



Article

# ‘Let *fa’afafine* shine like diamonds’: Balancing accommodation, negotiation and resistance in gender-nonconforming Samoans’ counter-hegemony

Journal of Sociology  
1–19

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DOI: 10.1177/1440783320964538

journals.sagepub.com/home/jos



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## Abstract

In the Pacific Island country of Samoa, a gender-nonconforming community known as *fa’afafine* is said to constitute part of customary tradition and therefore enjoy cultural legitimacy. Yet *fa’afafine* are also confronted with a binary gender discourse that daily marginalises them within families/communities. This article explores *fa’afafine*’s gendered positioning in contemporary Samoa and the ways in which they have negotiated it to carve out space for oppositional agency, focusing on the strategies employed by the Samoa Fa’afafine Association. Based on semi-structured interviews with *fa’afafine* and other gender-nonconforming Samoans, and guided by Pacific methodology of Talanoa, the article examines *fa’afafine*’s collective pursuits as a case of counter-hegemonic struggle through a Gramscian theoretical lens. If their acts of resistance are covert and incremental, they are effective in aligning Samoa’s powerful cultural institutions with an alternative gender discourse to cultivate social change. The article closes with reflections on possible challenges to this counter-hegemony.

## Keywords

counter-hegemony, *fa’afafine*, gender, Gramsci, Samoa

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In the Pacific Island country of Samoa, a gender-nonconforming community known as *fa'afafine* has attracted a great amount of media and popular attention. The term *fa'afafine* translates as 'in the manner of a woman'. *Fa'afafine* are those assigned male at birth 'whose gendered behaviours are, to varying degrees, feminine', often with sexual/romantic orientation towards masculine men (Schmidt, 2016: 287). Images of *fa'afafine*, such as beauty pageant contestants, have been widely circulated by the local and international media and become a conspicuous face of gender variance in Samoa and the wider Pacific Island region. Part of the popular discourse of *fa'afafine* is the notion that they have historical existence in Samoan tradition and therefore enjoy a degree of cultural legitimacy. Sometimes it has been claimed that a boy born to a family short of feminine labour may be raised as *fa'afafine* (Farran, 2010; Mageo, 1992), although this has been refuted by contemporary researchers (Schoeffel, 2014; Tcherkézoff, 2014). Regardless of their exact historical roots, *fa'afafine* have been said to be shielded from the stigmatisation experienced by gender-nonconforming persons in many other cultures. Media and popular narratives are replete with remarks such as '*fa'afafine* . . . [are] an accepted part of Samoan culture for generations' (Tan, 2016). Perhaps the most symbolic of such alleged cultural affirmations is the Prime Minister Tuilaepa Aiono Sailele Malielegaoi's patronage of the Samoa Fa'afafine Association (SFA).

Yet, as recently as in 2016, the *Samoa Observer's* sensationalist coverage of a *fa'afafine's* suicide<sup>1</sup> outraged the SFA, who described it as an indication of *fa'afafine* not being 'fully functional, free and equal citizens of Samoa' (Tan, 2016). Indeed, since its inception in 2005, the SFA has consistently highlighted and condemned the discrimination, stigmatisation and abuse faced by the *fa'afafine* community. Samoa's 2018 State of Human Rights Report (Samoa Office of the Ombudsman/National Human Rights Institution, 2018) states that 'verbal abuse of *fa'afafine* is so common and normal that many do not see it as a problem so it is not reported, with parents being the most common perpetrators' and that 'young boys showing feminine traits . . . are often subjected to severe violence at the hands of their own families'. Researchers have also documented the marginalisation that *fa'afafine* routinely experience, especially from normative males (Dolgoy, 2000; Schoeffel, 2014). *Fa'afafine* are, then, 'both integrated and marginalised . . . they find themselves between two worlds: gender enlightened and gender repressed' (Farran, 2010: 1). Or, in the words of the founding president of the SFA, the late Roger Stanley, being *fa'afafine* is 'both a blessing and a challenge' (*Outright*, 2017).

How do *fa'afafine* negotiate this multifaceted existence in Samoan society? This is a pertinent question particularly in light of the widespread persecution of sexual and gender-nonconforming persons in the Pacific Island region, where seven countries, including Samoa, continue to criminalise same-sex relations and, even in the countries that have decriminalised, homophobia and transphobia remain rife and can take violent forms (see e.g. Diverse Voices and Actions for Equality, 2019). Key existing studies that offer insights into this question include Besnier's (1996) early work on gender liminality in the Pacific, which is one of the first critical studies concerning non-heteronormative Pacific Islanders, and Dolgoy's (2000, 2014) comprehensive work on the early history (from the 1960s to mid-1980s) of the '*fa'afafine* movement'. Schmidt (2003, 2010, 2016, 2017) also provides extensive and valuable analysis of the complexities of the gender embodiment and identification of *fa'afafine* in New Zealand and Samoa,

with particular attention to Westernisation and migration as key contexts. Other relevant research examines such questions as the cultural roles, meanings and representations of *fa'afafine* (Mageo, 1992, 1996, 2008; Roen, 2001; Schoeffel, 2014; Wolf, 2010), and their legal status (Farran, 2010, 2014; Farran and Su'a, 2005). In the context of this growing body of research, we take note of Schmidt's (2017) observation that representations of *fa'afafine* by academic disciplines have often been framed by Western discourses such as Orientalism, essentialism and functionalism, and her call for a more nuanced understanding of the lived experience of *fa'afafine*. McMullin and Kihara's (2018) collection of autobiographical stories by *fa'afafine* and non-heteronormative Samoans makes an important contribution towards such a goal. The aim of our article is to further extend the literature by foregrounding *fa'afafine*'s voices in exploring their experiences of and responses to their gendered positioning in Samoan society as individuals and as a collective, guided by the following research questions:

1. How do *fa'afafine* experience their gendered positioning at family, community and societal levels?; and
2. What are the strategies they employ to negotiate it and exercise their political agency, individually and collectively?

The study is informed by Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony/counter-hegemony, which explicates relations of power as a dynamic process both maintained and contested through the medium of ideological and cultural struggle. We acknowledge that gender, feminist and intersectional theories are more widely employed in research concerning non-heteronormativity. But we believe that the themes emerging from our data, especially with regard to *fa'afafine*'s engagement with the dominant gender discourse, can be usefully examined with reference to hegemony/counter-hegemony. The strength of the Gramscian scheme lies in its attention to the multifarious and ever-shifting dynamics of the interplay between forces of domination and resistance. Hegemony/counter-hegemony is not a simple case of imposition of an already-formulated discourse but rather differential interests and discourses continually aligned, realigned and disaligned to form a 'common conception of the world'. While a hegemonic discourse is powerful in so far as it sustains an effective articulation, it is also always in a state of flux; 'a battle field . . . a continuous struggle' (Mouffe, 1979: 185). Our analysis is guided by such theoretical insights in exploring the complexities of *fa'afafine*'s strategies for political agency.

## Method

The primary data for this study were garnered via 25 semi-structured interviews in August and September 2017. We interviewed 16 persons who identified as *fa'afafine* (including 10 SFA members), 6 as *fa'afatama*<sup>2</sup> (those who are assigned female at birth but identify as men<sup>3</sup> or act 'in the manner of a man'), and 1 as lesbian, as well as 2 government officials and 1 international development agency official. We sought to recruit *fa'afatama* as well as *fa'afafine* in view of the SFA's recent decision to extend its membership to *fa'afatama*. We also attempted to include non-heteronormative participants other than *fa'afafine* and *fa'afatama* for insights into a diversity of experiences, but it

proved difficult as few such persons were open about their gender/sexual identities. The government and international development agency officials were interviewed for information regarding the SFA's relationship with government ministries and international agencies. We employed snowball sampling, while the SFA also assisted in recruiting the majority of the *fa'afafine* participants, who were largely its senior/founding members. This provided a valuable vantage point for understanding the SFA's advocacy strategies, although it also skewed the sample towards older and more politically involved *fa'afafine*. Of the 16 *fa'afafine* participants (aged 30–58), 7 were interviewed in Apia (capital city) and 9 on the island of Savai'i. All six *fa'afatama* (aged 24–49) were interviewed in Apia. All participants but four were in paid employment. The interviews, which lasted for 40–70 minutes, were conducted primarily in English and intermittently in Samoan. These were recorded, transcribed and put to thematic analysis (Nowell et al., 2017) guided by the research questions as well as new themes emerging from the data. In the following sections, interview quotations are presented in indented paragraphs or with inverted commas, with the participants referred to by pseudonyms.<sup>4</sup>

Our positionalities as researchers must be acknowledged. We are cisgender, heterosexual women: a Samoan geographer currently residing overseas and an Asian sociologist who has lived in a neighbouring Pacific Island country for two decades. Our normative gender/sexuality, occupations and researcher status placed us in a dominant position over many participants. Our approach in negotiating this power differential was informed by Talanoa, a Pacific indigenous research methodology, especially its conception of research as an 'empathic apprenticeship' entailing 'an intentional, embodied, emotional, and intersubjective process between the researcher and the participant' (Farrelly and Nabobo-Baba, 2012: 1–2). This resulted in the SFA playing a key role in the participant recruitment, our ongoing consultation with its members as we collected data, and the SFA reviewing the abstract of this article before its submission to the journal. It also fostered plans for future research collaboration.

In the following sections, we first provide the context of *fa'afafine*'s advocacy by outlining the country's socio-political climate and the diversity of *fa'afafine*'s gender identifications and embodiments. We then explore *fa'afafine*'s own accounts of their gendered positioning in Samoan society, followed by the ways in which they have negotiated it to cultivate a transformative gender discourse. Finally, the strategies they have employed in this process are analysed as a case of counter-hegemonic struggle through a Gramscian theoretical lens.

### ***Fa'afafine* as a gender-nonconforming continuum**

Samoa has a population of 196,700 and a developing economy dependent on development aid, family remittances, tourism and agriculture. A customary chiefly system coexists with a democratic governance process, which allows only chiefs (*matai*) to contest elections. The notion of *fa'asamoa* (Samoan way of life) holds sway, which requires the well-being of the community to take precedence over individuals, assigning women, men and children specific roles in extended families (*aiga*) headed by *matai*. Village councils (*fono*), comprised of *matai*, can make rules relating to village resources,

direct anyone to do work for the village, and impose punishments for misconduct according to village custom. Samoa ranks 80th out of 162 countries in the 2018 Gender Inequality index (United Nations Development Programme, 2019). The 2018 National Public Inquiry into Family Violence found that 86% of women had experienced physical violence from intimate partners (Samoa Office of the Ombudsman/National Human Rights Institution, 2018). In 2013, with active lobbying by the SFA, former criminal provisions prohibiting ‘female impersonation’ by males were repealed. Samoan law however has not decriminalised same-sex relations between males. With 98% of the population being Christian, the national constitution was amended in 2017 to declare Samoa as a Christian state, which, parliamentarians reportedly stated, would mean that it would not be influenced by ‘adopted ideas like gay rights’ (Wyeth, 2017). *Fa’afafine* thus find themselves in a complex socio-political milieu marked by a ‘mixture of traditionalist hierarchical principles combined with notions of democracy and individual rights’ (Siikala, 2014: 226).

*Fa’afafine* have been described by commentators (Mageo, 1992; Roen, 2001) and many *fa’afafine* themselves as a ‘third gender’, which stresses their distinction from Western categorisations of transgender/transsexual/homosexual. The ‘third’ positioning of *fa’afafine* derives from the fact that their gender embodiments often encompass expressions of both femininity and masculinity and performance of both feminine and masculine labour. Researchers have also offered other, more nuanced understandings. Besnier (1996) describes gender-nonconforming Pacific Islanders as ‘gender liminal’, which denotes their *intermediacy* between the two normative genders, while Schmidt (2016: 295) situates *fa’afafine* across the two genders on the basis of ‘a necessary incorporation of both the masculine and the feminine’, stressing that masculinity is a consequential component of their identities.

Our participants’ accounts suggest that there exists no single set of qualities or meanings that *fa’afafine* attach to their gender identities and expressions. Rather, supporting Dolgoy’s (2000) observation, these constitute a *continuum*. Some discussed their gender expressions as a fusing of femininity and masculinity and their gender identity as culturally unique, but others identified exclusively as women and regarded themselves as equivalent to transwomen. Yet others believed *fa’afafine*’s defining characteristic to be an absence of bodily alteration via hormonal therapy or surgery. Similarly, some performed both gender roles (‘We can do male jobs, feeding the pigs, weeding, and turning to girls’ side, we can make flower arrangements, tidying the house, making the gardens. Everything’) while others made a point of performing only feminine labour (‘I cannot cut grass, I cannot chop wood . . . even scraping the coconut; I’d hurt my fingers!’). There is also a wide spectrum of bodily expressions. Some presented as feminine, with long hair, feminine clothing and manners, and so on; others deployed a mix of feminine and masculine expressions, while two presented typically masculine appearances (‘Even macho men! They are also *fa’afafine*. You know, the ones with short hair, *lavalava*<sup>5</sup> and a shirt’). In short, as Kylie summarised, ‘we are all different. There’s no one formula.’ It is nevertheless important to note that all participants shared assignment as male at birth and expression of some aspect of femininity. All participants but one preferred to be addressed as ‘she’ although many did not mind if they were addressed as ‘he’.

## ***Fa'afafine's gendered positioning***

Despite the notion of *fa'afafine's* cultural legitimacy, our participants stressed that such 'legitimacy' had not always existed. Beckie, a pioneer in the *fa'afafine* movement, reflected:

In the 1990s, prior to the establishment of SFA, not many *fafas* were seen in Apia. . . We were doing a hard job at the time, letting people know that there is a *fafa* community in Samoa. Now things have changed and the whole world knows about us. Everybody is coming out of their shells. I love to see the young ones coming up – the smart ones good at school, good in different areas, in the government sectors. Back in those days it was *so* hard. (emphasis original)

Moreover, they continue to experience varying degrees of marginalisation today. Some participants described themselves fortunate for having a figure of authority in their family who protected them from victimisation. Others shared painful experience:

In my family I've always been a victim of bullying and labelling. I was always depressed, because I was wondering 'What's wrong with me?' My grandfather would tell me off about how I walk, how I talk, how I eat, because I was always very dainty in my ways. I was always angry.

Even when I talk, they [participant's family] say 'Hey! Don't talk like a girl.' Sometimes, when I go to my room, I think 'Why was I born a boy and not a real girl?' [Many *fa'afafine*] hide themselves, 'cause the parents and the families don't understand.

The spectrum of marginalisation ranged from family disapproval and bullying at school to a case of severe physical violence, in which Kate, who normally did not dress as a woman but wore a mini skirt and boots on one occasion, was beaten up by her father with the cord of an electric kettle, which permanently ended their relationship. The severity of sanctions depended on family values, village laws/leadership, rural or urban location, and *fa'afafine's* chosen gender expressions. Many participants spoke of *fa'afafine* fleeing persecution by moving from villages to Apia or leaving family homes to live with other *fa'afafine*. As Mena explained:

In places like Savai'i, they have *tula fonono* [village rules]. They don't accept any *fa'afafine* with long hair. They have to cut it. Don't dress up like a girl. . . So *fa'afafines* from Savai'i, they come here in Apia, live with their friends and have a free life.

Charlotte was among those who left Savai'i for Apia, when, at age 15, she was turned out of her family home for gender nonconformity. When she returned three years later, she was punished by the village for her long hair, with a fine of a pig, ten cartons of tin fish, and 300 tala (approximately US\$100). She remained in the village because 'I value being a *fa'afafine* and I want people to see that', but six other *fa'afafine* in her village who received the same punishment left for Apia.

The participants noted that some churches, especially new evangelical denominations, disapproved of *fa'afafine*: 'They are often in a position where they can incite discrimination, violence, and all sorts of negative attitudes.' Religious animosity often

manifests in sermons: ‘One day, they compared us fafas to dogs! Yes! Dogs! . . . It can be a very good sermon, and then all of a sudden it goes back to fafa.’ Some may attend such a church against their will (‘It was my mum who forced me to go. I respected her so I still went’). Others refuse to do so (‘They’re, like, talking about me, talking behind my back. That’s why I don’t wanna go to church in Samoa. . . . Not here. Hell, no’).

Several researchers have suggested that the marginalisation of *fa’afafine* may be a product of Western trans/homophobia (Dolgoy, 2000; Farran, 2010; Schmidt, 2010), although Besnier (1996) warns against uncritical traditionalism. While it is beyond the scope of this study to examine the origin of gender-phobia in Samoa, it is evident that the contemporary history of *fa’afafine* is marked by an ongoing struggle against a dominant, Christian-based, binary gender discourse. Curiously, this gender discourse is frequently presented as a Samoan ‘tradition’, contradictory to the notion of *fa’afafine*’s historical existence in Samoa and indicative of how, ‘as a set of cultural practices and values, fa’a Sāmoa is regularly contested and reformulated to suit the needs of those who practice it’ (Mallon, 2010: 365).

If *fa’afafine* enjoy a degree of cultural ‘legitimacy’ today, our participants’ accounts suggest that it is a product of a long history of *fa’afafine* relentlessly working to carve out space for political agency. The participants agreed that the SFA played a central role in this collective pursuit. While there had previously been smaller associations focused on sports, beauty pageants and fundraising, the SFA took political advocacy as its primary mandate and became a central lobbying body for *fa’afafine*. The fee-paying membership, mostly located in Apia, is about 70, with many others informally affiliated. Our participants’ accounts illuminate the strategies employed by the SFA and the *fa’afafine* community, which are explored below.

### **Socio-cultural strategies: working with *fa’asamoa***

Many *fa’afafine* negotiate the binary gender discourse, whose hegemonic status is anchored in ‘tradition’ and religion, by seeking cultural avenues of effecting change within families and communities – that is, by working with, rather than against, the powerful cultural institution of *fa’asamoa*. *Fa’asamoa* rests on intersubjective relationships of ‘[r]espect (*fa’ aaloalo*), obedience (*usita’i*), love (*alofa*), dignity (*mamalu*), and service (*tautua*)’ (Dolgoy, 2000: 72), which are embodied in one’s ‘[m]embership of and service to *aiga* (extended family) and community’ (Schmidt, 2003: 149). Our participants shared many personal experiences of cultivating this cultural ethos to manoeuvre the dominant gender discourse and their standing in relation to it. Jordan explained this approach:

Don’t counter. This is what we say. We do not have to counter the ancient Samoan cultural rules that may have discriminated against *fa’afafines*. Do not counter that by using a Westernised approach. Use our own culturally appropriate approach, because it will be a lot more easily accepted.

We must acknowledge that our participants, who recognised strategic meanings in their socio-cultural practices, were predominantly older SFA members/executives, and

that other *fa'afafine* may not necessarily or consciously do so. But this 'culturally appropriate approach', previously observed by Dolgoy (2000) in the early *fa'afafine* movement, has served as a notable counter-hegemonic vehicle.

### Projection of gender/sexuality

Creative and strategic bodily expressions are a key example of this approach. As mentioned above, some *fa'afafine* project femininity through clothing (such as *pulefasi*),<sup>6</sup> make-up, long hair and other gender markers, but others wear masculine clothes or adopt mixed or non-binary dressing styles ('Half-half. Not dresses, but *sulu*<sup>7</sup> with a lady shirt'). Some who do not feminise their appearance do not feel the need to do so: 'This is the way I am.' For others, non-feminine appearance can be a strategic decision: 'I know the limits of my life. We live in a village; we don't live in a town [where *fa'afafine* may access greater autonomy].' Some carefully craft their appearance according to social situations, such as wearing masculine clothing at work/church and formal/ceremonial events and adopting a feminine appearance in personal spaces or outside of the remit of *fa'asamoa*:

You don't want to go over the limit. . . I don't want to go to church with heavy make-up and everything. You have your limits. When you go to church, just wear your nice *lavalava*. Who do you want to impress? . . . And when you go to the other side of the world [i.e. overseas], that's when you do your stuff.

When I go to work, I just wear normal – no make-up. But when I go out, I wear make-up, do a dress, high heels, earrings. Then you see me different – the real one [laughs].

Our participants noted that younger *fa'afafine* did not always share this approach, and that they made a point of mentoring them:

We always try to educate the young ones: 'Slow down. When you go to public places, don't do anything stupid there. Because here, it's all about family. When you are in Samoa, you have to respect. . . You know where not to cross the line.'

Their concern is based on the possible consequences of 'crossing the line'. In Kate's village in Savai'i, young *fa'afafine* who wore feminine clothing were made to work in plantations as members of the village young men's group, a punishment that Kate, who did not feminise her appearance, was spared. Hence, in Susana's words: 'Whatever we do, we have to be careful. Everything that we do – because it can backfire.' Given that clothing and bodily display are integral to the validation of *fa'a aloalo* (respect) and other intersubjective relationships of *fa'asamoa* (Kuramitsu, 2016), our participants carefully fashioned their gendered appearance.

Many *fa'afafine* take a similar approach in regard to their sexuality by choosing not to make their intimate relationships public. Three participants had lived with partners, but others, like Charlotte, had short-term partners and did not intend to have a long-term relationship because: 'I know the boundary and expectations of the village. I wouldn't overstep the boundary.' This extends to the SFA's position on same-sex marriage and

decriminalisation of same-sex relations. During the law reform that led to female impersonation no longer being a criminal offence, the SFA opted not to pursue same-sex marriage or decriminalisation, although not all leaders were in agreement. Today, many *fa'afafine* remain uncertain about the agenda:

Because of our church, our Christianity, we try to balance the scale here. . . Here, it's all about your family, it's about your church, your community. If I want to get married to a man, I won't do it here in Samoa, hell no. I'll go to New Zealand or somewhere. . . It's so hard for us to get respect for that part of our lives here in Samoa.

These participants thus carefully aligned the public projection of their gender and sexuality with the requirements of *fa'asamoa*, especially in situations where non-compliance was deemed to risk significant sanctions.

### *Affiliation with normative society*

The participants stressed that they did not just passively accommodate *fa'asamoa*; they actively embraced and cultivated it through *tautua* (service) to the family, church and community, in return for which *fa'asamoa* offers them 'recognition, respect, esteem, honour, and acceptance in the general community as people who had fulfilled their sacred corporate obligations' (Dolgoy, 2000: 289). Many regard service as a principal quality of the *fa'afafine* community rather than in an instrumental manner ('My pride is to be a real Samoan *fa'afafine* serving the community, serving the family'); yet it has also functioned as a key persuasive strategy:

The charity approach is the main factor. I have come across *fa'afafines* who have participated actively in their communities . . . and a time comes when a *matai* or the village council will see it fit to recognise a *fa'afafine* to do whatever she likes to do in the village.

Importantly, although some Christian denominations disapprove of *fa'afafine*, at many other churches, they perform prominent roles (Farran, 2010). Josephine felt that the *faiifeau* (pastor) at her church accepted *fa'afafine* because of their active contributions, especially their skills in decorating the church for formal events, using unusual, creative materials. Others also discussed their contributions with pride:

All the churches in Samoa have *fa'afafines*. They do decorations, they're in the choir, they boost the youth. So that's our contributions in the church. . . In all the choirs, all the top sopranos are *fafas*! Like myself, I'm a conductor and a top soprano.

When I was 16, I started to join the Sunday school choir and our pastor picked me to sing the soprano solo. That's when I opened up my female voice. . . If one of us, me and my brother [*also fa'afafine*], is absent in the choir practice, he [the pastor] would send one of the kids to fetch me.

The participants also discussed their contributions to family finances. Penina's brother, who had previously disapproved of her, no longer rejected her because her income from wedding decorations and cooking for funerals paid their family's utility bills and church

donations. She proudly referred to this as 'cash power'. Manu, a business owner, pointed to her pocket and said she could openly live with her partner because 'I am earning money.' Charlotte, who had been fined by her village for her long hair, eventually earned acceptance because she worked independently as a seamstress and contributed financially to her family.

A notable avenue for *fa'afafine's* broader community contributions is the beauty pageant. At least one pageant has been held annually since before the SFA's inception. The events are immensely popular and attract large, enthusiastic audiences. These have become an informal political space for *fa'afafine* to publicly assert their femininity, engage with human rights discourse and facilitate the solidarity of the *fa'afafine* community. Furthermore, the SFA carefully designs them so that they not only directly benefit *fa'afafine* but visibly function as major charity events. That is, as noted by Dolgoy (2000) and Schmidt (2003, 2010), pageants constitute 'a means of redeeming their reputations and claiming a location within Samoan society and culture' (Schmidt, 2003: 425). In our participants' words:

One factor we use to attract everyone is the pageant. If you are a *fa'afafine*, your call is to run for a beauty pageant. That's how we gather the young ones. If we advertise for the pageant, young ones will come forward. It's good, because they are beautiful! . . . And we do a lot of charity work. It seems that the more charity work we do, the more acceptable and open we become.

Our money from the pageant, we'll give it for the old people. It's fundraising. And disabled kids. That's where our money is going to. Heaps of people in Samoa support *fa'afafines* because we are doing the right thing. That's why the Prime Minister likes us.

Finally, their fulfilment of intersubjective relationships of *fa'asamoa* is sanctioned by the patronage of key public figures and organisations, which originates in the early *fa'afafine* movement (Dolgoy, 2000) and continues with the SFA. The cultural and political significance of the Prime Minister's patronage is evident in the fact that he holds multiple *matai* titles and has continuously held office since 1998. Susana recalled how it began at the SFA's launch in 2006:

We had to start strong. It's make or break it. So we invited him to launch and deliver the keynote address to the nation. It was that dramatic. . . . We were mad enough to ask him. Because I know, if we get the top, then the rest will follow. So he's our patron ever since.

The SFA has since been notably successful in securing buy-in from different sections of normative society. It collaborates closely with the Ministry of Health in HIV and AIDS, nutrition and other health campaigns. The 2017 pageant we attended was opened by the Prime Minister as had become a tradition, and a Ministry of Education official served as a judge. Catholic nuns were present as special guests, and a long list of local/regional businesses and the Ministry of Health were announced as sponsors. Such extensive alliances serve to validate the SFA in a public way, prompting the *Samoa Observer*, for instance, to highlight how the Health Minister commended the SFA at the 2019 pageant for addressing pressing social issues (Fruean, 2019).

*Fa'afafine* have thus collectively and individually pursued a cultural strategy of affiliating with key actors and institutions of normative society, by shaping the ways in which their gender/sexuality is projected and making material and labour contributions to the family, church and wider community. The persuasive effect of this strategy is reflected in a government official's words:

I think the most important thing is that they know where they belong in the culture. . . . They are making people aware that they know their place in society, as Samoans. . . . I think that's why the Samoan government is very supportive of them.

### Mobilising *fa'asamoa*

It may appear from the above that these *fa'afafine*'s strategy is apologetic and conformist rather than oppositional. But far from simply submitting to customary restrictions and requirements, *fa'afafine* can mobilise *fa'asamoa* to their advantage. As we have seen, many employ *tautua* to gain respect from their family/community, the right to grow their hair, have a partner, etc. Some also mobilise their customary status: 'Use your cultural background. If you know you will be bestowed a *matai* title, use it to get into the village council and work from there.' Elenoa discussed cases of *fa'afafine* chiefs whose status allowed them to wear *puletasi* in village council meetings. Susana, a *matai* herself, was the first *fa'afafine* to wear *puletasi* at work as a civil servant, a precedent that has since become a trend among *fa'afafine* employed in government offices. Such claim to and use of customary power is significant in light of the previous researchers' observations that *fa'afafine* were not titled (Mageo, 1992), that titled *fa'afafine* did not feminise their appearance in public (Dolgoy, 2000) and that access to chiefly power necessitated the enactment of normative masculinity (Besnier, 1996; Schmidt, 2016).

That is, even as they may be seen to accommodate the demands of *fa'asamoa*, *fa'afafine* also deploy this cultural institution to incrementally reconfigure the prevailing gender discourse. Emanating from our participants' accounts is a collective pursuit of social change executed in a tactical, knowledgeable and also cautious and unobtrusive manner. In Jordan's words:

The culture of Samoa is always about reciprocity. . . . If you want something, you have to give something. . . . Samoan culture is such that our advocacy is not very pushy. . . . If we push and it doesn't go through, we step back. We strategise. Then we push again.

### Political strategies: beyond *fa'asamoa*

But the SFA's approach is not wholly culturally constituted. Integral to their advocacy is a strategic appropriation of the opportunities and resources of global social movements. The SFA's success is in part attributable to its access to the skill set necessary for exploiting the funding, political backing and technical resources available in the international civil society sector. The SFA was established by about ten *fa'afafine* with academic qualifications and professional backgrounds (in civil service, law, education, etc.), and today most 'academic *fa'afafine*' have joined the association, which has

drawn on their social and cultural capital: ‘All *fa’afafines* who sit on our executive board are smart. . . They know how to give a proposal to any organisation for funding.’ Despite the absence of core funding, the SFA has successfully operated on project funding and infrastructural support from the government and development aid agencies as well as active fundraising.

Today, the SFA is increasingly articulating its activism in terms of human rights and LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, intersex) discourse to the extent that some *fa’afafine* recognise an affinity with transwomen. Dolgoy (2000:169) previously observed that *fa’afafine* ‘resist identifying with overseas gay movements where projections of identity are concerned’. With the rise of a younger, educated generation who increasingly engage with international LGBTI communities, however, their political positioning may be undergoing gradual change. The disagreement among SFA members over decriminalisation and same-sex marriage point to an ongoing collective negotiation of *fa’afafine* identities and political agenda. The SFA is today in alliance with global LGBTI networks, including the International Trans Fund and International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association: ‘We’re going global! [laughs] It’s a matter of the resources we need and knowledge and stuff.’ The SFA also collaborates with regional LGBTI organisations such as Fiji’s Rainbow Pride, Diverse Voices and Actions for Equality, and Haus of Khameleon, since ‘they are very well informed. They have access to all the regional [resources].’

In recent years, this political strategy has prompted a shift in the SFA’s advocacy: inclusion of *fa’afatama* in its membership. Unlike *fa’afafine*, few *fa’afatama* are open about their gender/sexual identities due to the widespread stigmatisation and marginalisation they face. Our *fa’afatama* participants explained:

You know, people – they love the *fa’afafines* but they don’t like the way we are.

This kind of life is really disliked by Samoan people. They don’t like it, and they push us aside. You know, they push us aside. . . Even singers who make recordings, I even hear they say things about us [in songs]. . . And that really hurts me. It hurts me, eh, when I hear it. Especially when I’m on the bus and hear those songs and people in the bus start pointing fingers.

I think it [*fa’afatama*]’s the cultural taboo. . . At the ground level, everybody knows there are *fa’afatamas*. But there’s fear in the village council level and the *matai* level. . . I think *matais* accept *fa’afafines* more because they are men acting as females. But females acting as men are quite hard to accept.

There is no network of *fa’afatama* due partly to safety concerns, and most of our *fa’afatama* participants did not know any other *fa’afatama*, indicating their social isolation. Prompted by regional LGBTI bodies, the SFA leadership, who had once been divided over the inclusion of *fa’afatama*, began taking steps towards broadening the membership in 2015. Its first *fa’afatama* member joined in 2017. Today, the SFA’s Facebook page describes itself as a ‘non-profit incorporated society set up to promote the rights & interests of faafafines and faafatamas’. This significant move away from exclusivity is both a result of pressure from the international LGBTI movement and an opportunity embraced by many to render support to another, more marginalised group:

Having only *fa'afafines* is quite a limited target. Globally, we have opened up our discussions, our focus. What everybody is looking for is global funds. It is stronger if we take both genders than one gender.

It's hard for them [*fa'afatama*], because the only [non-heteronormative] people you see every day in Samoa are *fafas*. . . We're more accepted. . . We've been trying to bring *fa'afatamas* into our association, because we want them to have their own association too.

The SFA has struggled to increase the *fa'afatama* membership. Unlike Joe, who felt 'safe with the *fa'afafines*. They respect me more than my family. That's why I'm happy with my sisters,' Sai, Dan and Cameron were sceptical because 'We have to have our own club. It's no good to mix with them [*fa'afafine*]. They are strong enough. . . They have a group, we go under them, and they are the boss.' But the SFA is continuing to pursue this approach. While it is likely to consolidate the SFA's engagement with the LGBTI rights movement, it has also prompted *fa'afafine* to critically reflect on the complexities of gender-phobia:

It's such an educational experience for us. . . Everyone has to readjust, understand. When we refer to another *fa'afafine*, we say things like 'my sister' or '*lo'u uso*'. When we call [the *fa'afatama* member], we [should] say 'my brother'. But sometimes we say, 'sister – oh sorry!' and we laugh about it. It's such an amazing experience.

The *fa'afafine* movement, which had long been a localised one, is today seeking to develop greater resilience in weaving a multiplicity of strategies, identities and genders.

### Claiming space to 'shine like diamonds'

In this collective pursuit, *fa'afafine* have not merely won tolerance from normative society; they have claimed space for asserting gender nonconformity. Feminisation of appearance, which researchers have argued is an outcome of Westernisation (Dolgoy, 2000; Mageo, 1992; Schmidt, 2003), is but one of the many resources for their expression of creativity, fashion style and femininity. Penina does not dress typically feminine or masculine but wears her signature-style high-collared top, sewn especially for her by a tailor, which she proudly calls '*kola saiga*' (Chinese shirt). Kylie does not feminise her appearance out of respect for her sisters but instead presents a striking non-binary look with short hair, a shirt, multiple layers of heavy beads around her neck and dark shades. In both cases their femininity is not in question because 'Everybody knows I'm a *fa'afafine* – I don't have to dress up, make up, to make the men like me!' Similarly, when Josephine was not allowed to grow her hair as a student: 'I still had my beautiful face and feminine, like a woman, you know [laughs]. [Asked how she expressed her femininity] You know, the normal ways, the way you walk, the way you talk.'

*Fa'afafine* also showcase what many participants valued as their collective cultural capital through the pageant and entertainment. The pageant's dance performances, talent and fashion shows, interviews and so on offer them a medium of bold display, not only of femininity but creativity, entertainment talent and humour. Discussing *fa'afafine*'s prominence in entertainment, comedy and jesting, Mageo (1992) provides an anthropological

analysis of its historical and ceremonial role in the idealisation of cisgender girls through gender norm violation. Farran (2010) notes its linkage with drag shows and burlesque in diffusing sexual tensions in sexually segregated societies (see also Besnier, 2002, for critical analysis of this topic in the Tongan context). Here, we focus on its contemporary political role. As discussed by Hereniko (1994; see also Besnier, 1996, 2016), Pacific Islanders have historically used secular and ritual clowning as an avenue for expressing critiques of chiefly, colonial, or male power. While they may not always subvert existing conditions, mimicry, parody and satire nevertheless allow Pacific Islanders to demystify or resist these forms of power and hence hold out potential for social change. In this context, *fa'afafine* deploy humour and entertainment to artfully destabilise the hegemonic gender discourse, in a way reminiscent of Butler's (1990) drag but executed through a culturally embedded medium of secular clowning:

In the pageant there are categories. The most interesting category is talent: that's where you showcase your qualities as *fa'afafine*. It's how you entertain and be yourself. Because we are really into that field, we like entertaining. [Asked if they don't mind people laughing] That's the reason why they want to come and watch the thing! To get a good laugh. And at the same time, give them a lesson too. You know, when it comes to the [contestant] interviews, giving them [the audience] a message while making some fun out of the same question. You can turn yourself into a man, and then turn yourself into a woman. You can be a man and a woman at the same time! . . . Get a good laugh, and at the same time we're giving you a message.

Despite the great diversity among *fa'afafine*, exercising such creative-political agency, fused with pride in their reputation for service, has become a cherished collective cultural asset, which Sandy called 'the *fa'afafine* quality' and is everywhere mobilised by *fa'afafine* in their many spaces and situations:

To me, it's a *fa'afafine* quality. . . Being an entertainer – [snapping her fingers] – being active all the time. It comes out in our language. For instance, if I don't like someone, I'd say '*no'i*' which means '*inoino*' (dislike of something/someone) but we say it the other way, '*no'i*' [laughs]. Another example – *fa'afafines* say '*neite*' instead of '*teine* (girl),' '*mata*' instead of '*tama* (boy).' [If] There is no *fa'afafine* living in Samoa, it will be very boring.

When you hear a big laugh coming from somewhere, you can be pretty sure that *fafas* are doing some comedy stuff. If you see a house with a nice garden, everything is neat outside, you're pretty sure there's a *fafa* living there. When you go to church, they arrange the flowers and make sure that their best is given to the decorations.

Here, far from a co-opted voiceless minority or willing victims of compartmentalisation, *fa'afafine* deftly and actively work at countering the binary gender discourse, and, moreover, fostering an alternative discourse of *fa'afafine* as integral and invaluable to the life of Samoans. In Sandy's words, by 'entertaining and giving back to the community . . . they [the SFA]'ve been doing a lot in bringing out the goodness in all *fa'afafines* and let the *fa'afafines* shine like diamonds in their families and communities.'

## ***Fa'afafine* advocacy as counter-hegemony**

*Fa'afafine's* 'gentle politics of recognition and persuasion' (Dolgoy, 2000: 268) may not display typical characteristics of political radicalism in Western contexts. Indeed, embracing the tenets of *fa'asamoa* and affiliating with normative society may be seen as an instance of 'channelling counter-hegemonic forces into the heteronorm', illustrating 'how heteronormativity is resistant to the possibility of being subverted, even in the discourses of LGBTQ individuals who are engaged in the struggle to overcome it', as Lasio et al. (2018) argue in their study of Italian LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, queer) activism. Yet, if resistance is understood as counter-hegemony in the Gramscian sense, as a process of negotiation and persuasion rather than an act of frontal assault, constituted by a dynamic and ever-shifting interplay between forces of domination and resistance, *fa'afafine's* ongoing cultural and political pursuits emerge as an effective counter-hegemonic struggle.

As Gramsci (1971: 349) explains, (counter-)hegemony 'presupposes the attainment of a "cultural-social" unity through which a multiplicity of dispersed wills, with heterogeneous aims, are welded together . . . on the basis of an equal and common conception of the world'. Achieving such a 'common conception of the world' – a counter-hegemonic discourse – is 'not a question of introducing from scratch a scientific form of thought into everyone's individual life, but of renovating and making "critical" an already existing activity' (Gramsci, 1971: 331). In Samoa, the notion of *fa'asamoa* has been heavily reified to be widely accepted as immutable, sacred cultural heritage (as our participant stated: 'We can't go around changing *fa'asamoa*'), with which the binary gender discourse has become closely articulated. Rather than making a frontal attack on this powerful cultural complex, *fa'afafine* have appropriated its principal elements of respect, service, love and so on, and articulated the '*fa'afafine* quality' with them, thereby weakening gender binarism in this hegemonic configuration and cultivating an alternative gender discourse as its constitutive element. This alternative discourse asserts *fa'afafine* as an integral and virtuous part of Samoan culture to be cherished and celebrated, where they 'shine like diamonds in their families and communities'.

Notably, as Gramsci (1971: xx) argued, such ideological struggle is played out in everyday social and cultural practices, in 'all manifestations of individual and collective life' beyond political arenas. Here, *fa'afafine's* cultural strategy assumes crucial importance. They have not only participated in non-governmental organisation activism and global human rights discourse, but, aware of the potency of customary institutions, daily engaged with these to induce a 'national-popular collective will' (Gramsci, 1971: 133), or spontaneous popular consent, to an alternative gender discourse. Today, they have made considerable progress towards achieving such a 'common conception of the world' to the point that many Samoans taken-for-grantedly regard *fa'afafine* as part of Samoan 'tradition'. The popularity of the claim that a male child in a family short of feminine labour may be raised as *fa'afafine* attests to the efficacy of this ideological quest.

Most recently, by extending their alliance to *fa'afatama*, they are in the process of further incorporating dispersed wills to create an ever more strategic and inclusive counter-hegemonic gender discourse. It remains to be seen if this will prove successful and lead to 'multiple appropriations of democratic discourse' (Smith, 2003: 9) in the way

envisioned by Laclau and Mouffe's (2001) version of hegemony, or if the movement will continue to be framed by singular identity politics. While the imperative of international LGBTI discourse prompts the integration of *fa'afatama*, it has to be seen if the cultural strategy *fa'afafine* have relied on to date can sufficiently serve the differential interests of non-heteronormative 'others' in Samoa. Additionally, achieving a 'common conception of the world' among *fa'afafine* is likely to assume growing importance, as greater diversity may emerge in this community in the future. The majority of our participants were older *fa'afafine* who embraced the cultural strategy, whose origins date back to the early *fa'afafine* movement. But our data also suggest that younger *fa'afafine* may adopt considerably different (often more feminised and/or overtly oppositional) approaches to gender embodiment and identification, in the context of increasing globalisation and migration (see Schmidt, 2010). Combined with differential views on decriminalisation and same-sex marriage, some *fa'afafine* may possibly be moving away from culturally sanctioned identity politics towards more 'elective' social identity-making (Hetherington, 1998). Further, SFA leaders, with their educational and professional status, are privileged in steering the definition and dissemination of what it means to be *fa'afafine* (the '*fa'afafine* quality') and the agenda-setting for the movement. In light of the structural inequalities Besnier (2002) highlights within a similar community of *fakaleiti* in Tonga, the SFA's ability to continue to evolve and to sustain an effective articulation of the interests of those on the margins or outside of the movement is likely to be essential to achieving successful counter-hegemony. Their victories to date, and the challenges they may tackle as they further develop their advocacy, illuminate a crucial aspect of both hegemony and counter-hegemony – that hegemony/counter-hegemony is never static or total but, on the contrary, a dynamic and contested process, or, in Raymond Williams's (1977: 112) words, it 'has continually to be renewed, recreated, defended, and modified. It is also continually resisted, limited, altered, challenged by pressures not at all its own.'

## Conclusion

In this article, we have explored *fa'afafine*'s gendered positioning in contemporary Samoan society and the ways in which they have negotiated it to cultivate a transformative gender discourse. We have also examined the cultural and political strategies they have employed in this process as a case of counter-hegemonic struggle through a Gramscian theoretical lens. Our aim has been to foreground the lived experiences and voices of *fa'afafine* as we explore their engagement with the complex socio-cultural and political conditions in which they find themselves.

Despite the common assumption about *fa'afafine*'s 'acceptance' in Samoa, our participants' accounts point to their historical and ongoing marginalisation. They also outline the ways in which *fa'afafine* have responded to this, with a delicate combination of accommodating and claiming powerful cultural institutions, and keeping up with and maximising the advantages of global social movements. These strategies have facilitated a counter-hegemonic process whereby *fa'afafine* have welded elements of *fa'asamoa* with their collective standing in and contributions to key institutions of normative society, thereby weakening the dominant church-based binary gender discourse. These acts of resistance may be covert, incremental and

outwardly apologetic, but have had significant impacts which have made their cultural 'legitimacy' possible. Recognising the power of these collective pursuits is important because it underscores the subtle and complex ways in which counter-hegemonic struggle is played out in everyday social life, and also because it captures the primary medium through which subordinated groups in many societies exercise their oppositional agency. Finally, we have noted possible challenges to this counter-hegemony, emanating from differential interests and agendas between *fa'afafine* and *fa'afatama*, as well as among *fa'afafine*, in relation to gender embodiment and identification, engagement with the global LGBTI movement, and structural inequality. As such, the case of *fa'afafine* is especially pertinent in elucidating both the transformative potency of, and complexities inherent in, counter-hegemony as a medium of resistance.

### Acknowledgement

We sincerely thank Professor Vijay Naidu who provided valuable comments on a draft of this article.

### Funding

The authors disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: The authors received financial support from the University of the South Pacific for this research.

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### Notes

1. The newspaper was widely criticised for publishing a photo of the *fa'afafine*'s body on its front page.
2. They are also known as *fa'atamaloa*. Many participants considered the terms interchangeable, while two explained that *fa'afatama* are equivalent to young men and *fa'atamaloa* to mature/married men.
3. All our *fa'afatama* participants identified as men.
4. Since most participants were known by Western feminine names, we use a mix of Western and Samoan feminine pseudonyms.
5. *Lavalava* is a piece of cloth worn as a loincloth or skirt. Here, it refers to the type worn by men.
6. *Puletasi* refers to a two-piece dress with a long skirt and a top, which serves as women's full dress.
7. *Sulu* is a Fijian equivalent of *lavalava*.

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