Developing Safe Spaces for Fa'afafine Community to Increase Advocacy a Story about Collaboration

American Samoa Alliance against Domestic Violence

10.06.2023

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Luana Scanlan

- Prime Minister of Independent Samoa, Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese Taisi Efi: "I am not an individual: I am an integral part of the cosmos. I am not an individual, *because I share my. tofi (inheritance) with my family, my village, and my nation. I belong to my family and my family belongs to me. I belong to my village and my village belongs to me...this is the essence of my sense of belonging.*" (Tui Atua, 2003).

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How are you coming into this space?

- What do you hope to take with you today?

It began with many meetings...

such a beautiful exchange tonight. Thank you Alliance for hosting our LEGEND Zone focus group tonight over dinner. #safespace #lgbtqiRights #betterSOFIAS #faafafineSamoa
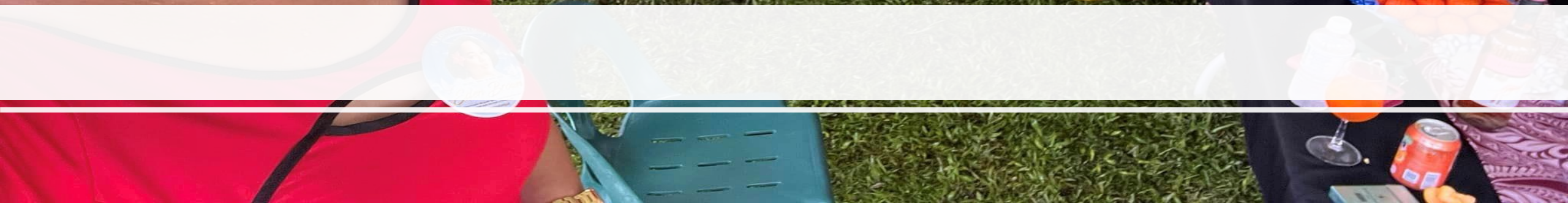
SOFIAS COHORT= ZONE Leaders

Project Activities & Outcomes

Developing Safe Spaces with & for Fa'afafine To Increase Advocacy

SOFIAS members with Alliance's *(front center)* Judy Matautia, Training Coordinator, and Jennifer Tofaeono, Executive Director

FA'AFETAI TELE LAVA
Fa'afafine are known for their creativity, tenacity, and resilience. The flowers portrayed here represent the colorful, larger than life personalities of those who participated in this planning process. We thank them for their time, honesty and support and acknowledge their partnership in this important endeavor.

O le tele o sulu e maua ai figota, e mama se avega pe a to amo fa'atasi . . . My strength comes not from me alone but from many.

One of the most interesting, and tight-knit, communities in American Samoa is that of the fa'afafine. This 'third gender' spirit is celebrated through a variety of mediums including pageantry, poetry, music, and fine arts but little data exists to support the development of culturally safe and appropriate interventions to address inequities, including service provision for domestic violence, experienced by this marginalized community. Our assessment represents a partnership between the Society of Fa'afafine in American Samoa (SOFIAS) and the Alliance to develop fa'afafine self-advocacy that mitigates the impact of social, economic, health, and cultural inequities.

We extend our sincerest fa'afetai to the many service providers and partnering organizations who opened gateways, supported our efforts, and commit to ending gender-based violence.

PROJECT AIM: develop a data informed plan to train community-based fa'afafine advocates and build a supporting infrastructure.

STRATEGY: conduct a mixed-methods, evidence-based, territory-wide assessment of the third-gender experience and consequent needs for physical, psychological, and social support.

ACTIVITIES:
- Survey 200 self-identifying fa'afafine
- 5 interviews with self-identifying fa'afafine
- Survey 50 service providers
- 16 interviews with service providers
- 22 fa'afafine participate in 3 focus groups
- 7 podcasts produced

OUTCOMES:
- Increased collaboration with, and understanding of, the fa'afafine community
- Increased collaboration with, and understanding of local service providers
- Established relationships with SOFIAS board and zone leadership
- Completed plan to establish fa'afafine advocacy training and infrastructure.

"Maybe the Alliance can help SOFIAS develop the leadership so that they're better equipped to create a safe space." [KI4]

In the past year, have you been **denied equal treatment or service**, such as at a place of business, government agency, or public place because you are fa'afafine?

Yes/Ioe	9.00%	18
No/Leai	91.00%	182

In the past year, did anyone **physically attack you** (such as grab you, throw something at you, punch you, use a weapon) because you are fa'afafine?
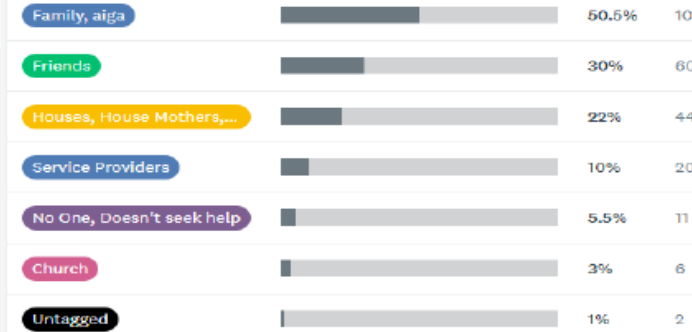
Yes/Ioe	8.50%	17
No/Leai	91.50%	183

In the past year, did anyone **verbally harass you** because you are fa'afafine?

Yes/Ioe	17.00%	34
No/Leai	83.00%	166

In the past year, did anyone stop you from entering or **deny you access to a bathroom** because you are fa'afafine?

Yes/Ioe	11.50%	23
No/Leai	88.50%	177

Where do you think fa'afafine in abusive situations are going for help?

Family, aiga	50.5%	101
Friends	30%	60
Houses, House Mothers,...	22%	44
Service Providers	10%	20
No One, Doesn't seek help	5.5%	11
Church	3%	6
Untagged	1%	2

The fa'afafine interviewed see their community as marginalized and in need of support but they also recognize their potential as educated leaders and as the 'SOFIAS' to help their own members. Their statements corroborate *sentiments of resilience and independence* reflected in the Focus Group data which also recognize that fa'afafine must help themselves:
   "We think we can handle it (DVSA) ourselves . . . we can do everything ourselves."
   ". . . the name calling . . . it's built us to become strong people."
   ". . . we push our own forward, and I don't know, I just think more in our own community."

Highlights

The Project proposed that fa'afafine experience discrimination, socioeconomic inequities, isolation, and gender-based violence in their relationships, homes, communities and within the systems of healthcare and justice. **The key informants, like most survey respondents, did not report experiencing this phenomenon.** The majority report acceptance by professionals and religious leaders. They did not report experiencing homophobia. *"I think it would be so foreign here. Because there's never really a big argument about fa'afafine on a political* (or sociopolitical) *spectrum here."* [KI 2]

Instead, the informants reveal that '**challenges**' and '**needs**' of fa'afafine experiencing DVSA **are rooted in interpersonal relationships between fa'afafine, and between fa'afafine and their families and friends.** Needs are more relational than material or physical.

"We need (help) because we're still a marginalized community. They (fa'afafine) really need a safe space" [KI 1]
"Safe spaces for them to come to as a resource." [KI 4] *"There needs to be an open conversation about it, there needs to be a dialogue somewhere about what is happening to fa'afafine in our community, from that will bring about advocacy and educational communication with the community."* [KI 3] The informants agree that abuse and violence don't happen to fa'afafine specifically because they are fa'afafine.
"If they're mad, whatever the situation, you're not a fa'afafine first. First, you are the member of a dynamic family." [KI 2]

Guiding Principles

- **Fa'aSamoa – perspective & values**

- **Feminist Principles – approach & methods**
  Discovery by and for fa'afafine.
  Fa'afafine voices prioritized and empowered in safe environments.
  Ethical protocols guide data collection, analysis, and reporting.

Final Outcome

A **culturally tailored, fa'afafine informed plan**

to build a **community-based coordinated response** to

the needs of fa'afafine suffering from domestic violence and sexual assault

Goal #1: Establish a stakeholder-informed collective understanding of the fa'afafine experience of domestic and sexual violence to guKIe planning activities		
Objective 1	**Objective 2**	**Objective 3**
Task: In months 1 – 3 establish a stakeholder cohort to facilitate data collection and project planning	In months 4 – 9 complete a needs assessment amongst 10% (est. n=200) fa'afafine	In months 4 – 9 conduct a gap analysis of data collected through stakeholder interviews (est. n=20)
Outcome: Stakeholder Cohort established includes SOFIAS Zone Leaders, Project Staff, Evaluator	**Outcome**: 200 surveys completed by October 18, 2022 – data uploaded to Survey Monkey	**Outcome**: stakeholder interviews completed January, 2023
Goal #2: Collaborate with stakeholders to plan training and community outreach that can reduce the impact of violence on the Fa'afafine community		
Objective 1	**Objective 2**	**Objective 3**
In months 10 – 12 formalize assessment findings and report back to stakeholders	In months 13 – 15 convene stakeholder groups to outline priorities and strategies for building infrastructure for advocacy training and sustainable partnerships	In months 16 – 24 facilitate the report back to stakeholders, finalize and disseminate the Proposed Plan, establish infrastructure for community-based advocacy training

Method

*When methods, which hold values intrinsic to western cultures are applied to non-western communities, they contribute directly to **exclusions and misrepresentations**.*

A **mixed-methods assessment** was conducted by the Alliance and SOFIAS and overseen by the Advisory Cohort comprised of Samoan fa'afafine.

Completed Activities

6-member fa'afafine Advisory Cohort who oversaw data collection and planning

200 surveys *(10% of total Fa'afafine community)* **collected from fa'afafine** and analyzed by October 2022

16 interviews and 24 surveys completed with service providers by January 2023.

22 focus group participants who strengthened the depth and breadth of survey result

Survey aims:

(1) assess the health impacts and social **experiences** of fa'afafine in American Samoa,

(2) identify their social service and health **needs**, and

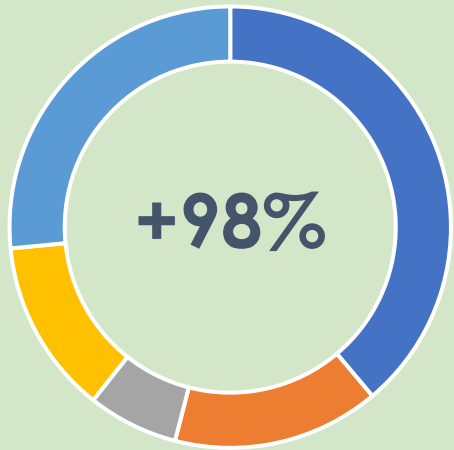(3) identify factors to target through public/community health **interventions**

conducted January-October 2022 via Survey Monkey or paper form which was manually input to Survey Monkey.
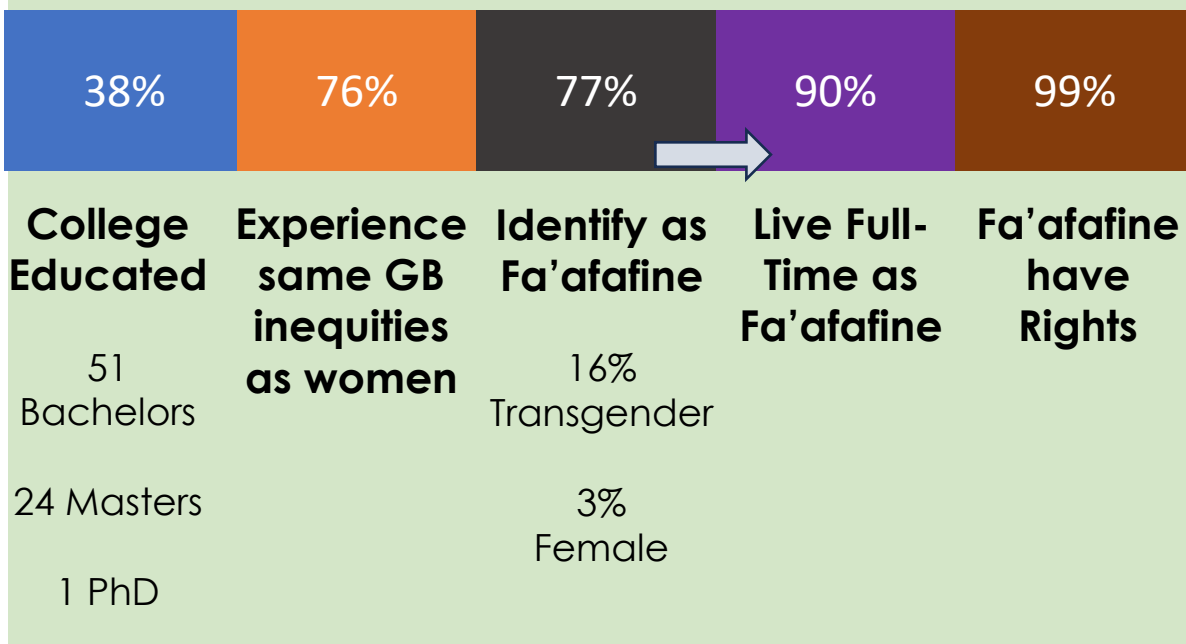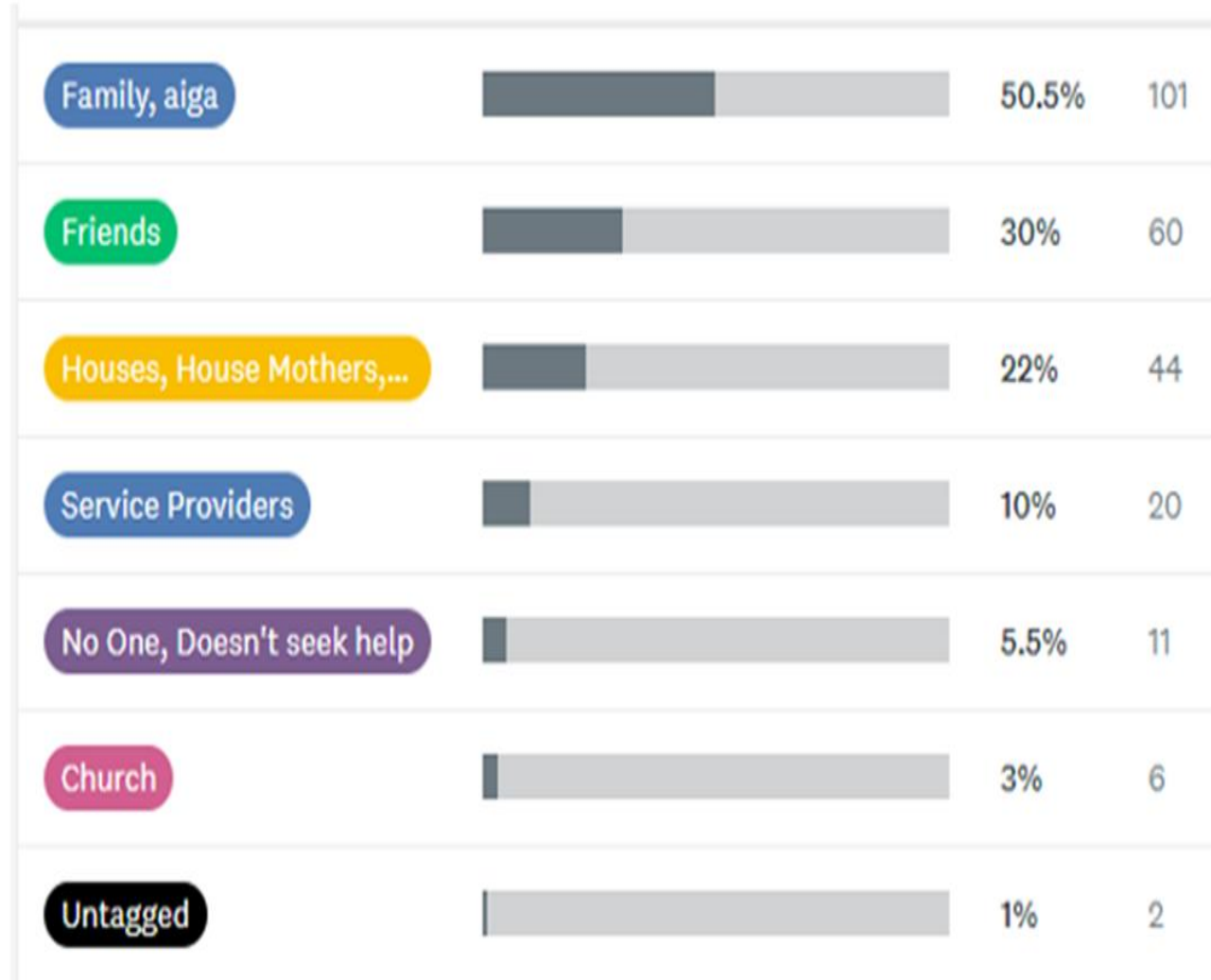

Inclusion criteria include:

• age 18 years and over plus
• self-identifying as fa'afafine
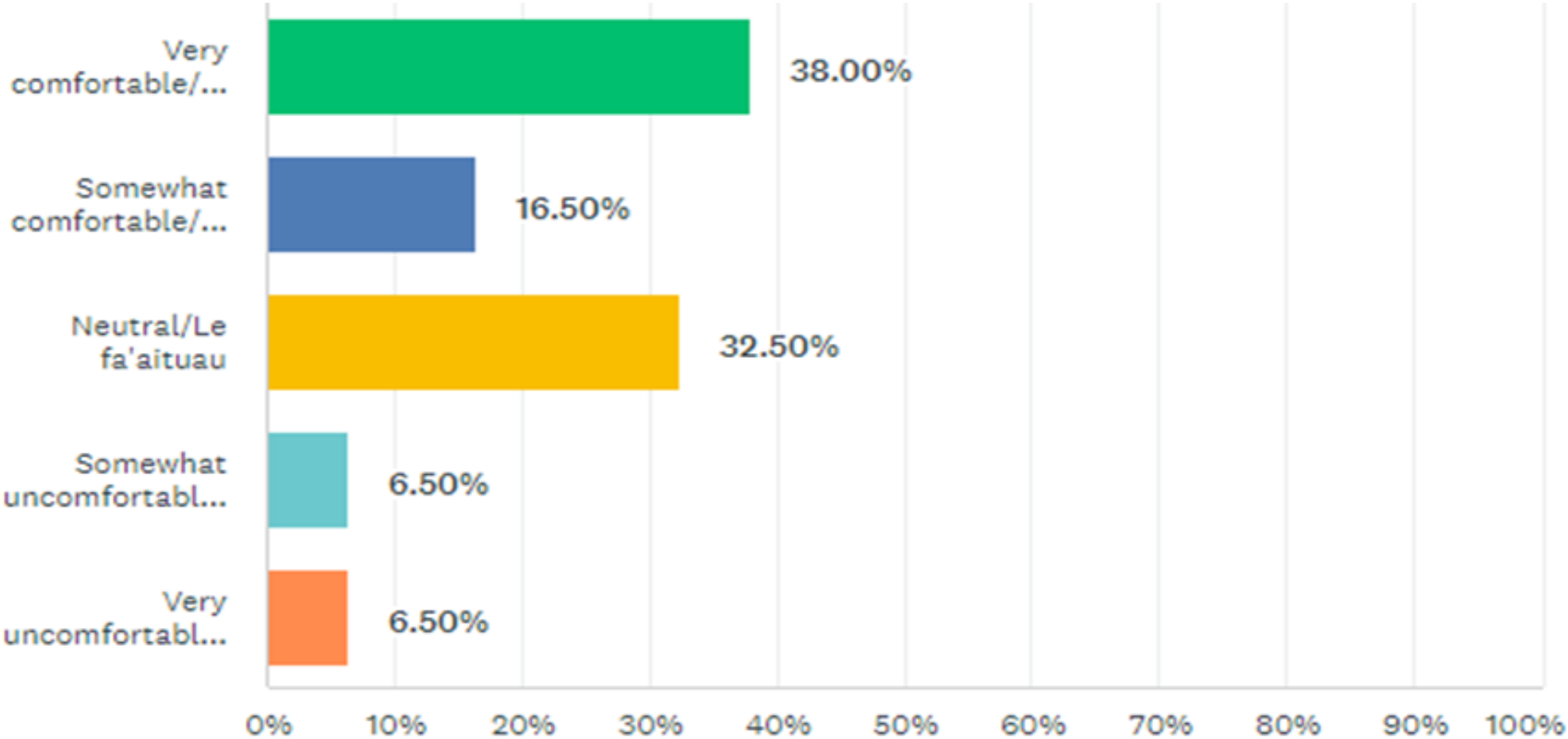• written consent before proceeding.

Survey Highlights

+98%

need advocacy and protection

38%	76%	77%	90%	99%
College Educated	**Experience same GB inequities as women**	**Identify as Fa'afafine**	**Live Full-Time as Fa'afafine**	**Fa'afafine have Rights**
51 Bachelors		16% Transgender		
24 Masters				
1 PhD		3% Female		

Q13: Where do you think fa'afafine in domestic abuse situations are going for help?

Family, aiga	50.5%	101
Friends	30%	60
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Q26: If you needed help from the police, how comfortable would you feel asking them for help?

Response	Percentage
Very comfortable/...	38.00%
Somewhat comfortable/...	16.50%
Neutral/Le fa'aituau	32.50%
Somewhat uncomfortabl...	6.50%
Very uncomfortabl...	6.50%

Survey Indicators

- Fa'afafine are aware of **gender-based inequities** but only a small number stated they experience them, for example, in the past year . . .

    8 were denied equal treatment or service in the past year

    23 were denied access to a public bathroom (male or female) in the past year

- They are **not accessing social services**

- 70 cited '**personal factors**' as being the **most *challenging*** for the fa'afafine community around DVSA issues.

- They are **experiencing violence,** for example, in the past year . . .

    17 were physically attacked because they are fa'afafine

    16 were physically attacked by strangers in public because of their gender

    34 were verbally harassed because they are fa'afafine

Talanoaga
Key Informant Interviews and Focus Groups with Fa'afafine

Aim: document the **help-seeking practices and specific needs** of adult fa'afafine who experienced, or are witness to another's experience, of domestic violence and sexual assault

Three questions guided the recorded discussions.

- What are needs of fa'afafine who experience DVSA? Do they need help?
- How do fa'afafine victims of DVSA get help when experiencing DVSA?
- What resources are needed to support fa'afafine victims of DVSA?

Five survey participants agreed to be interviewed via Zoom, **twenty-two survey participants participated in one of three focus groups**

What are needs of fa'afafine who experience DVSA?

- **Social norm change**

  "A lot of times the feeling of shame reinforces the idea that all fa'afafine are good for is sexual actions against them."

- **Needs are rooted in interpersonal relationships**

- *"We call them girls with no license...remember living dual lives without licenses of approval from their parents."*

- **Help fa'afafine discuss DVSA issues**

  "I know personally, in our community we have a culture of keeping things under wraps, like in our families...silencing the issue...translates into keeping it hidden."

Where do fa'afafine victims get help?

- **SOFIAS**

"They would seek comfort through the SOFIAS community for counsel, advice, stuff like that."

"SOFIAS is already the go-to...and the Alliance."

"She would probably go to someone older or another fa'afafine."

- **Nowhere**

"I saw a young fa'afafine on Tik Tok telling her story about being sexually assaulted by her neighbor so that tells me she had nowhere else to go."

"They wouldn't report it (to police) unless they're really beat up."

What resources are needed to support fa'afafine victims of DVSA?

- **Single support system run by fa'afafine for fa'afafine**

  "Help fa'afafine develop their own skills so when these issues arise my guess is that the first place they go is to SOFIAS so SOFIAS should have training and like an action plan."

- **Safe spaces**

  "Like, a center to go to for shelter, help…provide education to the community about the issues, professional help like real mental health resources, advice, and counsel."

  "An intervention, support group, helping parents know how to be supportive of their fa'afafine child."

Underlying Themes

- **Need for leadership in the fa'afafine community**

  "SOFIAS has all these educated fa'afafine…we should establish a non-profit and collect our own data."

  "We need a better route to support fa'afafine. SOFIAS should prioritize help for victims."

- **Need for an 'official' space** for the SOFIAS to offer services including training, education, shelter, safety, counseling, direction.
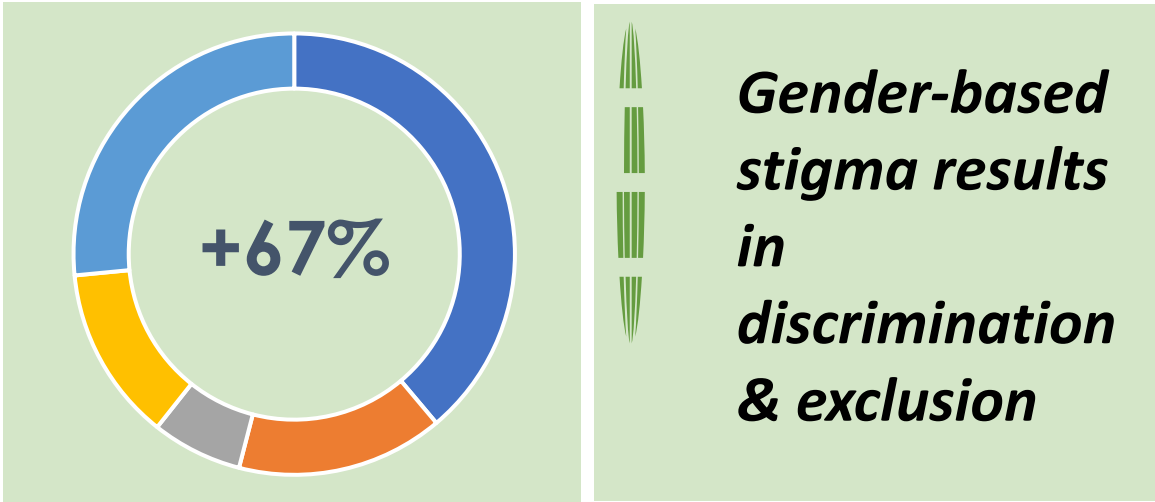
- **Marginalized but Mighty**

  "…the name calling – it's built us to become strong people."
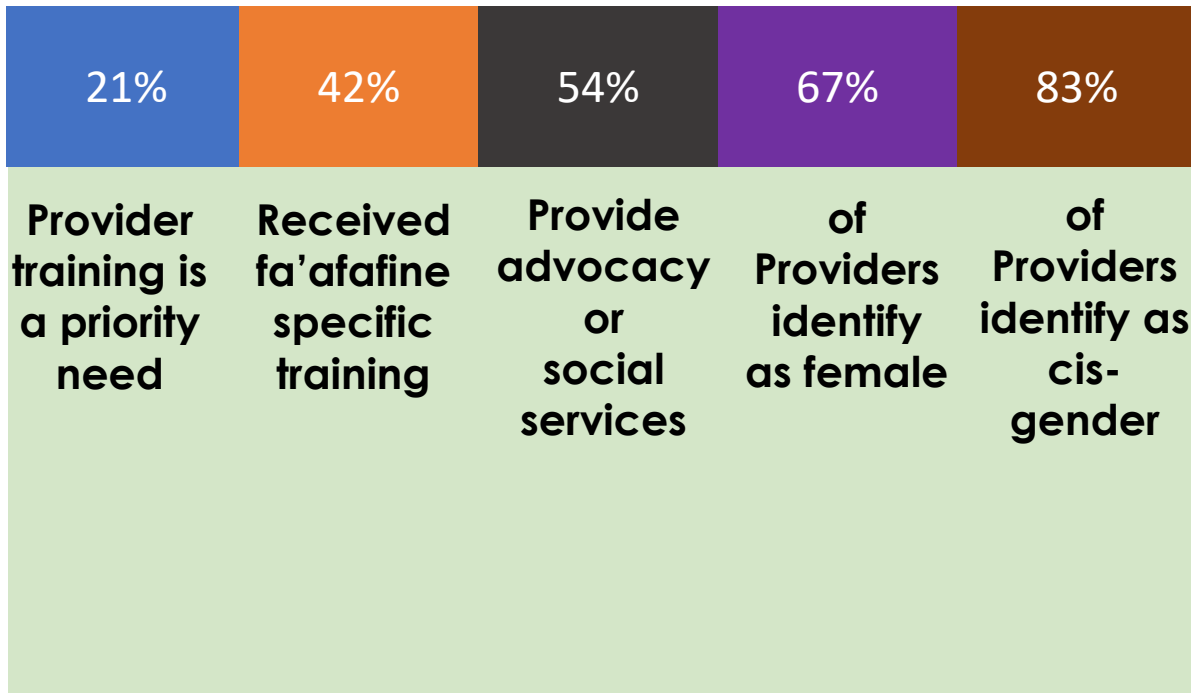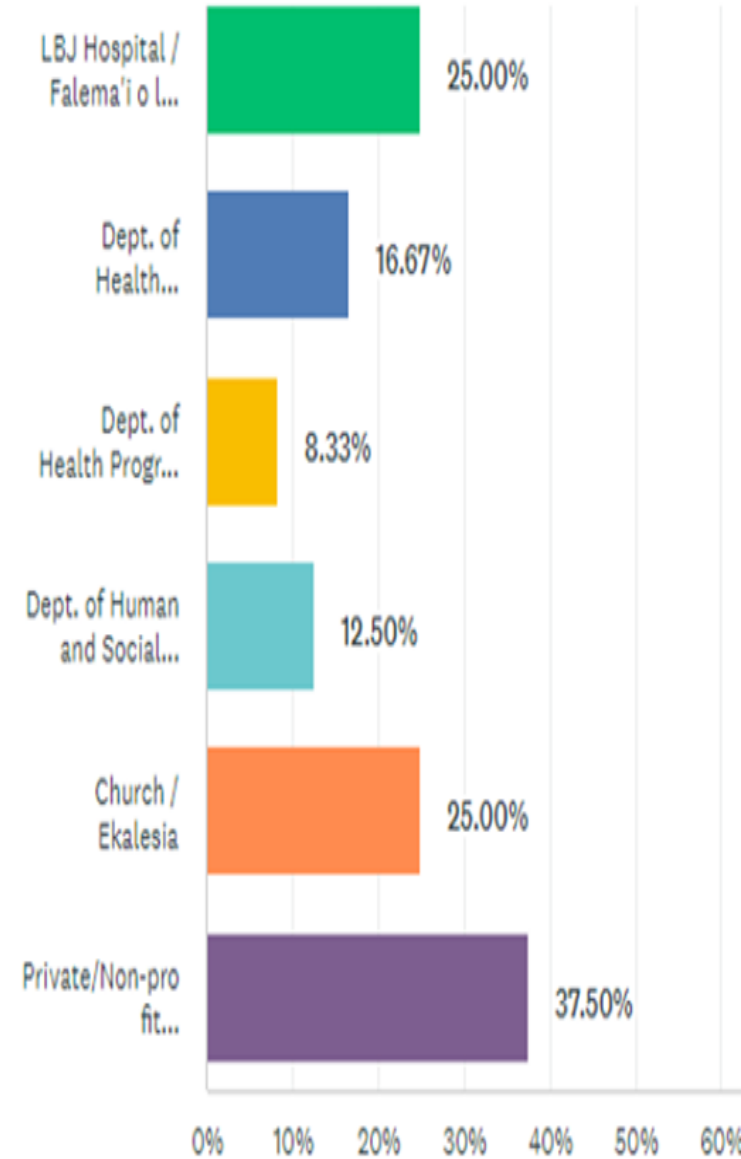
  "…we push our own forward."

Summary

- **Barriers** to help-seeking are found in both the fa'afafine community and social care services. Most are rooted in **interpersonal, relational**, issues like lack of effective communication, unstable relationships, a paradox between Christian values and fa'afafine lifestyles. Survey respondents cite 'jealousy', 'self-acceptance', 'gossip', and other relational issues which jeopardize their confidence and self-efficacy.

- Fa'afafine are **wary of systems-based services** and prefer an individualized, personal approach to service interventions. Even if adequate support systems were in place respondents are unsure of whether fa'afafine would trust them enough to utilize those services. **Key informants advocate for services by and for fa'afafine**.

- The **family and social network of fa'afafine is best placed to provide care for fa'afafine** experiencing domestic violence.

Survey Highlights

+67%

Gender-based stigma results in discrimination & exclusion

21%	42%	54%	67%	83%
Provider training is a priority need	**Received fa'afafine specific training**	**Provide advocacy or social services**	**of Providers identify as female**	**of Providers identify as cis-gender**

Q6 Where do you provide services? (24 answered)

Location	Percentage
LBJ Hospital / Falema'i o l...	25.00%
Dept. of Health...	16.67%
Dept. of Health Progr...	8.33%
Dept. of Human and Social...	12.50%
Church / Ekalesia	25.00%
Private/Non-profit...	37.50%

- **50% believe fa'afafine experience challenges when accessing services because of their gender.**

- **25% cite gender based physical and verbal violence experienced by fa'afafine**

  "(they) struggle with coming to terms with their sexuality and gender expression and may succumb to peer pressure leading to harmful behaviors like self-harm, paranoia, body dysphoria."

- **17% witnessed fa'afafine feel and voice that they are...**

  *"uncomfortable when placed in an all-male (*hospital*) room and being forced to share one bathroom' and*

  *'refusing treatment due to (*their*) being fa'afafine'.*

Key Informant Findings

Training for clinical, emergency, and social service providers to appropriately support and address the needs of fa'afafine is a **critical need**.

Respondents were equally split on whether or not fa'afafine experience unique gender-based challenges.

Stigma – resulting in discrimination, exclusion, and bullying – is viewed as the **greatest challenge** fa'afafine experience.

Public education and promoting equity and empathy are considered **key steps** towards addressing stigma.

Establishing inclusive, accepting, accessible services and growing public awareness through education and acknowledgement of the fa'afafine gender are suggested to improve service provision.

Last Words

- **'Safe Space' -** a place or person of safety or protection - a physical place or state of mind, or a collective feeling of solidarity as a member of a family or village. Participants reveal that they do occupy a unique space in their families and communities – one characterized by reciprocity, service, and caregiving. They find safety in groups: "*close friends and family*", in the 'SOFIAS', with "sister fa'afafine". However, they also **express a strong need for an 'official' safe space designed and occupied by their own community.**

- **Empowering the fa'afafine community by training fa'afafine to be advocates for their own will move them towards a position of strength and independence.**

Fa'afetai tele lava!

Manuia le po!