men were appointed as matai, nowadays the situation has shifted and women are also allowed to take on such titles. The bestowal of titles depends on the degree to which the person is considered apt, responsible and capable to contribute financially to the collective welfare (Fieldnotes, 12 April 2019). The matai has the highest status in the family followed by the matai's husband or wife. Women who move to a village and family as a result of getting married, are situated at the bottom of the hierarchy and are called *nofotane* (Stewart-Withers 2011). These women do not have the same rights and status as women born in the village (Feagaimaali'i-Luamanu 2016). However, within the village of birth, women will retain a higher social rank, allowing them to participate in decision making if they return (Boodoosingh, Beres, and Tombs 2018).

Similar to many other societies worldwide, Samoa is characterized by certain gendered divisions of labour. For instance, each village has committees divided by gender. The responsibility of the women's committees is to inspect houses and make sure that interiors are clean and properly equipped. This reflects a colonial legacy from the 1930s, aimed at controlling standards of living, sanitation facilities and family welfare (Boodoosingh, Beres, and Tombs 2018).

Even though Samoa has been somewhat resilient to influences from abroad, it is increasingly incorporated in global trade systems. A great part of the Samoan income comes from remittances sent from relatives and adult children working overseas, most of the time in New Zealand, Australia, or the United States (Stewart-Withers 2011). This has greatly helped raising living standards in Samoa. Financial capital enables people to start businesses (Lilomaiva-Doktor 2004) as well as to cover everyday expenses (goods, fuel, school fees and so forth). Cahn (2008) also points to remittances as an important form of gifting and the custom of *fa'alavelave*, meaning contributions to events such as weddings, funerals and title bestowals (Thornton, Kerlake, and Binns 2010; Lilomaiva-Doktor 2004). Funerals, for example, involve gifting such as money, food, or handicrafts from families in order to demonstrate solidarity. However, the family of the deceased is also expected to return gifts to all visitors, and so *fa'alavelave* often constitute heavy financial burdens for affected families (Fieldnotes, 16 April 2019). Conversely, it enables people to show generosity and, additionally, to gain status (Stewart-Withers 2011).

### *Socio-cultural context, empowerment, and agency*

Policies and projects combining gender equality and poverty reduction have received considerable criticism for being simplistic, reductionist and ineffective in their attempts to achieve established development goals (Cornwall 2016; Tucker and Boonabaana 2012; Ferguson 2010; Kabeer 1999; Cole 2018). Several observers (Cole 2018; McKinnon et al. 2016; Tucker and Boonabaana 2012) have stressed the need to consider the complex socio-cultural and religious contexts in analyses of development processes, gender equality and women's empowerment. Furthermore, Tucker and Boonabaana (2012) point to the widespread emphasis on women's *economic* empowerment in much of the policies viewing tourism as a vehicle for poverty reduction and gender equality, criticizing the tendency to downplay other dimensions of empowerment. Policies concerned with women's economic empowerment seem to be dominated by western liberal and/or radical feminist theories (Singh 2007; Tucker and Boonabaana 2012; Johnson 2015). As observed by Cole (2018), the inherent capitalist bias in many theories and policies means that only paid labour is counted for. Reproductive labour, such as domestic duties and caring, and subsistence agricultural work along with religious commitments, are largely ignored.

Even though it is widely recognized that there is no one-size-fits-all solution to gender inequalities and poverty (Kabeer 1999; Cornwall 2016; Cole 2018), certain ideas seem to linger, for instance around the meaning of indigenous culture to development processes. Certainly, many forms of cultural practices can be seen as impediments for development (Johnson 2015). This is the case in societies where cultural and environmental preservation are given priority before pursuit of profit and growth (Willis 2011; Peredo and Chrisman 2006). With regard to the Pacific island nations, development for gender equality and female empowerment cannot be isolated from the Samoan way of living and understanding, including the complex community system where extended households and fellow community members depend on each other (McKinnon et al. 2016). As observed by Lilomaiva-Doktor (2009), improved standards of living in terms of material assets may very well be desired by Samoans, but that does not mean that the belief in *fa'a Samoa* will be replaced or put aside. Cahn (2008) adds to this by stressing that indigenous entrepreneurship organized around individuals, family or kin can achieve community outcomes and enhance social networks within communities. Conversely, however, she also recognizes that there are elements within Samoan culture effectively discouraging innovation and change. Thus, based on Cahn's analysis and our own findings, we adopt the view that local culture can be *both* an enabler *and* an impediment to development and empowerment.

Moving on to the concept of empowerment, it seems clear that this is a multidimensional and complex matter (Cole 2018; Cornwall 2016; Scheyvens 2000). Even so, one common feature appears to be that of acting to level out power imbalances to favour those exercising little power over their own lives (Rowlands 1997). Drawing on the work by Batliwala (1994), Cornwall (2016) explains the difference between *power* and *empowerment* by defining power as control over material assets, intellectual resources and ideology, while empowerment is described as the process of challenging existing power relations, and of gaining greater control over the sources of power. Consequently, one key task for researchers is to identify what power relations are at play in a given socio-cultural context, and what the main sources of power are. As we align ourselves with the idea that true empowerment grows from within communities rather than being something achieved by outsider organizations such as NGOs (Cole 2018; Johnson 2015; Cornwall 2016), we also recognize the interlinkages of power and empowerment with the concept of agency (Ahmed 2019; Tucker and Boonabaana 2012). Our understanding of agency does not rest upon any simplistic idea of autonomous action or absolute power, but rather focuses on agency as conditioned by socio-cultural context. In the present study, this translates into women entrepreneurs navigating existing social structures and cultural practices, such as the matai system and tradition of gifting, while simultaneously also reproducing, reinforcing *and* changing some of these structures and practices.

In Samoa, the key power relations at play seem to reside in the fa'a Samoa, and particularly in the social and economic strengthening of the aiga (family) relative to other families. As observed by Cahn (2008, 4): 'Status, and well-being derived from status, begins at the aiga, then moves outward to the village and wider community'. Other than asserting status, the membership in an aiga ensures the individual's and the household's access to material assets, such as land and a home. As mentioned before, each family appoints a *matai* (chief) who controls the resources of the aiga, and who represents the family in the fono (village council). This leaves the matai with considerable power and authority, further emphasized by the fact that only people holding a chiefly title can become members of Samoan parliament (Cahn 2008). Traditionally, matai titles are also entwined with land accumulation according to a logic of the larger the extended family, the more land is available, and the more land, the more titles (Thornton, Kerslake, and Binns 2010). However, the power-relation between matai and aiga is not without complications, as we shall demonstrate through some of the findings of the present study.

Linked to the status and well-being of the aiga is the gift economy and donative responsibilities. As pointed out by Curry (2003), engaging in gift

exchange is not something from which an individual can easily withdraw, as it is central to the notion of both personhood and community. According to Cahn (2008), gifting can be perceived as a form of savings, since surpluses are given away with the expectation of being returned sometime in the future.

The strong relationship between the fa'a Samoa, families, remittances and financial gifts is important to support a business while *vice versa*, a successful enterprise can provide both financial and non-financial outcomes for individuals, families and communities (Cahn 2008). As we will demonstrate through our study's findings, both the social hierarchy reflected in the matai system, and the practice of fa'alavelave, have repercussions for the possibility of starting a business. Hence, the economic empowerment of women *and* men is highly conditioned by culturally defined social structures entangled with financial obligations.

Donative responsibilities also extend to the church, requiring quite substantial contributions from Samoan families, which frequently amount to between 30-50% of their monthly incomes (Thornton, Kerlake, and Binns 2010). While gifting and donations to the church affirms leadership, solidarity and membership, as well as conveying status to the chief, the extended family and to the village (Cahn 2008), the *inability* of fulfilling these culturally induced financial obligations is associated with considerable stigma and guilt. While the capability to give is predicated by position and possessions, it is also the means by which households, extended families and individuals (acquiring a chiefly title) can rise within Samoan society (Thornton, Kerlake, and Binns 2010). Hence, gifting and social status, influence and power are intricately interwoven. Ultimately, the ability to give is what empowers people.

## Methods and material

To conduct this study, two of the authors went to Samoa for an eight-week ethnographic field study (Katz 2019), carried out on the island of Savai'i. As pointed out by Stratford and Bradshaw (2016), the validity of qualitative research is largely dependent on the researcher's ability to extract knowledge from the information gained, irrespective of the sample size. For this study, data from seven interviews were used. Firstly, five female managers at tourism accommodations in Savai'i were interviewed. The women were of different ages and backgrounds, and their tourism accommodations were of varying standards and sizes, stretching from traditional *fale* (open house constructions on poles) to luxurious resorts. By conducting semi-structured interviews, we gained valuable knowledge about these women's experiences. The interviews were carried out with a biographical approach (see for example



Lawson 2000; Rogaly 2015), in the sense that the research team posed questions regarding the women's life histories. Unlike the biographical approach, we did not delve into the history of each woman in order to give a full account of each individual's biography. Rather, we focused on certain recurrent themes, such as financial contributions, family support, location of land, and work ethic. All women tourism entrepreneurs interviewed for this study have been given pseudonyms to preserve their anonymity.

Two additional interviews with women working in tourism development were carried out to gain a broader understanding of the industry on Savai'i, its role in development there, and the influence of culture on women's efforts towards empowerment. The first of these interviews was with a representative at the Savai'i Samoa Tourism Association (SSTA), and the other was with a director working for a domestic non-governmental organization promoting female business development in Samoa. All of the women spoke English, which simplified the interviews. With the informants' permission, interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Descriptive coding was applied to reduce the data and to identify recurrent themes (Cope 2016).

In addition to the interviews, the research team carried out observations (Kearns 2016; Katz 2019) to get a more holistic understanding of the study area, its culture and people. These also included several informal and spontaneous conversations with local people. Notes were taken, for instance about what houses looked like, about people working in and around the tourism accommodations, of missionaries moving about in the villages and so forth, but also to acknowledge the researchers' own reflections and emotions. This allowed us to refine research and interview questions, while alternatively information gained from interviews enabled us to improve our understanding of the Samoan society. The following section presents the main themes that emerged from the data gathered.

### ***Factors affecting female empowerment through tourism development in Savai'i***

#### ***Financial obligations: 'the Samoan way is to always give' in order to rise***

Gift-giving is deeply embedded in Samoan culture, as illustrated by this quote from one of our interviewees:

The really nice thing here in Samoa it that we live by a rule that giving is much more rewarding. Samoans always live with the thinking that they want to earn blessings up in heaven, so a lot of people give a lot all the time. – Lagi

This seemingly altruistic and noble characteristic of constantly contributing to the community despite owning few individual possessions is not without implications. It prevents many people from building economic buffers, hence making it much harder to start and sustain businesses (Cahn

2008). One major barrier to save money for individual investment purposes is the fa'alavelave. As mentioned earlier, these events usually require monetary contributions, or otherwise rely on whatever people have the ability to give. However, the story of Fono demonstrates that possessions and an ability to give leads to titles and an enhanced social position. She explained to us that one reason for being appointed matai was because she had the financial means to contribute to fa'alavelave:

If you are a good leader and a good chief you look after all of your family. You know fa'alavelave, there are too many fa'alavelaves in Samoa [...] maybe if it is a funeral you take some fine mats with you or a box of herring or money, whatever you can afford, and you can give it to them. That's how we help each other in the world, the family or in the village [...]. If anything happens in Upolu where my other family is, I always go. – Fono

Although the gender relations are embedded within the hierarchical system, where the (usually male) matai possess high and nofotanes (female in-laws from other villages) a low and disempowered rank, there is no rule without exceptions. Although she is a woman, Fono, at the age of 82, holds several chiefly titles. Furthermore, and contrary to the portrayal of the powerful matai, the following anecdote, conveyed to us by Nafanua, reminds us of the complexity involved in the power-relations between matai and aiga, and that no power is unconditioned:

[...] I had this worker, he had been with me when I had the old fales, and then he quit his job because they gave him a matai title, so they told him he had to stay home and look after the family, and 'We'll all go and we'll send money to you to help you with the family'. So, he came and he said, 'Ahh I think I have to stay [home]', and I said 'Yeah but do you really want to rely on these people?' Because he had his wife and kids, and so I said 'That means you have to call them and ask them for money, do you really want to rely on these people? Why don't you come to work and you will still have your own money and they will help for the other stuff?', but he said no. And last year he came back and he said, 'Ahh I think I want to come back to work'. That's like after ten years. And he was my best waiter, so I said 'Okay come, come'. So, then he came and worked, and not even a month later, he came back to me and said, 'Ahh they are all angry with me, my family. They ask me why I have gone back to work', and I said 'Yeah they are sending money but you have to ask them, that's the difference'. But sometimes the culture... so... he said 'No, I have to stay because I am the chief, they have chosen me and given me the title. So, I have to look after the family, go to the village meetings, the church things, but they will send me money to support me and my children'. – Nafanua

The impact of gifting and donative responsibilities on the entrepreneurial activities of these women is deeply ambivalent. On one hand, financial obligations represent barriers to building economic buffers for investments but, on the other hand, gifting and remittances lay the ground for starting up a business. Importantly though, the ability to give is tightly connected to

chiefly titles and status. As will be demonstrated, holding a title, or being close to a matai, are factors that enable women to become tourism entrepreneurs. The opposite causation may be equally true however, since becoming a tourism entrepreneur may enhance the ability to engage in gifting, which, in turn, enables these women to position themselves as (potential) matai in the eyes of their families and the wider community. Whether becoming a matai results from gender relations undergoing more pervasive changes, or if changed gender relations follow from women becoming matai, is an issue that needs further inquiry.

Judging from the statements of our interviewees, the social pressure to give is not challenged but rather reproduced when women become matai. Furthermore, the above quote from the interview with Nafanua suggests that there are nuances in the power-relations between the matai, the aiga and the obligations associated with fa'alavelave that have been overlooked in previous research. In light of the above, we also ask ourselves if becoming a matai constitutes a pure privilege and should be perceived as an unequivocal sign of empowerment, or if it rather increases the burden on women?

### *Gendered divisions of labour, social and family structure – spaces of negotiation*

Samoa family structure presents a paradoxical factor in women's experience of empowerment. While the women interviewed for this study receive crucial support from their families, which enables them to run their tourist accommodations, the inherent structures and hierarchies may at the same time represent barriers to empowerment, especially to those disadvantaged in terms of status and connections to the matai and the village council. Even though women are not commonly the matai, they are important players in the village life, taking care of the family, village and church, making money, raising children and making handicrafts. Apart from practical chores, it is also largely the women's responsibility to uphold the pride and status of the aiga (Dragicevich and Mclachlan 2009; Stewart-Withers 2011). In order to become tourism entrepreneurs, these women have had to negotiate gender roles and women's responsibilities, as evidenced by the following statement made by the SSTA representative:

In Samoa the women are known to be the 'straighteners' of any issue. Women are the stronghold of the family, any family, in the village, in the community. In Samoa that's a well-known aspect. So, when it comes to cleaning, when it comes to holding the village together, it's always the women's committee that's present. It's always them that get things running and hold things together. If a family falls apart it's because of the woman, it's because they're not doing their job. But that's

the importance of women in Samoan culture. They are seen as the backbone of our country. – SSTA

Two of the women had a parent from overseas, which resulted in them being exempted from expectations to participate in chores and conform to norms traditionally placed upon women in Samoa. Due to her privilege as a half *palagi* (a non-Samoan white person) not growing up in Samoa, Lagi, in particular, had the opportunity, which was accepted by the village, to choose which of the cultural and social obligations she preferred to ignore, such as going to church or traditional gatherings. She told us:

On Tuesdays it is the day that all the matai women and wives of matai get together for their weaving. I don't weave, but I pop in sometimes. – Lagi

Meanwhile, Cole (2018) has stressed the reconciliation of paid work and domestic life as one primary challenge for women, something which needs to be accurately addressed by practitioners and researchers alike. As pointed out by Cahn (2008), when compared to many other parts of the world, Samoan women are more likely to be supported in their work and business by other family members, including men.

With regard to gender roles and the division of labour between husband and wife, we received a mixed set of opinions. One of the women, Lagi, described a situation wherein her husband took on significant domestic responsibility in order for her to pursue her paid work at a resort, while another, Alofa, portrayed the men in her close vicinity as lazy and controlling of the rest of the family.

In line with the observations made by Cole (2018) and Cahn (2008), having supportive parents proved to be an advantage for the women interviewed. Expectations on women to keep the household together and care for children, while at the same time having income generating work, could be a challenge without the support of the family, as demonstrated by this quote from Sina:

I am lucky that my mom and dad are looking after her [newborn baby] because you know, I can't do this without anyone helping me. – Sina

The matai system has a strong presence in people's lives. Before starting a business on family land, the business idea must be approved by the village fono and high chief. The outcome depends on the status of the woman as well as on land ownership. The status of her family members can also make it easier to pursue the business idea. Lagi told us:

My husband is a matai now, and in the village I don't have a matai title but I am the wife of a matai so I have a higher status. – Lagi

Evidently, if the matai is closely related to the woman entrepreneur, the approval and support of a business venture is more likely to occur (Cahn

2008). Thus, to be well situated relative to the matai is of major importance for the ability to start and run a tourism accommodation business. Additionally, while the matai system largely represents a patriarchal model, it is a system to some extent renegotiated, as demonstrated by Nafanua:

Well, like for example in our family, the traditional way in our family, like if women want to have a title they are not allowed, only men in our family. But a few years ago, my dad [matai] and my uncle [high chief] allowed their sisters and my niece to have the title. [...] They told them: Come to the meeting tomorrow! And that's good because then we can have a say in different things. – Nafanua

Being favourably situated with regard to the matai system, and being able to negotiate gender roles are two factors affecting the opportunities for these women to run a tourism accommodation business. Additionally, the support from parents and/or kin is another factor enabling these women to enter paid labour. Taken from the interviewees' testimonies, there is no clear-cut evidence that gender roles, or the gendered division of labour, are undergoing substantial transformation. Instead, what we observe are incremental changes. Even though women now may become matai, and this represents a change to existing social structures, other social hierarchies associated with the matai system are unchallenged, as the power and responsibilities that come with titles seem to remain within the same families.

### *Land ownership and geographical location of land is crucial*

Having access to land in the right place is a factor influencing women's (and their families') decision to set up a tourist accommodation and thus affects their empowerment pathway. Furthermore, as described below by the SSTA, there are other implications connected to land in Samoa:

Land here is a big issue, it's a very sensitive issue in Samoa because people are very possessive with their lands. It's very sacred in Samoa. – SSTA

The vast majority of the land is customary, meaning that the land is owned by families, and passed on from one generation to the next. Hence, people never have to pay for it, and never buy or sell it. The land most often comprises a piece of plantation where Samoans cultivate taro, cocoa, breadfruit and coconut trees. To a large extent, this subsistence farming makes families self-supporting. There is always a natural provision of food, and as will be demonstrated, this may also have implications on the readiness and necessity to engage in paid labour. The other type of land is called freehold. It is a legacy from the colonial period when Germany, the ruling nation from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to the beginning of the first World War, bought land from Samoans. Nowadays, it is possible to purchase these parcels of land. Being able to buy a piece of land next to the water can prove to be an

especially good deal, like in the case of Nafanua, who owned a luxurious sea-side resort.

A concern in many tourism destinations in the Global South is that most of the products used within the industry are imported, while several facilities tend to be foreign-owned and managed. As a result, only a small proportion of the money goes to local producers and workers and thus, they do not gain much from the growth of tourism (Garrigós-Simón, Galdón-Salvador, and Gil-Pechuán 2015). In Samoa however, the fact that only a small percentage of the land is freehold also means that foreign investors cannot easily open up hotels in the country. This is one fundamental reason why most tourism properties in Samoa are locally owned, and more inclusive tourism can be practiced.

Clearly then, land is a source of power. Having land by the scenic parts of the coastline is especially advantageous for anyone who wants to start and run a tourism accommodation business since most tourists coming to Savai'i generally want to enjoy the sun, the ocean and the beaches. Concurrently, if one's family land is located up-country, this might constitute a barrier to empowerment by limiting the possibility to operate within the tourism industry.

### *Experience and knowledge from abroad pave the way for women tourism entrepreneurs*

Having a connection to or experience from outside Savai'i and Samoa proved to be of great importance in terms of acquiring the appropriate knowledge to start up and run a tourism accommodation on the island. The women interviewed all had some experience either from overseas, or from the capital of Samoa, Apia. In some cases, they had left their village to work or to study, or they had a family member who came from another country (and culture). In particular, earlier work in the tourism sector resulted in an interest and knowledge of how to operate a tourism accommodation, as illustrated by this remark made by Lagi:

I had a job in a travel agency [overseas] and I stayed in that job for ten years, selling the whole world and learning about what people want and what they are expecting. – Lagi

Furthermore, having undergone a university education in tourism management from overseas proved to be helpful for Sina who possessed a holistic mindset regarding tourism. This is what she had brought back to her village:

If there are any tourists who want to go snorkeling, I get one of the local fishermen to take them out and they get some money from the tourists. We are doing activities as well. There is a cave not far from here, we can take them there

and they can stop by at a local family and experience the Samoan lifestyle so the families also earn money from the tourists. – Sina

Experience from abroad facilitates guest service, strategic business decisions, and nurtures a certain dedication to income-generating work. In particular, the tourism-related ‘know-how’ seems to be an important factor for these women to position themselves as tourism entrepreneurs, and to use the income from tourism to empower themselves and their extended families.

### *Remittances, subsistence farming and fa’a Samoa affect the ‘work ethic’*

As pointed out by Raghuram (1999) and Gibson-Graham (2008), the protestant work ethic is not necessarily applicable in all societies around the globe. While in the Global North we have seen a shift from welfare to workfare, thus placing a larger responsibility on the individual to secure an income (Peck and Theodore 2012), in Samoa the responsibility to ensure a livelihood for all means setting aside individual interests and pursuing the common good. In addition to this, Samoans have another frame of interpretation and understanding, sometimes foregrounding objectives and duties in life other than becoming economically self-sufficient. In fact, the priorities in Samoan society, mainly revolving around commitments to the family and the village, often make it hard for Samoans to keep a job for an extended period of time (Cahn 2008). Another aspect, albeit one that is difficult to judge in terms of its importance, is the concept of ‘island time’, a perception of time that does not necessarily follow the clock, but rather personal feelings and rhythm. Samoans decide for themselves if, how and when they will engage in different chores (Alinder and Jonsson 2004). By contrast, a capitalist system where labour is bought and sold as any other commodity (Herod 2018) necessitates that employers can access and control workers. For the women running tourism accommodations in Savai’i, the work ethic among their employees was a major issue. They simply could not trust that employees would show up for work the next day, and this worried them:

The young ones are the ones who have come and left. It’s quite hard to get good employees here. Because they ... I don’t think they have the drive to work, to get somewhere, and I think it’s because of the money as well. Things here are expensive, but they are not paid well. I think the lowest rate is 2,50 tala [about 1 US\$] per hour. Some of them will work to help their families. But some, if they get another opportunity somewhere else, they just leave. – Nafanua

This view was further amplified by the SSTA:

Samoans just have a very difficult mindset. Some, not all of them. If they don’t want to go to work, they just don’t show up. If they got some family thing at home, they consider that a priority and work comes second when it’s work providing for their family. So, I see a challenge there. I think it really depends on

their preference, depending on the priorities and values as well and their respect of work ethics. – SSTA

The wages in Samoa are low, compared to the relatively expensive prices, and many families live on remittances. This, combined with the fact that the whole income in most cases will be divided between the family, village and church, while no money is left for the individual, contribute to a resigned attitude towards paid work. Furthermore, since most Samoans have their own land where they grow subsistence crops, most families are able to feed themselves. This, according to the interviewees, could be an underlying factor to the somewhat relaxed view on income generating work:

Well you will be surprised! Samoan people don't need a lot of money at the best of times. Some people don't have any money in their pocket for a whole week and they are okay, they are obviously still eating. We are not starving. – Lagi

Regarding the interviewees' own work ethic, in most cases, there was a role model in the family, who did not necessarily embrace a protestant work ethic but was hard-working nonetheless. Thus, from an early age they learned about the importance of working. This is how Fono expressed it:

My father didn't work in the office, he was a farmer and he was a very hard-working man. Because all the time when I was young, after we had been to school we came back and had something to eat. Then my father said: 'Come on! Pick up your stick and two baskets, put on your neck and go to the plantation'. – Fono

Clearly, 'work' is an area where the ethics and logics of the fa'a Samoa, and the protestant-capitalist ditto, compete with each other. In face of having to choose between obligations with regard to kin and 'going to work', many Samoans prioritize the former. Overall, paid work seems to take on a paradoxical position in Samoans' lives, since people do need money, for instance to contribute to fa'alevalave and to pay the church tax, but family priorities come first. Furthermore, Samoans are likely to be discouraged from engaging in paid work due to low pay levels and the fact that people rarely starve. Still, women tourism entrepreneurs depend on workers to show up at work even though Samoan labour is not an easily controlled resource. In light of the above therefore, the Samoan 'work ethic' seems to be a barrier to the economic empowerment of these women entrepreneurs.

## Conclusion

In this paper, we have explored the complexity of Samoan society and culture, through women managing tourism accommodations. Our aim has been to examine the ways that socio-cultural context *both* enables *and* impedes empowerment, and to disentangle what sources of power women tourism entrepreneurs need to access and/or control in order to run their businesses.



With regard to key sources of power, the findings of the present study point to, firstly, the importance of social capital as represented by membership in an aiga, and the positioning relative to the matai system. Being well connected is crucial for anyone who wants to start a business while being supported by kin is indispensable for these women entrepreneurs, as they depend on their families for everything from childcare arrangements to financial support. This dependence is mutual, as these women also provide for their extended families, while simultaneously gaining or securing both their own social status and that of the aiga. Secondly, access to material assets, such as land located by the coastline, is pivotal in terms of setting up a tourism accommodation business. However, access to material resources very much depends on the positioning of the chief and extended family, as land, capital, labour and status accumulate together. Thirdly, access to labour adhering to a protestant-capitalist work ethic and willing to prioritize paid work before family obligations is an absolute necessity. As illustrated by the findings of this study, Samoan labour is not an easily controlled resource, as Samoans follow their own culture, rhythm, 'moral economy' and balance between support and duty to each other. Fourthly, possessing knowledge, whether through obtaining a university degree or by accumulating experience from working in the tourism industry, is valuable to women entrepreneurs, since know-how is necessary to successfully operate a tourism business while insights related to tourists' preferences seem essential.

The cultural elements of fa'a Samoa, the matai system, the aiga, and the fa'alavelave all constitute support for the wellbeing and welfare of Samoan people, none of which are related to economic growth (Brash et al. 2012). But sure enough, the burdensome obligations to the family, village and church makes it hard for any individual to save a nest egg for themselves. Here, a dilemma emerges. Whilst not really needing money to survive or to have a decent life, there are heavy expectations imposed on Samoans to contribute monetarily, not only to fa'alavelave, but also through church donations. This means that Samoans are in fact in a situation where they need incomes.

As demonstrated by our findings, the financial obligations and the communal social structure motivate these women to become tourism entrepreneurs. At the same time, success in business and a steadier inflow of money, enable them to give back to the community and to the church, thereby also demonstrating their eligibility to hold a matai title. Gender roles and gendered divisions of labour are to some extent negotiated, as more women enter paid labour and get to be appointed matai. However, the matai system as such, where power and responsibilities supposedly are concentrated in the hands of the chief, does not appear to be deeply influenced by women receiving titles. Instead, the practices and structures associated with the

matai system are reproduced, and the culturally induced financial obligations persist. In the same manner that gifting and social status, influence and power go hand in hand, the inability to contribute adds to the social stigma and guilt among the poorest. Importantly though, the present study also indicates that the power-relations between matai and aiga are far more complex than has been acknowledged until now. We have only scratched the surface of the power structures inherent in Samoan society, and there is certainly room for further in-depth inspection into this complex web of social divisions and power relations.

While work ethic was deemed to be of major concern among female tourism entrepreneurs, the working conditions are quite harsh, as work hours are not regulated and jobs are not paid well. In addition to this, engaging in paid work also implies that the individual must give up the right to decide on what to do with one's own time, something which may translate into a form of *disempowerment*. Future research should, therefore, examine other underlying factors to the attitude towards income-generating work.

Finally, we return to the thorny issue of women's empowerment and tourism development. While there is some evidence that the women tourism entrepreneurs interviewed for this study have used the incomes from tourism to empower themselves through gifting, they all relied on intrinsic social structures, such as the support from extended families and villages, parents and matai, to succeed as tourism entrepreneurs. Yet, these relations are reciprocal, meaning that the expectations on these women entrepreneurs were to contribute to the communal wellbeing. Furthermore, it is through unique socio-cultural processes that Samoan women navigate their roles as matai, wives of matai, mothers, daughters, sisters, entrepreneurs, and, according to the SSTA representative, the backbone of Samoan society. With this at the back of our minds, we conclude that no (wo)man is an island, not in any society, and not in Samoa.

## Acknowledgements

We would like to thank SIDA and the International Office at Mid-Sweden University. Without your funding and support this journey would not have been possible. We also want to thank Women in Business Development Incorporated in Samoa for their generosity and for letting us take part in their work. Furthermore, we would like to thank our most valuable key informant Gillian Stewart and our respondents in Savai'i. Our warmest thanks also to Dimitri Ioannides for finessing the English of our manuscript. Last, but not least, we want to thank the Editor Ozlem Altan-Olcay and three anonymous reviewers for their time and effort. We are very grateful for the careful reading of our manuscript, and for your suggestive and encouraging comments. The authors of this paper would like to recognize that eight weeks in Samoa was just long enough to scrape the surface of the intricate and complex society, and all usual disclaimers apply.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Funding

Sweden's Government Agency for Development Cooperation (SIDA).

## Notes on contributors

**Klara Persson** holds a bachelor degree in Human Geography, Mid-Sweden University. She is currently working as a Research Assistant in a project examining sexual and racist harassment in the hospitality workplace.

**Kristina Zampoukos** is a Senior Lecturer in Human Geography at the Department of Economics, Geography, Law and Tourism, Mid-Sweden University. Her research interests include feminist and labour geographies. She is currently managing two research projects, the first examining sexual and racist harassment in the hospitality workplace, and the second focusing on gig workers' labour and life opportunities in Sweden.

**Ida Ljunggren** holds a bachelor degree in Human Geography, Mid-Sweden University. She is currently studying at the Master's Program in Public Policy, University of Gothenburg.

## References

- Ahmed, Sarah. 2019. "I Am My Own Person,' Women's Agency inside and outside the Home in Rural Pakistan." *Gender, Place & Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography*, 27 (8): 1–19. doi:10.1080/0966369X.2019.1664420.
- Alinder, Sara, and Magnus Jonsson. 2004. *Söderhavet. En spännande resa genom Stilla havets övärld. [The South Pacific. An Exciting Journey through the Pacific Island World]*. Stockholm: Horisont Förlag.
- Batliwala, Srilatha. 1994. "The Meaning of Women's Empowerment: New Concepts from Action." In *Population Policies reconsidered – Health, Empowerment and Rights*, edited by Gita Sen, Adrienne Germain, and Lincoln C. Chen, 127–138. Boston: Harvard Center for Population and Development Studies.
- Boodoosingh, Ramona, Melanie Beres, and David Tombs. 2018. "Research Briefing: Violence against Women in Samoa." *Women's Studies Journal* 32 (1/2): 33–56.
- Brash, Celeste, Brett Atkinson, Jean-Bernard Carillet, Jayne D'Arcy, Virginia Jealous, and Craig McLachlan. 2012. *South Pacific*. 5th ed. Carlton: Lonely Planet Publications.
- Cahn, Miranda. 2008. "Indigenous Entrepreneurship, Culture and Micro-Enterprise in the Pacific Islands: Case Studies from Samoa." *Entrepreneurship & Regional Development* 20 (1): 1–18. doi:10.1080/08985620701552413.
- Cole, Stroma. 2018. "Introduction: Gender Equality and Tourism – Beyond Empowerment." In *Gender Equality and Tourism – Beyond Empowerment*, edited by Stroma Cole, 1–11. Oxford: Cabi.
- Cope, Meghan. 2016. "Organizing and Analyzing Qualitative Data." In *Qualitative Research Methods in Human Geography*, edited by Iain Hay, 373–393. Ontario: Oxford University Press.

- Cornwall, Andrea. 2016. "Women's Empowerment: What Works?" *Journal of International Development* 28 (3): 342–359. doi:10.1002/jid.3210.
- Curry, George N. 2003. "Moving beyond Postdevelopment: Facilitating Indigenous Alternatives for "Development." *Economic Geography* 79 (4): 405–423. doi:10.1111/j.1944-8287.2003.tb00221.x.
- Dragicevich, Peter, and Craig Mclachlan. 2009. *Samoa & Tonga*. Carlton: Lonely Planet Publications.
- Fairbairn-Dunlop, Peggy. 1994. "Gender, Culture and Tourism Development in Western Samoa." In *Tourism: A Gender Analysis*, edited by Vivian Kinnaird and Derek Hall, 121–141. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons.
- Feagaimaali'i-Luamanu, Joyetter. 2016. "U.N. Funds 'Economic Empowerment of Nofotane Women' in Rural Samoa." *Samoa News*, May 09. Accessed 17 May 2019. <https://www.samoanews.com/regional/un-funds-%E2%80%9Ceconomic-empowerment-nofotane-women%E2%80%9D-rural-samoa>
- Ferguson, Lucy. 2010. "Interrogating 'Gender' in Development Policy and Practice: The World Bank, Tourism and Microenterprise in Honduras." *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 12 (1): 3–24. doi:10.1080/14616740903429080.
- Garrigós-Simón, Fernando, José Luis Galdón-Salvador, and Ignacio Gil-Pechuán. 2015. "The Economic Sustainability of Tourism Growth through Leakage Calculation." *Tourism Economics* 21 (4): 721–739. doi:10.5367/te.2014.0372.
- Gibson-Graham, J. K. 2008. "Diverse Economies: Performative Practices for 'Other Worlds.'" *Progress in Human Geography* 32 (5): 613–632. doi:10.1177/0309132508090821.
- Gidwani, Vinay. 2002. "The Unbearable Modernity of 'Development'? Canal Irrigation and Development Planning in Western India." *Progress in Planning* 58 (1): 1–80. doi:10.1016/S0305-9006(02)00017-X.
- Gupta, Akhil. 1998. *Postcolonial Developments: Agriculture in the Making of Modern India*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Herod, Andrew. 2018. *Labor*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- lati, lati. 2013. "Samoa's Price for 25 Years of Political Stability." *The Journal of Pacific History* 48 (4): 443–463. doi:10.1080/00223344.2013.841537.
- Johnson, Cate M. 2015. "Gender, Empowerment, and Cultural Preservation at Topu Honis Shelter Home, Timor-Leste." *Gender, Place & Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography* 22 (10): 1408–1425. doi:10.1080/0966369X.2014.970134.
- Kabeer, Naila. 1999. "Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment." *Development and Change* 30 (3): 435–464. doi:10.1111/1467-7660.00125.
- Katz, Jack. 2019. "On Becoming an Ethnographer." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 48 (1): 16–50. doi:10.1177/0891241618777801.
- Kearns, Robin A. 2016. "Placing Observation in the Research Toolkit." In *Qualitative Research Methods in Human Geography*, edited by Iain Hay, 313–333. Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press.
- Lawson, Victoria A. 2000. "Arguments within Geographies of Movement: The Theoretical Potential of Migrants' Stories." *Progress in Human Geography* 24 (2): 173–189. doi:10.1191/030913200672491184.
- Lilomaiaava-Doktor, Sa'iliemanu. 2004. "Fa'a-Samoa and Population Movement from the inside out: The Case of Salelologa, Savai'i." PhD diss., University of Hawai'i.
- Lilomaiaava-Doktor, Sa'iliemanu. 2009. "Beyond 'Migration': Samoan Population Movement (Malaga) and the Geography of Social Space (Vā)." *The Contemporary Pacific* 21 (1): 1–32. doi:10.1353/cp.0.0035.

- Macpherson, Cluny, and La'avasa Macpherson. 2011. "Churches and the Economy of Samoa." *The Contemporary Pacific* 23 (2): 303–337. doi:10.1353/cp.2011.0042.
- McKinnon, Katharine, Michelle Carnegie, Katherine Gibson, and Claire Rowland. 2016. "Gender Equality and Economic Empowerment in the Solomon Islands and Fiji: A Place-Based Approach." *Gender, Place & Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography* 23 (10): 1376–1391. doi:10.1080/0966369X.2016.1160036.
- Meleisea, Malama, and Penelope Schoeffel. 2017. "Forty-Five Years of Pacific Island Studies: some Reflections." *Oceania* 87 (3): 337–343. doi:10.1002/occea.5166.
- Peck, Jamie, Nik Theodore. 2012. "Politicizing Contingent Work: Countering Neoliberal Labor Market Regulation ... from the Bottom up?" *South Atlantic Quarterly* 111 (4): 741–761. doi:10.1215/00382876-1724165.
- Peredo, Ana María, and James J. Chrisman. 2006. "Toward a Theory of Community-Based Enterprise." *Academy of Management Review* 31 (2): 309–328. doi:10.5465/amr.2006.20208683.
- Raghuram, Parvati. 1999. "Religion and Development." In *Culture and Global Change*, edited by Tracey Skelton, and Tim Allen, 232–239. London: Routledge.
- Rogaly, Ben. 2015. "Disrupting Migration Stories: Reading Life Histories through the Lens of Mobility and Fixity." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 33: 528–544. doi:10.1068/d13171p.
- Rowlands, Jo. 1997. *Questioning Empowerment: Working with Women in Honduras*. Oxford: Oxfam publishing.
- Samoa Bureau of Statistics. 2016. *Census Projection. Total Population and Estimates 2011–2030*. Apia: Samoa Bureau of Statistics.
- Scheyvens, Regina. 2000. "Promoting Women's Empowerment through Involvement in Ecotourism: Experiences from the Third World." *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* 8 (3): 232–249. doi:10.1080/09669580008667360.
- Singh, Shweta. 2007. "Deconstructing 'Gender and Development' for 'Identities of Women'." *International Journal of Social Welfare* 16 (2): 100–109. doi:10.1111/j.1468-2397.2006.00454.x.
- Stewart-Withers, Rochelle. 2011. "Contesting a Third World Development Category: Female-Headed Households in Samoa." *Women's Studies International Forum* 34 (3): 171–184. doi:10.1016/j.wsif.2010.11.003.
- Stratford, Elaine, and Matthew Bradshaw. 2016. "Qualitative Research Design and Rigour." In *Qualitative Research Methods in Human Geography*, edited by Iain Hay, 117–129. Ontario: Oxford University Press.
- Thornton, Alec, Maria T. Kerlake, and Tony Binns. 2010. "Alienation and Obligation: Religion and Social Change in Samoa." *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* 51 (1): 1–16. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8373.2010.01410.x.
- Tucker, Hazel, and Brenda Boonabaana. 2012. "A Critical Analysis of Tourism, Gender and Poverty Reduction." *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* 20 (3): 437–455. doi:10.1080/09669582.2011.622769.
- Willis, Katie. 2011. *Theories and Practices of Development*. 2nd ed. Abingdon: Routledge.