

# 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'afasi . . . 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/loe 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/loe 8.50% 17

**No/Leai** 91.50% 183

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

Yes/loe 17.00% 34

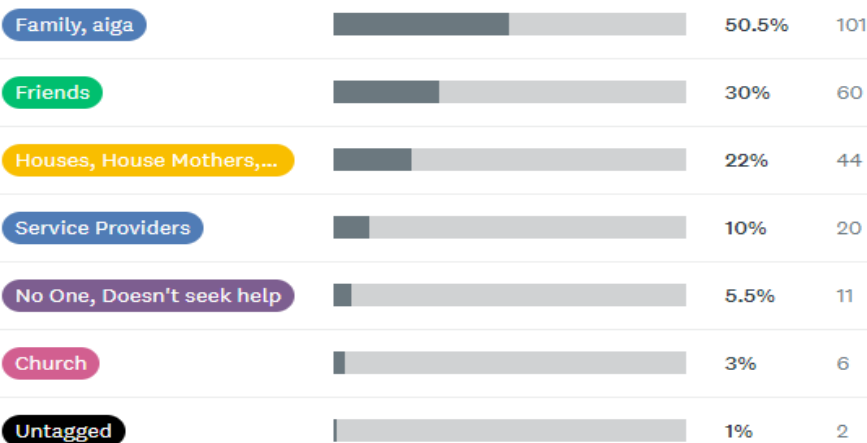
**No/Leai** 83.00% 166

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

Yes/loe 11.50% 23

**No/Leai** 88.50% 177

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



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 2]

*“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]

