

## Research report: Tatala le ta'ui le Atua: Rolling out the fine mat of scripture

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### Abstract

This report outlines some of the research carried out by members of the project, 'Tatala le ta'ui le Atua: Rolling out the fine mat of scripture', funded by the New Zealand Institute for Pacific Research. The project (which took place between 2017 and 2018) asked how Samoan churches can best participate in wider efforts to tackle the country's high rates of violence against women. This report outlines some of the goals, challenges, and outcomes of the project, using as its focus a conference presentation about the project by its lead researcher, Dr Mercy Ah Siu-Maliko. This presentation captures perfectly the aims, motivations, and challenges of 'Tatala le ta'ui a le Atua', as well as illuminating the crucial role that Ah Siu-Maliko has played in shaping the project's philosophy.

### Key words

*Samoa, violence against women, ta'ui, church, Bible*

In 2017, I was invited to join a research project, 'Tatala le ta'ui a le Atua: Rolling out the fine mat of scripture. Church responses to gender-based violence against women in Samoa: Supporting church capacity for transformative social leadership'. The project has investigated how Samoan churches can best participate in wider national efforts to tackle the troublingly high rates of violence against women (VAW) reported in this island nation. It was funded by the New Zealand Institute for Pacific Research (NZIPR), and has involved a group of researchers affiliated with the Universities of Auckland and Otago, and the National University of Samoa. The project lead was Dr Mercy Ah Siu-Maliko, a lecturer at Piula Theological College, Samoa and research affiliate at the University of Otago's Centre for Theology and Public Issues. Professor David Tombs (Howard Paterson Chair of Theology and Public Issues, University of Otago) was the principal investigator. I served as co-investigator along with Dr Melanie Beres, senior lecturer in the Department of Sociology, Gender Studies, and Social Work at the University of Otago. Other members of the team included Dr Ramona Boodoosingh, senior lecturer in the School of Nursing and Health Science, National University of Samoa, and Dr Tess Patterson, senior lecturer in the Department of Psychological Medicine, University of Otago.

The primary aims of the project were fourfold (see (NZIPR, n.d. for further details):

1. To investigate current attitudes within Samoan churches about VAW, particularly their understanding of VAW as a pastoral and public issue. The project looked at the level of church support for tackling VAW, as well as church norms and structures which might sustain this violence. In particular, the project sought to assess the extent to which there may (or may not) be a disconnect between Samoan church responses to VAW and international, national, and local initiatives on VAW prevention.
2. To develop contextual and participatory group Bible study resources that could be used to foster church conversations about VAW. These resources are grounded in biblical and theological scholarship, focusing on biblical texts that speak to the issue of VAW. They also

include texts that are sometimes used to justify the subordination of women (particularly in marital relationships) and, consequently, to excuse domestic violence.

3. To pilot and assess the impact of these Bible study resources in Samoa, introducing them in a series of workshops delivered to church groups, theological students, and women's groups. These workshops would be guided by the transformative and dialogical pedagogy pioneered by Brazilian educator and philosopher, Paulo Freire.
4. To consider the practical decisions, actions, and policy recommendations that church leaders might take in response to the Nadi Accord 2014, in light of the issues raised by the project. The Nadi Accord arose from the Pacific Prevention of Domestic Violence Programme, and declared that culture, tradition, and religion ought never to be used as an 'excuse for abuse'. It also called on religious leaders to 'champion the elimination of SGBV [sexual and gender-based violence] and to act with strong leadership in this regard' (Pacific Prevention of Domestic Violence Programme, 2014).

Throughout the project, there has been a range of conferences and conversations with colleagues in Samoa, Fiji, and Aotearoa New Zealand, including a conference held at the University of Auckland's Fale Pasifika on 11 June 2018. The conference, titled 'Tatala le ta'ui a le Atua: Church responses to gender violence in Samoa', aimed to initiate new conversations between academics, researchers, church pastors, and community activists about the role of the church (in Samoa and the wider Pacific region) in tackling VAW. The conference included presentations from three esteemed keynote speakers: Dr Ah Siu-Maliko, Rev. Dr Joan Alleluia Filemoni-Tofaeono<sup>1</sup> (lecturer at Kanana Fou Theological Seminary, Tafuna, American Samoa), and Rev. Dr Nasili Vaka'uta (Principal of Trinity Methodist College, Auckland). In the afternoon, there was a screening of the 2015 documentary *Sisi le lā'afa – Raise the sennit sail*, directed by Galumalemana Steven Percival. Following the screening, there were group discussion sessions, where attendees could share their responses to and reflections on the documentary, which highlights the complex intersections between religion, cultural tradition, and VAW in Samoa.

In this research report, I focus on the keynote presentation delivered at the conference by Dr Ah Siu-Maliko, *Tatala le ta'ui a le Atua (Rolling out the fine mat of scripture): Constraints and opportunities* (Ah Siu-Maliko, 2018).<sup>2</sup> I have chosen this as the basis of my report as it captures so beautifully the aims, motivations, and challenges of the wider 'Tatala le ta'ui a le Atua' project, not to mention the vital role that Ah Siu-Maliko has played in shaping the philosophy that underpins it.

At the start of her presentation, Ah Siu-Maliko spoke about how important it is for researchers to feel connected and committed to their work, particularly when this involves the vital issue of gender-based violence. She described her own 'passion' for researching VAW in Samoa, and her commitment to speaking openly about it in order to bring about positive change in Samoan churches and society (Ah Siu-Maliko, 2018). 'Gender-based violence is part of my being', she admitted, 'I wake up thinking about gender-based violence. When I breathe, it's gender-based violence. When I look around – my whole being is dominated by this issue' (Ah Siu-Maliko, 2018).

Referring to some of the recently published reports which record the growing rates of violence against women and girls in Samoa, Ah Siu-Maliko noted that there have been a number of responses to these reports from government ministries, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and some religious institutions, many of whom have initiated projects to challenge VAW. Nevertheless, she voiced a wariness about the motivations underpinning these projects: 'It seems like there is a competition, to develop resources and engage in workshops. But the

question that I ask – are we doing it for funding? Or are we connecting ourselves to what we’re doing?’ (Ah Siu-Maliko, 2018).

Moreover, Ah Siu-Maliko noted that there is still one key voice absent from the conversation about gender-based violence in Samoa – the ‘prophetic voice’ of the Samoan church (Ah Siu-Maliko, 2018). While Fijian church leaders have recently made a public commitment to VAW prevention initiatives, including participation in the country’s 16 Days of Activism campaign (United Nations Development Programme, 2017), the Samoan church has remained relatively silent, preferring not to engage actively with government and NGO initiatives that aim to tackle the crisis of VAW in Samoa. It is this silence that Ah Siu-Maliko seeks to break, in her capacity as a member of the Methodist church in Samoa, a lecturer at Piula Theological College, a public theologian, and a ‘concerned citizen of Samoa’ (Ah Siu-Maliko, 2018). In these intersecting roles, Ah Siu-Maliko spoke of her determination to move out of her ‘comfort zone’ to ‘mingle with the vulnerable in Samoan society’ (Ah Siu-Maliko, 2018). Yet, as she admitted, she has faced a number of challenges along the way, which she refers to throughout the rest of her presentation.

After these introductory remarks, Ah Siu-Maliko explained the context of *tatala le ta’ui a le Atua* – rolling out the fine mat of scripture. The phrase conveys the importance of being relational in Samoan culture, and the Samoan belief that the self takes its form from maintaining relationships: ‘It articulates the necessity to reconnect with one’s God, and sisters, neighbours, and environment in order to reveal one’s genuine self-identity rooted in relationships of respect’ (Ah Siu-Maliko, 2018). In Samoan culture, *ta’ui* has a particular use, referring to the finest woven mats, which have been cared for and cherished over the years within their Samoan homes. These mats are old and delicate, and are only rolled out in public on special occasions. When they are, those present often get ‘goosebumps’ when they witness the mat’s beauty (Ah Siu-Maliko, 2018). At this point in the presentation, Ah Siu-Maliko and David Tombs rolled out a large *ta’ui* that was lying, rolled up, beside the presenter’s lectern. As Ah Siu-Maliko explained, the conference is indeed a special occasion where the *ta’ui* can be unrolled, as it is an opportunity to talk about a vital issue affecting not only Samoans but the entire world (Ah Siu-Maliko, 2018). The phrase *tatala le ta’ui a le Atua* also emphasises the significant role of the Bible in this conversation; the fine mat of scripture has to be rolled out to transform human relationships, including those damaged by violence.

Ah Siu-Maliko also spoke about some of the constraints and challenges she has faced researching gender-based violence in Samoa. The first challenge she discussed was her status as an ‘insider researcher’ – a Samoan woman theologian researching a Samoan issue (Ah Siu-Maliko, 2018). As she noted, a researcher’s ‘insiderness’ can be of benefit, as long as it does not bias their study; for example, her identity as a Samoan woman has facilitated safe and honest communication with the Samoan women she interviewed during the course of her research (Ah Siu-Maliko, 2018). Moreover, her Samoan identity has also allowed her to represent faithfully Samoan understandings and worldviews and to engage critically with scholarly research about Samoa (Ah Siu-Maliko, 2018).

Another research challenge that Ah Siu-Maliko raised was that, although VAW is a public issue in Samoa, it is often regarded as a ‘woman’s issue’, with which men are reluctant to engage (Ah Siu-Maliko, 2018). She noted that some male participants in her research interviews appeared to feel uncomfortable talking about the topic, resorting to humour in an attempt to evade having serious conversations (Ah Siu-Maliko, 2018). She was also aware that some men did not want to participate in her research in case others thought she was interviewing them because they were perpetrators of gender-based violence (Ah Siu-Maliko, 2018). As she

noted, 'Finding ways to engage with this issue in a public arena when it has historically been shrouded in silence and secrecy has required great sensitivity and patience' (Ah Siu-Maliko, 2018). Being an 'insider researcher' in this project has therefore been of great value here, allowing her to approach these difficult conversations with greater understanding.

Yet, as Ah Siu-Maliko admitted in her presentation, patience is sometimes hard to come by when there is still so much work to be done. She therefore described her role as lead researcher in the 'Tatala le ta'ui le Atua' project as a 'God-given opportunity' that has allowed her to begin urgent dialogues with Samoan churches about their role in tackling VAW (Ah Siu-Maliko, 2018). She noted without irony that her academic status allowed her to speak to those in the 'upper level of Samoan society', such as male church leaders (Ah Siu-Maliko, 2018).<sup>3</sup> Most importantly, though, much of her research has been guided by the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, whose pedagogy is rooted in the imperative to see everyone's potential, regardless of their life situations, and to treat research participants as agentic subjects rather than passive objects. Drawing on Freire's work has allowed Ah Siu-Maliko to forge strong and fruitful networks with Samoan women from all walks of life, including women in leadership positions. And, while challenges remain and progress can appear awfully slow, she reminded the conference audience that 'it's about taking small steps, with passion and love' (Ah Siu-Maliko, 2018).

Ah Siu-Maliko also took time during the conference presentation to discuss the preliminary findings of her research. She admitted that initial analysis of her interviews with Samoan church leaders and members has provided her with an 'eye-opening opportunity', both to assess the extent of work already being done by churches to address VAW and to consider what else they could and should be doing. After studying her interview data closely, she coded the data into nine thematic categories: (1) the (general) role of the church in Samoa; (2) the (more specific) role of the church in responding to social issues; (3) thoughts on VAW; (4) preventing VAW; (5) helping families affected by VAW; (6) the role of the church in addressing VAW; (7) biblical texts used as justification for VAW; (8) using sacred texts to challenge VAW, and; (9) affirming the sacred value and dignity of all people.

Focusing on categories 1, 3, and 6, Ah Siu-Maliko noted that these themes in particular highlight the realities of church responses to VAW (Ah Siu-Maliko, 2018). Of especial interest, her research findings uncovered an overall philosophy that guides Samoan relationships and engagements: as she puts it, 'keeping the face, or keeping the front matters tidy' (Ah Siu-Maliko, 2018). While some of her research participants understood this as an enactment of the Samoan concept of *teu le va* (respecting and honouring the relational space between two people; McRobie & Agee, 2017), Ah Siu-Maliko contended that it is, nevertheless, a key contributing factor to gender-based violence being hidden, or, as she put it, 'swept under the carpet as if it's not a problem' (Ah Siu-Maliko, 2018). She also noted that this philosophy was particularly evident in the responses she received during her interviews with church leaders and NGOs in Samoa. The only exceptions to this were some of her female interviewees, who admitted that the confidential space afforded by the interviews gave them 'a moment of liberation from the fear of the status quo' (Ah Siu-Maliko, 2018). Speaking openly about gender-based violence is still taboo in many cultures and countries around the world, and Samoa is no different. Yet, as the 'Tatala le ta'ui le Atua' project has found, the silence that often surrounds VAW only perpetuates the sense of shame and stigma experienced by its victims (NZIPR, 2018). In both Samoan churches and wider society, women who are victims of gender-based violence are more likely to be blamed than offered support; even when they are not directly blamed, many still fear the stigma they will encounter in their local communities and churches. The church's silence about VAW is therefore never neutral, but can often be harmful (NZIPR, 2018).

Ah Siu-Maliko also stressed that her research provided her with a valuable opportunity to engage with the wider Samoan public and thus to create concrete platforms from which work can be done to tackle VAW (Ah Siu-Maliko, 2018). It has also enabled her to develop strong networks with other women who stand with her on the ‘battlefield’, waging war against those systems and ideologies that sustain VAW. In these networks, she noted, ‘we are not only developing and sharing resources, but nurturing human relationships as a way to prevent violence against women’ (Ah Siu-Maliko, 2018).

Ah Siu-Maliko ended her presentation by offering the audience a glimpse of the ‘end product’ of her research, which incorporates one of the key goals of the ‘Tatala le ta’ui le Atua’ project. Drawing on material from her research interviews, and working alongside biblical scholars and theologians (including myself and David Tombs), she has developed a series of Bible studies for use in Samoan churches to foster dialogue about VAW. Based on the transformational model of Paulo Freire, these Bible studies aim to liberate people through the process of self-awareness and consciousness raising (Ah Siu-Maliko, 2018). The studies eschew passive learning and encourage participants to think and speak for themselves, giving them the confidence to break the silence that surrounds VAW. As Ah Siu-Maliko explains, the studies are not a ‘quick fix’ to VAW, but rather move participants from reflection to concrete action as part of an ongoing process (Ah Siu-Maliko, 2018). Crucially, these Bible studies draw churches into this process, enabling them to dialogue openly about VAW, to participate in tackling VAW, and to offer healing and support to those impacted by it. The Bible studies also break the silence surrounding VAW in Samoan society, inviting members of the Samoan churches to publicly challenge the shame and stigma that many victims experience. Churches clearly have massive potential to lead the way in tackling VAW, but they need to recognise and embrace this as an integral part of their mission and ministry at both national and international levels (NZIPR, 2018). Ah Siu-Maliko’s Bible studies offer an invitation to the Samoan church to recognize this potential and to begin taking action; as such, they are worth their weight in gold.

Ah Siu-Maliko concluded her presentation by noting that her participation in the ‘Tatala le ta’ui le Atua’ project has reminded her of the importance of knowing herself – ‘my tūrangawaewae – my standing place – and believing I can be a part of making a positive change’ (Ah Siu-Maliko, 2018). She acknowledged that her commitment to making change is an ongoing process that affects her personally at every level – her self, her family, her church, her nation. But, as she noted:

Every little step counts, as they are steps driven by a passion and conviction to enhance the common good of Samoans and all of God’s people. God did not put me here for no reason. There is a purpose for everything. And despite the challenges entailed in combatting gender-based violence, we are discovering in our faith tradition and our sacred scriptures resources that can guide us towards liberation and empowerment (Ah Siu-Maliko, 2018).

It has been a privilege working with Mercy Ah Siu-Maliko on the ‘Tatala le ta’ui le Atua’ project, along with the other researchers who made up the project team, and also those who participated at the Auckland conference. As she observed in her presentation, those of us working to end gender-based violence find ourselves very quickly on a ‘battlefield’, waging war against the systems, ideologies, and structures that sustain such violence. This work can be exhausting and demoralizing, but we support each other, and draw strength from each other, refusing to give up while there is still so much work to be done. And, as Ah Siu-Maliko reminds us, ‘Every little step counts’.

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## Notes

- 1 Rev. Dr Filemoni-Tofaeono is co-author (with Lydia Johnson) of the ground-breaking book, *Reweaving the relational mat: A Christian response to violence against women from Oceania* (2006). Prior to Ah Siu-Maliko taking over the role, she also co-ordinated Weavers: Women in Theological Education, which developed resources for use by theological colleges to open up dialogue about violence against women in Oceania (Weavers 2006).
- 2 The other two keynote addresses at the 'Tatala le ta'ui a le Atua' conference were presented by Rev. Dr Joan Alleluia Filemoni-Tofaeono, University of Auckland, *Embrace our Voice: A call to re-image Tama'ita'i Samoana (women) in the image of God*, and Dr Nasili Vaka'uta, Trinity Theological College, Auckland, *#MeToo: Troubling 'sexual abuse' in scriptures*. Links to the video recordings of all three keynote addresses can be accessed on the NZIPR website at <https://www.nzipr.ac.nz/2018/07/04/tatala-le-taui-a-le-atua-rolling-out-the-fine-mat-of-scripture/>
- 3 Dr Ah Siu-Maliko is the first Samoan woman to be awarded a PhD in theology, and the first to be appointed to a teaching position in a Samoan theological college. For an overview of her research, see Ah Siu-Maliko (2016).

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