

**From:** APIA

**Sent:** Tuesday, 12 December 2023 1:10 pm

**To:** APIA; DS PDG; DEVPP; PACPF; EUR; HAGUE

**Cc:** DCE; CEO; ALL DIVISIONS (FM); ...ALL POSTS; FM.P/S MFA (Seemail); Cable Exchange DFAT-AUS; Cable Exchange FCDO-UK; Cable Exchange GAC-CAN

**Subject:** SĀMOA: AMBASSADOR FOR GENDER EQUALITY – (PACIFIC) | TUIA TANGATA ATTENDS THE LAUNCH OF ALOFA INITIATIVE

[IN CONFIDENCE]

## Rāpopoto – Summary

Aotearoa New Zealand's Ambassador for Gender Equality (Pacific)/Tuia Tangata, Louisa Wall, attended the launch this month of the Alofa Initiative. The Initiative is the first organisation in Samoa that advocates for the human rights of youth encompassing diverse sexual orientations, gender identities, expressions, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC). The launch was supported by funding from the Equity and Inclusion Enabling Fund, and the Dutch Embassy to New Zealand. The visit coincided with Samoa's Fa'afafine & Fa'afatama Week 2023 and the UN Women 16 Days of Activism programme. This provided additional opportunities for engagement with both Samoa Fa'afafine Association, and organisations representing people of diverse SOGIESC.

## Hohenga – Action

For information

## Pūrongo – Report

Ambassador Wall attended the launch of the Alofa Initiative on December 9<sup>th</sup>, and undertook official calls in Sāmoa from 6 – 12 December.

2 Ambassador Wall's programme included attendance at the Fa'afafine & Fa'afatama National Forum and the Miss Sāmoa Fa'afafine contest. She undertook a full range of meetings including with the Sāmoa Fa'afafine Association; the Pacific Sexual and Gender Diversity Network; the Australian High Commission; Brown Girl Woke; Yuki Kihara (Artist); Ronnie Aiolupotea (Head of Samoa Cyber Emergency Response Team); Mele Mauala (UN Women); Fonoti Pio Molioo (Husband of Minister for Women, Community and Social Development) Dr Patrick Thompson (Auckland University); the Acting Director Human Rights of the Sāmoan Ombudsman, and; a talanoa with Professor Serge Tcherkezoff, Alex Sua (President Sāmoa Fa'afafine), and writer Sia Figel.

### *Launch of the Alofa Initiative*

3 Brown Girl Woke (BGW), an organisation focused on youth development and well-being that has acted as an incubator for NGOs that support youth initiatives, set up the Alofa Initiative. The Initiative will remain part of BGW until there are sufficient resources for it to become independent.

4 The Alofa Initiative fills a niche that is currently unmet in Sāmoan civil society. It intends to support youth health and well-being through preserving Samoan cultural heritage, human rights advocacy work, creating safe spaces, educating young people and the public and diverse representation. It is open to and supportive of youth from diverse SOGIESC.

5 It intends to set up a public facility will provide the following services for youth health and well-being:

- Counselling and Support: Professional counselling services will be available for youth facing challenges related to identity, mental health, and other issues.
- Health Workshops: Regular workshops will cover physical health, mental well-being, sexual health education, and coping strategies.
- Resource Library: A comprehensive library of educational materials will empower youth with accurate information about various health topics.
- Community Events: The facility will host events that promote unity, understanding, and cultural exchange among young individuals.
- Advocacy and Leadership Training: Youth will have opportunities to develop advocacy skills, fostering the growth of future leaders.

6 The launch of the Initiative was supported by the Dutch Embassy and the MFAT Equity and Inclusion Fund (stream B) - (E&I Fund FM 12 September 2023 refers). A large number of people including the leadership of the Samoa Fa'afafine Association (SFA) attended the launch. There has been long running tension within the Fa'afafine community about how Fa'afafine should relate to people that identify with western concepts like LGBTQIA+, so the endorsement of the SFA was crucial in legitimising the Alofa Initiative as an organisation that can support individuals that do not fit within traditional Samoan gender norms.

7 The launch started with an impassioned sermon from Rev. Siaoisi Salesulu. He highlighted the challenges of launching an organisation such as this in the deeply Christian Samoan setting and set out a framework for Christians to approach the work of the Alofa Initiative. A panel discussion chaired by Ambassador Wall included a number of high profile defenders of SOGIESC rights from around the Pacific, and highlighted the challenges faced by youth of diverse SOGIESC backgrounds. Challenges identified include equitable access to safety, respect, secure housing, accessible healthcare, dignified employment, and emotional well-being. The value of Brown Girl Woke's advocacy was highlighted in discussions with UN Women country programme manager Mele Mauala who highlighted its *HUSH* Musical supported by UNESCO and other work that they have done aimed at addressing Gender Based Violence.

8 In line with E&I Fund guidelines, additional reporting on the activity will follow once the Alofa Initiative has made more progress in the setup of its office.

*Fa'afafine and fa'afatama – supporting rights of people of diverse SOGIESC?*

9 Meetings with the Fa'afafine organisation and other organisations and individuals who support people of diverse SOGIESC, highlighted a growing sense of acceptance and support for the SOGIESC community by those individuals who identify as Fa'afafine, and

now also those who identify as Fa'afatama. In a sign of the change in attitudes, the President of SFA announced that the organisation will consider changing its name to include Fa'afatama in next year's AGM.

10 Sua also noted that as an enduring, pre-colonial, cultural taonga, Fa'afafine and Fa'afatama are not members of the SOGIESC community. However, he underscored that there is opportunity for Fa'afafine and Fa'afatama to be more visible in their support for people that have identities that do not fit Samoan norms. He asked for greater understanding of the struggles of people of diverse SOGIESC, as they are often similar to those of Fa'afafine and Fa'afatama, but frequently more profound due to the lack of cultural recognition.

*Embracing diversity and challenging traditional norms*

11 Professor Serge Tcherkezoff, Alex Sua (President SFA), and writer Sia Figel featured during a talanoa. Their discussion centred on the recognition that there exists a broader spectrum that challenges traditional norms and encourages a more inclusive understanding of gender identity that goes beyond the four accepted genders in Sāmoan society. It was acknowledged that Sāmoan society is navigating a delicate balance - acknowledging the importance of cultural heritage while embracing the evolving views on gender roles and identities. Mutual respect and support between Fa'afafine and people of diverse SOGIESC was considered key to advancing the human rights of both. This sentiment was echoed in other meetings, both with Fa'afafine and Fa'afatama, and people of diverse SOGIESC.

12 A conversation with former Prime Minister and Patron of the SFA, Tuila'epa Sa'ilele Malielegaoi highlighted the degree to which attitudes have shifted. He recalled that when he first agreed to be Patron, he was ridiculed in the Samoa Observer and faced questions from friends and family, yet now there is growing acceptance of Fa'afafine. He noted the positive public profile of Fa'afafine and that Fa'atama although culturally congruent tended to be on the margins and less visible.

13 Artist Yuki Kihara highlighted that while it was good to be challenging norms, it was important for this to be done in a manner that respected the Samoan context and for the change to be led by Samoans and supported by the SFA. She highlighted the incongruence of the rainbow as a symbol in western Pride movements which already had different associations in Samoan culture. There was discussion about the inclusive progressive Pride flag as a more specific and appropriate representation of SOGIESC rights. She shared details of her MFAT-supported 2024 Paradise Camp exhibition in Samoa and highlighted her proposal to produce a booklet detailing the work behind the scenes which illustrates that a broad range of people are supportive of Fa'afafine in Samoa as a means of legitimising support from a broader range of people. She noted that some additional funding was still required for her exhibition and Ambassador Wall undertook to raise this with Friends of SOGIESC in New Zealand.

*Working together to progress gender equality*

14 The meeting with the Australian High Commission provided an opportunity to discuss mutual areas of interest and challenges. This included issues such as gender and climate change, s6(a)

15 s6(a)

16 s6(a)

17 Ambassador Wall also discussed ways in which Australia and New Zealand might support decriminalisation efforts in Sāmoa. s6(a)

in  
the meeting with the Office of the Ombudsman, a positive response was received to Ambassador Wall's request to consider this issue under the Ombudsman's mandate. s6(a)

18 Mauala (UN Women) suggested that New Zealand consider investing in collaborations with SPREP focused on the intersection of gender and climate action. She recommended we investigate climate gender equality initiatives for collaboration, emphasising the potential impact of aligning policies, expanding programs, targeted financing, research, and fostering partnerships to empower women and marginalised groups while addressing climate-related challenges.

19 In a meeting with Fonoti Pio Molioo, he shared his aspirations for sports infrastructure development in Savaii to foster gender equality. He set out a proposal for a new sports complex in Savaii. s9(2)(f)(iv)

#### *Online safety a challenge for Samoan youth*

20 Ambassador Wall met with Ronnie Aloipotea, head of Samoa Computer Emergency Response Team (SAMCert) to discuss the challenge of online safety people of

diverse SOGIESC. Ronnie noted that while SAMCert was initially established to focus on the technical response, recent roadshows supported by NZCERT had highlighted the social dimension of cybercrime and in particular the impact of cyber bullying, harmful digital communications and scams/identify theft on youth in Samoa (separate API/DEVECO emails refer). Ambassador Wall shared New Zealand's experience with the value of the Harmful Digital Communications Act, and organisations like Netsafe in responding to the range of social harm that is taking place online.

21 Ronnie noted that MCIT is about to undertake a World Bank and DFAT funded review of relevant legislation to identify digital crimes that are not currently accounted for. He hoped that part of the outcome of this review would be new laws which address the harm taking place, and the establishment of an organisation similar to Netsafe or Australia's eSafety Commissioner for people that have been harmed online. Ronnie noted that currently it has had limited success in engaging with companies like Meta to get harmful content taken down, and it was slow to act as its lack of Pacific language capability meant that content was not caught in automated processes. Ambassador Wall undertook to investigate how New Zealand could address this issue using its relationship with tech companies and its Pacific language capability centred in the Ministry for Pacific Peoples.

#### **Tākupu – Comment**

22 Attitudes towards people of diverse SOGIESC continue to evolve in Sāmoa. The tapestry of gender roles is woven intricately into the fabric of cultural heritage, and Sāmoan society has long been characterized by a rich diversity of expressions of gender and sexuality. The increased recognition by Fa'afafine of Fa'atama and people of diverse SOGIESC is a positive step to ensuring those who are often invisible are seen and recognised. The endorsement by SFA of the Alofa Initiative is a meaningful action that will provide a foundation for greater legitimacy in wider Samoan society. In this context, the efforts undertaken by Ambassador Wall to seek and encourage mutual understanding and support between Fa'afafine, Fa'afatama and people of diverse SOGIESC, will be instrumental in ensuring the Alofa Initiative can sustain its vision into the future.

#### **Mutu – End**