

Exploring
the Health,
Wellbeing,
Social,
Cultural and
Human Rights
Experiences
of Tonga's
Rainbow+
Communities

The Manalangi Community Survey Report

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Executive Summary

The Manalangi Community report details data gathered from the Manalangi Survey which collected 68 responses from Rainbow+ and Leitī people living in Tonga. Most respondents were young to mid-life, 37.88% were aged 21–29 and 31.82% were aged 30–39. Almost all were Tonga-born (95.59%) and all respondents who answered the question currently lived in Tonga (100%), with the majority based in Tongatapu (91.18%).

Identity and belonging

84.85% identified as part of the Rainbow+/LGBTQIA+/Leitī community, while 15.15% were questioning. Gender identity was strongly locally grounded. 37.31% identified as transgender, 10.45% as non-binary, and 37.31% said Western categories did not apply to their gender identity. This supports a framing that centres Leitī and Fakatangata as culturally grounded Tongan identities, with many respondents stating a Tongan gender terminology ahead of a Western LGBTQIA+ category.

Education, work and income

Educational attainment was mixed, with 27.12% reporting equivalent NCEA Level 2 as their highest qualification, 15.25% primary school, 15.25% NCEA Level 1, 15.25% NCEA Level 3, 13.56% a trade certificate, 11.86% a bachelor's degree, and 1.69% a doctoral degree. 48.53% were in full-time work, 11.76% in part-time work, 14.71% working multiple jobs, and 14.71% were students. Income was low for many, 59.70% reported annual personal income under TOP \$10,000, and a further 19.40% earned TOP \$10,000–\$19,999.

Gender-affirming care

Awareness and access were limited. Only 22.06% were aware of gender-affirming care in Tonga, and 13.24% had accessed it. Among those who had accessed it, two-thirds described access as very easy or easy (66.66%), suggesting that while pathways may work for some, awareness and availability remain uneven.

Physical health and healthcare

Self-rated physical health was positive overall. 41.18% excellent, 41.18% very good, 14.71% average, and 2.94% poor. However, access barriers remain. 34.33% had avoided a doctor, clinic or hospital because of fear for safety or repercussions. Barriers to care included cost (28.79%), embarrassment (21.21%), lack of transport (19.70%), fear (19.70%), discomfort with the provider (15.15%), and not knowing where to go (13.64%). In healthcare settings, 24.24% had been misgendered, 18.18% had experienced homophobic comments, and 16.67% had experienced transphobic comments, importantly though 60.61% reported none of the listed discriminatory experiences.

Mental health and support

When experiencing mental distress, respondents were most likely to seek support from friends (36.76%), trusted family (27.94%), partners (22.06%), or a doctor/health professional (17.65%). 16.18% said they would seek support from no one. Only 23.53% had used a mental health support service in Tonga, but among those who had, 75.00% were satisfied or very satisfied.

Family, faith and culture

Family support was relatively strong: 64.70% described their family as supportive or very supportive, while 5.88% described family as unsupportive or very unsupportive. Respondents also carried substantial family responsibilities: 60.29% said their family was dependent or very dependent on them, compared with 45.59% who said they were dependent or very dependent on family. Religion and spirituality were highly important, with 94.12% saying religion/spirituality was very or extremely important. Unlike many deficit framings of faith, 67.16% said religion made life easier or much easier as a Rainbow+ or Leitī person, while 8.96% said it made life difficult or very difficult.

Culture and contribution

Culture was central to wellbeing: 86.57% said Tongan culture was very or extremely important. 73.53% were proud of Tongan culture, 63.24% said culture gave them confidence, and 30.88% said culture helped them accept who they are as Rainbow+ or Leitī. Respondents were also active community contributors, 58.82% had organised a cultural event, 66.18% volunteered regularly, and 55.88% had belonged to the Tonga Leitīs Association.

School and work life

School experiences were mixed. While 62.68% rated their overall school experience as positive or very positive, bullying and harassment were common: 20.00% were always bullied or harassed, 13.85% usually, and 33.85% sometimes. Homophobic or transphobic comments at school were also frequent, with 35.94% hearing them always and 17.19% usually. At work, 67.65% said it was easy or very easy to share their Rainbow+ or Leitī identity, but 67.17% had experienced discrimination from colleagues, clients or customers at least sometimes.

Human rights and safety

Respondents were divided on legal protection. 28.79% said Tongan legislation adequately protects Rainbow+ people and Leitī, 36.36% said it does not, and 34.85% were unsure. Public harassment and violence were major concerns. 13.43% had always experienced violence or harassment in public, 14.93% usually, and 41.79% sometimes. Only 22.39% reported incidents to authorities or support organisations, while 58.21% did not. Respondents believed violence is common across the community. 31.34% thought Rainbow+ people and Leitī in Tonga always experience violence, and 35.82% thought they usually do.

To improve the lives of Rainbow+ in Tonga, respondents indicated inclusion in the national census, the training of public servants and school measures to respect Rainbow+ people and Leitī would be the most effective in terms of improving the lives of Rainbow+ in Tonga to a great extent. Legal recognition of gender diverse partnerships was rated as the least likely to improve the lives or comfortability of Tonga's Rainbow+ communities.

Recommendations

1. *Strengthen legal protection and reduce structural stigma.* Reviewing laws that criminalise or fail to protect Rainbow+ and Leitī people, and progress culturally appropriate, staged legal reform.
2. *Improve access to safe and inclusive healthcare.* Develop safety training for health workers and develop confidential, trusted care pathways that reduce fear, discrimination and service avoidance.
3. *Expand culturally grounded mental health and peer support,* including community-led support models, strengthened referral pathways, and approaches that recognise the importance of spirituality and relational wellbeing.
4. *Support families and address housing insecurity.* Strengthen family understanding, provide culturally appropriate resources, and ensure safe accommodation and support for those at risk.
5. *Enhance workplace inclusion and economic opportunities.* Develop employer guidance, anti-discrimination practices; target pathways for employment, skills development and income security.
6. *Increase visibility, data inclusion and public leadership,* include safe inclusion in national data systems, and public messaging from trusted leaders that promotes dignity, respect and belonging.
7. *Engage churches and faith communities as partners,* recognising their central role in Tongan life and their potential to support wellbeing, reduce harm and strengthen family responses.
8. *Sustain and resource community-led leadership.* Ensure long term support for Rainbow+ and Leitī organisations to lead service delivery, advocacy and cultural contributions.

How to hold these findings

It is important to note that while the Manalangi Community Survey run in Tonga is the first of its kind, these results should be seen as illuminative, not exhaustive. In other words, this data shines an important light on the experiences of Tonga's Rainbow+ communities, but they should not be seen as fully representative of all the experiences of Rainbow+ in Tonga. These findings, however, are broad, wide-ranging and indicative, offering a highly-illustrative portrayal of the diverse range of experiences that Tonga's Rainbow+ communities navigate in the Kingdom. This report details both positive and negative experiences, taking a holistic view of what it is like to exist as Rainbow+ and Leitī in Tonga today.

While population-level data in Tonga may not be as exhaustive in other localities, these findings from the Manalangi Community Survey should be read in tandem with other national, and population-level surveys that are run in Tonga by the national statistics office.

**MANA: POWER, AUTHORITY, STANDING.
LANGI: SKY OR THE HEAVENS**

**MANALANGI: POWER, AUTHORITY AND STANDING DERIVED FROM
THE HEAVENS, INHERENT TO ALL, INCLUDING RAINBOW+ AND
LEITĪ INDIVIDUALS, WHO ARE AN INTEGRAL PART OF TONGAN
LIFE.**

Introduction

The Manalagi Survey and this associated community report is a collaborative project funded by the German Embassy to New Zealand and the Pacific Islands. As a study it represents the first comprehensive attempt to capture holistic, self-reported insights regarding the health, wellbeing, social, community, cultural and human rights experiences of Tonga's Rainbow+ communities. The Manalagi survey involved contributions from very many community leaders and advocates in Tonga, including the Tonga Leiti Association (TLA) and their supporters. As a project, much like its sister surveys in the Cook Islands and Aotearoa-New Zealand, the survey has been designed to support local movements around identifying ways to provide better support in improving the wellbeing of Rainbow+ and Leiti in Tonga.

Tonga's Leiti community have long been recognised locally as integral to many parts of Tonga's social, kin and cultural systems. This reality, however, is juxtaposed against reported experiences of violence, systemic exclusion and legal marginalisation. Furthermore, according to Joey Joleen Mataele, founder and long-term former president of TLA, aside from Leiti and gay men, lesbian women are seen as a much more sensitive or less openly discussed issue. This suggests that there are distinct differences between the way parts of Tonga's Rainbow+ communities are situated within Tongan life.

The Manalagi Survey builds on a foundation of regional-wide research embedded within local partnerships, most notably the Manalagi Project in Aotearoa-New Zealand. The approach of Manalagi was adapted and administered in Tonga and the Cook Islands under the Manarangi Survey and Community Report (2025).

Why this survey matters

The importance of this survey cannot be overstated. Whilst there have been data available on Tonga's Rainbow+ individuals, there has been a heavy focus on Leitī. Furthermore, most data has been generated focused on public health research, especially around HIV and STI surveillance, such as through the Tonga-HIV STI Risk Report. While this data is enormously useful from a public health standpoint, the focus on the prevention of sexually transmitted infections among Tonga's "transgender/men who have sex with men," limits the ability to draw a holistic picture of how life is going for Tonga's Rainbow+ communities.

TLA has long been an advocate for improving the lives of Rainbow+ peoples, specifically the Leitī community in the Kingdom of Tonga. TLA's efforts have been focused on capacity building and improving the social, political, economic and cultural standing of Rainbow+ or SOGIESC+ individuals. While individual project assessments and evaluations are useful in helping to drive project specific improvements and deliverables, having base line data that examines a range of challenges as well as the ways in which Leitī and Tonga's Rainbow+ communities show resilience, courage and ways in which they believe they are also thriving, is important to demonstrate the totality of the Rainbow+ and Leitī experience.

So, while the Manalangi Survey still documents challenges that are experienced by Tonga's Rainbow+ community such as human rights violations, stigma experienced in schools, workplace and healthcare settings, it also centres resilience, leadership and cultural pride. It asks questions about holistic wellbeing, relationships with family, contributions to society, volunteerism and service to community. This holistic approach to a survey of Tonga's Rainbow+ communities has not existed before.

Existing Research

Existing research shows us that Tonga presents a complex and often contradictory environment for Rainbow+ or sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC+) communities, particularly leitī. While leitī have long-standing cultural visibility and social roles, they simultaneously experience legal marginalisation, uneven social acceptance, and gaps in health and human rights protections. As mentioned earlier, research on the experiences of Tonga's SOGIESC+ or Rainbow+ communities have tended to fall out of HIV-prevention surveillance studies, or wider public health campaigns, which often point to the challenges that Rainbow+ communities face in Tonga. Despite the paucity of systematic holistic research approaches to the wellbeing of Tonga's Rainbow+ communities, what does exist can help to nuance our understanding of Tonga's Rainbow+ communities' overall life experiences across many domains.

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Cultural Context and Historical Positioning

Prior to the arrival of Christianity in the Pacific region, Pacific societies, including the Kingdom of Tonga recognised diverse gender people, finding an indigenous role and place for them within our various Pacific societies (Thomsen & Brown-Acton, 2021; Farran, 2010; James, 1994). Leitī, similar to fa'afafine in Samoa for example, occupy culturally recognised positions within family systems and community life. As Farran (2010) notes, Leitī are "members of families, kinship groups, and social groups just as others are," fulfilling important social and cultural obligations.

Ethnographic research supplemented by local accounts, highlights how leitī continue to be embedded in Tongan society through church participation, caregiving roles, and community labour (Besnier, 2002, 2004). For example, leitī often contribute through unpaid service such as cooking, decorating, and supporting church events, which can function as a pathway to social acceptance. As one respondent notes, "there is an expectation that leitīs will complete unpaid labour as a means of gaining and sustaining social acceptance." However, this inclusion is conditional. Besnier (2004) describes the "social production of abjection," where leitī are simultaneously visible and marginalised; in other words accepted in certain roles but excluded from full social legitimacy. This duality reflects broader tensions between indigenous cultural practices and imported moral frameworks.



The Role of Christianity and Colonial Influence

Christianity plays a central role in shaping attitudes towards Rainbow+ people in Tonga. While some local churches demonstrate acceptance while focusing on community contribution rather than identity, there are others that promote exclusionary views, particularly influenced by evangelical movements (Amnesty International, 2019). The introduction of Christianity and colonial legal systems significantly reshaped sexual and gender norms. Although Tonga was never formally colonised, British legal influence persists, particularly in laws criminalising same-sex relations (Human Dignity Trust, 2023). Farran (2014) argues that these laws reflect “introduced value systems” rather than indigenous cultural norms, creating tensions between tradition, religion, and human rights. Recent reports highlight “heightened religious tension,” including the influence of foreign-funded evangelical groups actively opposing LGBTQIA+ rights. This has contributed to ongoing stigma and resistance to legal reform.

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Legal and Human Rights Framework

Tonga’s legal environment remains one of the most significant barriers to equality and wellbeing for Rainbow+ communities. Same-sex sexual activity between men is criminalised under Section 136 of the Criminal Offences Act, carrying penalties of up to 10 years’ imprisonment and corporal punishment (UK Parliament, 2022; Human Dignity Trust, 2023). Although there is “no evidence of the law being enforced,” its existence constitutes a violation of human rights and reinforces stigma.

Legal discrimination extends beyond criminalisation. Same-sex marriage is not recognised, and LGBTQIA+ individuals lack legal recognition of relationships or family structures (Equaldex, 2024). A notable 2013 Supreme Court case denied custody to a gay man, citing the illegality of his “lifestyle,” demonstrating how criminal laws influence judicial decisions and everyday rights.

Additionally, laws targeting gender expression—such as the 1978 provision criminalising “male impersonation of a female person for an immoral purpose”—have been interpreted as restricting transgender expression (Equaldex, 2024). These vague provisions create legal uncertainty and reinforce discrimination.

Despite these challenges, there are limited protections. Judicial principles prohibit discrimination on “irrelevant grounds,” including sexual orientation, but these protections are weak and have been said to be inconsistently applied.





Social Acceptance, Discrimination, and Violence

Social attitudes towards *leitī* are often described as tolerant but conditional. Reports suggest that “diverse gender identities are much more widely accepted in Tonga than diverse sexual orientations,” reflecting a cultural distinction between gender expression and sexual behaviour.

Leitī visibility is high, particularly through events such as the Miss Galaxy Pageant, which has celebrated *leitī* identity since 1993 (Besnier, 2002). Community engagement, such as church participation and charitable work, has helped build social acceptance. As Joey Joleen Mataele explains, “community-based organising... is the key to building trust and changing attitudes” (Amnesty International, 2019).

However, discrimination remains prevalent. Many *leitī* experience family rejection, homelessness, and social stigma. Safehouses operated by the TLA provide refuge for those expelled from their homes. Violence, while underreported, persists. The 2021 murder of Polikalepo Kefu, a prominent activist and president of TLA, underscores ongoing risks, even if not officially classified as a hate crime. Importantly, lesbian and bisexual women appear less visible and potentially more marginalised. Cultural silence around female same-sex relationships contributes to their invisibility and lack of support (ABC News, 2023).

Health and Wellbeing

Sexual and Reproductive Health

Tonga has a relatively low prevalence of HIV, but *leitī* and men who have sex with men (MSM) are identified as key populations at risk (Rawstorne et al., 2016). Early HIV stigma disproportionately affected *leitī*, who were once publicly associated with the disease, leading to long-lasting discrimination. Despite improvements, significant gaps remain in sexual health knowledge. Research indicates that young people have “very limited awareness about sexual and reproductive health rights,” often relying on informal sources such as social media. The absence of inclusive sexuality education further exacerbates risks.

National health strategies acknowledge MSM and *leitī* but largely overlook other Rainbow+ groups, including lesbians, bisexual individuals, and intersex people. This limited scope restricts comprehensive health responses.





Mental Health and Social Wellbeing

While empirical mental health data specific to Tonga is limited, broader Pacific and global literature suggests that criminalisation, stigma, and family rejection contribute to elevated risks of depression, anxiety, and suicide among LGBTQIA+ populations (Logie et al., 2019). In Tonga, these risks are likely intensified by legal marginalisation and religious pressures.

Community support plays a crucial protective role. The Tonga Leitis Association, established in 1992, is the primary organisation advocating for LGBTQIA+ rights and wellbeing. Its programmes include health education, advocacy, and safe housing, contributing significantly to resilience within the community. Leiti also derive wellbeing from cultural belonging and social roles. Participation in church and community activities can foster a sense of purpose and acceptance, even within constrained environments.

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Education and Information Gaps

A critical gap in Tonga is the lack of inclusive education. There is “no sexuality education in the school curriculum that incorporates LGBTQIA+ themes,” limiting young people’s understanding of diversity and rights. This contributes to misinformation, stigma, and health risks. Digital platforms have become alternative sources of information, but these are inconsistent and often unreliable. Addressing this gap is essential for improving both health outcomes and social inclusion.

Intersection of Culture, Rights, and Global Influences

Tonga’s Rainbow+ communities exist at the intersection of local culture, global human rights discourses, and transnational influences. Diasporic connections play a significant role, with Tongans abroad influencing attitudes and advocacy efforts at home (Farran, 2014). At the same time, international human rights frameworks—such as CEDAW and UN Universal Periodic Reviews—have prompted discussions about legal reform. However, progress has been slow, reflecting tensions between global norms and local values. The concept of “vernacularisation” of human rights is particularly relevant, as rights must be interpreted within cultural and religious contexts. In Tonga, this process is ongoing and contested.





Resilience and Community Strengths


Despite structural challenges, Tonga's leiti community demonstrates remarkable resilience. Community visibility, cultural integration, and organised advocacy have contributed to gradual social change. Events like the Miss Galaxy Pageant and grassroots initiatives led by TLA have increased awareness and acceptance. As noted, leiti have "worked their way into people's hearts" through consistent community contribution. This resilience highlights the importance of culturally grounded approaches to health and human rights, which build on existing strengths rather than imposing external models.

Methodology and Methods

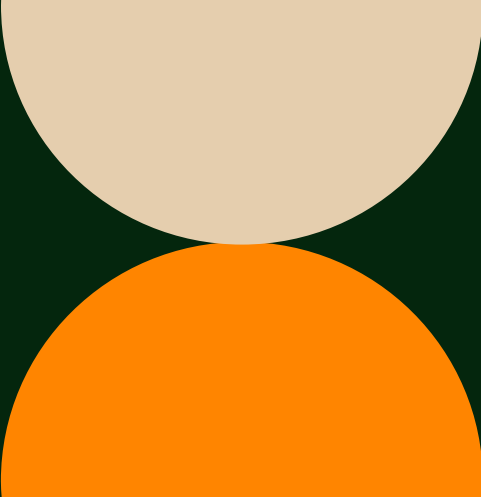
The Manalagi Survey draws on the design of the Manalagi Survey that was conducted in Aotearoa-New Zealand in 2021, and the Manarangi Survey, run in the Cook Islands and published at the end of 2025. The Manalagi Survey is an action research survey that was co-designed with Pacific Rainbow+ individuals across Aotearoa-New Zealand. All questions and elements of that survey were approved by community members in New Zealand, and at the request of both TLA and the Te Tiare Association in the Cook Islands, this survey instrument was brought across to both countries as a baseline for both the Manarangi Survey and the subsequent Manalagi Survey administered in Tonga.

Prior to the implementation of the survey, the research team, working within a tight timeline, began the process of research by deploying the Manalagi HCLC Model of community engagement (Thomsen and Brown-Acton, 2026) which stands for Honour, Connect, Listen and Collaborate.

Beginning: Honour



While the research team were working to a tight and compressed schedule, in that the project was expected to complete design, testing, implementation and delivery within two months, the project team still held to the principles of Manalagi's community engagement model. Honour, in this case, meant to pay homage to all of the leaders and trailblazers within Tonga's Rainbow+ communities in meaningfully engaging them through official inclusion and paying respect to their leadership. This was nowhere more evident in the way the team worked actively with TLA and included TLA's board member and long-time advisor, Joey Joleen Mataele as a named investigator on the project, making Joleen a key decision-maker within the project team. Joleen's activism in Tonga is legendary, her work with TLA in particular has been awarded multiple recognitions, including the film *Leiti's in Waiting*, which shone an important light on the complexity of Joleen's life as a servant in many cases to the Tongan Royal Family.




The research team had to honour this legacy by ensuring that we not only involved Joleen and her team, but this also required the research team to travel to and from Tonga to be physically present on-island for the survey design, community engagement and ultimately delivery of the survey.

Connect: Renewal and Building trust in the team

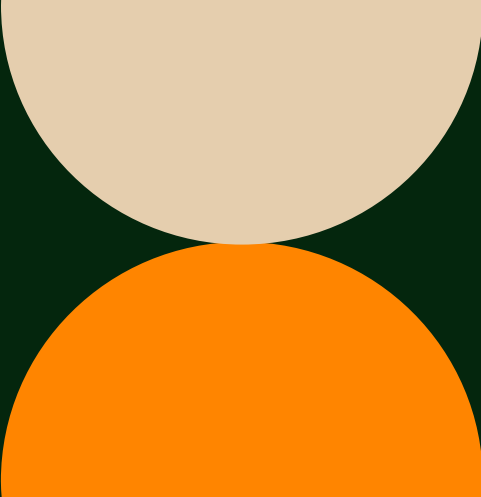
Honour naturally led into Connect. While the Manalagi project team had pre-existing relationships with leaders in Tonga, it did not mean that there was no need for these relational connections to be renewed. Furthermore, the Manalagi Survey instrument may have inspired the Manalagi survey instrument itself, but before we drafted a single survey item, the team felt it would be important that we mapped with TLA through in-person consultations, which stakeholders (including church allies, youth advocates, and outer-island contacts) we would need to bring on-board for the project. Our purpose was simple, to ensure that the instrument, the recruitment plan, and the way results would be shared were tied to people most affected. While the timeline for the project was compressed, we scheduled meetings with TLA and used small talanoa sessions to learn which topics mattered most in Tonga and how we could approach this. Moreover, connect in our research context also had a material dimension. Following the relational ethics described in Manalagi's HCLC model (Thomsen & Brown-Acton, 2026), the project budget covered venue hire, food, transport, and a mea'ofa (token or gift) of NZD \$50 for survey participants. These were not incentives in a narrow sense but acts of reciprocity, recognising time, expertise, and the emotional labour of sharing.

Listening also shaped language. Just as we did with the Manalagi Survey in Aotearoa-New Zealand and Manarangi in the Cook Islands, we had open text boxes when it came to questions regarding gender and sexuality so that people could write themselves into the survey using terms that were most appropriate to them, as well as in English.

Sharing power: Collaborate



The final HCLC principle, Collaborate, concerned governance and co-ownership. Rather than treat community partners as “recruitment channels,” we established a research team that included community leaders as named investigators. While the research team reviewed the draft instrument, the final version was approved after sense-checking with community through TLA. Collaboration shaped where the survey happened. While an online link was available, we prioritised neutral in-person completion at community rooms and travelled to respondents when requested with tablets that we had pre-loaded the survey instrument onto to ensure that respondents would be able to complete the survey without the barrier of needing WiFi and internet access.




The Survey Instrument: What we asked and why

The Manalagi Survey instrument was initially based broadly off the design of the Manalagi Survey that was administered in Aotearoa-New Zealand by the Manalagi Project team. This approach was requested by local leaders after they attended the launch of the Manalagi Community report in 2023. This approach was seen as suitable as surveys run by PSGDN in 2023-2024 had already brought into the region valuable survey data gleaned from research design that had been generated in Europe (Ravulo et al., 2024a; 2024b). The Manalagi Survey instrument was also seen as being culturally-relevant and specific to the Pacific as it had been co-designed by Pacific Rainbow+ community members across Aotearoa-New Zealand, and had a clear focus on culture, community-building, spirituality and other aspects of positive wellbeing.

The Manalagi Survey instrument was shared with local leaders in Tonga who analysed the instrument and provided additional advice around how the instrument would need to be adapted to the Tongan context. Through pre-consultation dialogue with TLA, additional sections were added to the survey instrument, including education, work, and human rights – domains that were not in the original Manalagi survey instrument.

Following this, two community meetings were called in Nukualofa in November 2024, where the research team shared the draft instrument with attendees – all of whom were Tongan community members. Attendees at the meeting provided further feedback on the final instrument and wording of the survey. Their advice and approval of the final questions created the final research instrument which was renamed to Manalagi in order to be localised into the Tongan context whilst preserving the shared context and meaning of the Manalagi ethos and framing. A position that advances the notion that Rainbow+ individuals, like all Tongans are gifted an inherent mana, which is relationally derived from the heavens or langi, and connected to genealogy – providing place and space for all unquestionably within their families, culture, history, spiritual framework and wider Tongan society.





Manalagi, as affirmed by community voices, would therefore include the following domains:

- 1. Demographics** (baseline data - age, gender identity expressions, place of residence, employment history, ability/disability, household make up, approximate income).
- 2. Physical health** (self-rated health status, frequency of medical visits, care satisfaction, barriers to accessing care, experiences of discrimination in healthcare settings, NCDs diagnosis, gender affirming care).
- 3. Mental health service use and experiences** (care seeking behaviours; experiences of mental health service usage; satisfaction with services);
- 4. Family/household** (support of Rainbow+ identity; reliance on family and vice-versa).
- 5. Religion and spirituality** (participation in churches, impact on Rainbow+ sense of self and happiness; self-care).
- 6. Culture and community** (significance of culture for Rainbow+; role culture plays in the lives of Rainbow+; volunteerism; experiences with community connections/organisations/participation).
- 7. School experience** (self-rated experience as Rainbow+; bullying, harrasment; Rainbow+ topics covered in school).
- 8. Work place experiences** (affirmation of Rainbow+ identity in workplaces; supportive or unsupportive workplaces; discrimination experienced in the workplace);
- 9. Human rights** (examining Tongan legislation; violence or harassment in public; rated interventions to improve the lives and human rights of Tonga's Rainbow+ communities.).

Much like the Manalagi Survey, the Manalagi survey questions were designed to be short, asked in plain-language, and sequenced to maximise efficiency. A key item of feedback from community members was to ensure that the survey was not overly-extensive, thus reducing the likelihood of community members not completing the survey in its entirety. Sensitive items were accompanied by “skip” options and on-page reassurance that people could decline to answer without explanation. We also included open-text prompts to invite narrative, recognising that numbers alone cannot capture context, nuance, or even humour.



Who participated: eligibility and sampling

Any Tongan person aged 15+ or over, resident in the Kingdom of Tonga; identified as Rainbow+ or questioning - could also be exploring gender/sexual identity were able to take the Manalangi survey. Recruitment for the study was led by TLA, who followed a community-centred purposive and network approach, leveraging their extensive national connections across all of Tonga's isles, with primary focus on Tongatapu. Considering time constraints and previous studies' sample sizes being relatively small re: Rainbow+ research in Tonga, the target was set at 40-50 Manalangi respondents. This was initially seen as ambitious, however, Manalangi managed to receive n=68 complete responses, which far exceeds our original target and speaks to how effective TLAs recruitment efforts were. While this number provides a solid base for future survey promotion in Tonga of Rainbow+ research, more data is needed to better support the efforts of providing safe and meaningful progress on the wellbeing of Rainbow+ in Tonga.

In following the local norm around how community data collection and workshops are usually held in Tonga, we held two community data collection meeting sessions in Nukualofa in December 2024, ensuring we provided food, refreshments and a safe venue for participants/respondents to be able to take the Manalangi survey. Further smaller data gathering happened in Ha'apai and Vava'u, where our local investigator travelled to both island groups with tablets to enable those resident there an opportunity to also participate. These were tablets provided by the research team funded through this project, and were gifted to TLA at the conclusion of data gathering. These tablets allowed for offline data collection that did not rely on paper modes, which are always susceptible to damage and loss during movements, as well as requiring differing data security requirements and safety precautions.

At the community meetings in Nukualofa, respondents were able to take the survey using the tablets, but some requested to also take the survey using their own phones. In this case, we provided an online link for participants to use, and also provided secure and free WiFi at the community venue for respondents to use. All respondents once they completed their survey were offered a mea'ofa of \$50 NZD as a gift of reciprocity in recognition of their mana and their gifting of their time and experiences to the research team through their survey responses.






Consent and Ethics

The Manalangi project applied to and received Tongan National Health Ethics and Research Committee approval in December 2024, providing the research team with a research permit (#20241205) and terms in which we were to carry out research in Tonga. Information sheets and consent were offered in plain English and translated into Tongan by our local investigator, although the survey was administered in English only. For 15–17 year-olds, consent procedures balanced youth safety with confidentiality, mindful of the risks associated with forced disclosure in families or schools. In line with regional best practice, we developed distress and disclosure protocols: if someone indicated current harm or asked for help, while support on-island in Tonga is limited, the research team were able to provide referrals to health, counselling, legal, or protection services, if respondents required them. No respondents indicated they needed these referrals after completing the survey.

The survey was completed anonymously, although research team members were often present in the same room when respondents completed the survey to answer any questions or troubleshoot any issues respondents had with the survey. Respondents were given the option of being left alone by the research team, or could request that the research team remained present based on their own preference. As some respondents took the survey online, we did not record IP addresses, preventing the data from being attributed to any specific individual via this means. As the sample that Manalangi is focused upon is a specific community group, there is still a small risk that some may be identifiable based on how much respondents shared in qualitative responses. As such, qualitative responses are reported as de-identified and thematically to ensure the risk of accidental disclosure of participation is minimised as much as possible.

Data Stewardship



The Manalangi dataset belongs to the people of Tonga, more specifically, to the Rainbow+ peoples of Tonga. As such, in-line with our ethical research requirements as stipulated by the Tongan National Health and Ethics Research Committee, the research team will keep the data stored in an encrypted environment, with all de-identified data published in this report for public usage, open-access. At the end of December 2031, all data that was collected in Tonga in December 2024 will be destroyed.

Any requests for the dataset to be used for research purposes will need to be approved by TLA, and the Manalangi Project research team, and will be considered on a case-by-case basis.

Limitations

68

Survey
Respondents

97%

Completion
Rate

While the Manalangi Survey garnered more responses than what the research team were initially targeting, it is still important to note that 68 responses, while capable of providing important and deep insights into specific issues, cannot be seen and should not be treated as wholly representative of a national population. The sample is heavily skewed toward those who are living on the main island of Tongatapu, and furthermore, those who are likely to be either living in, around or working in and around the capital city of Nukualofa; thus, the sample is also skewed to those likely to have stronger urban-based experiences in Tonga. While this does not make the data any less useful, it does mean that these contexts should be taken into consideration when interpreting the findings of the survey.

Self-selection within this survey is very likely considering the strong influence community networks had over the recruitment strategy. This means that those experiences are more likely to be visible in this dataset. Furthermore, researchers will likely understand that Manalangi is a cross-sectional study - which means that this survey represents a discrete moment in time, or snapshot of experiences taken during the sampling period. This means that while this data is enormously powerful in being able to illustrate what is happening in respondents lives at the moment they took the survey, or allowing respondents to recall past experiences at the exact moment the survey was administered, it does not represent longitudinal data, nor does it allow us to make many claims to causality. In other words, this data paints a vivid picture, but the way the data has been generated and reported here requires those who are wishing to use this data to proceed with caution in their interpretations.

Note also that throughout the survey, none of the questions were compulsory, so some of the total number of respondents for some questions could be more than 68 or less, with percentage totals in multi-select questions also likely to exceed 100%. Where this is the case, the total number of responses are provided, so, too are the percentage totals throughout the report.



Key Terms

Leitī

A culturally specific Tongan identity referring to gender-diverse people assigned male at birth, can often also identify as transgender - Leitī are recognised within Tongan social and cultural systems.

Fakatangata

Translates to be "like a man" or "masculine" in the Tongan language, and is an identity term that has been claimed by Tongans who are assigned female at birth, but see themselves more on the masculine side of the gender continuum.

Mana

A Pacific concept referring to spiritual power, authority, prestige, and relational standing derived from genealogy, community, and the divine.

Langi

The heavens or spiritual realm in Tongan cosmology, often associated with divine origin and ancestral connection.

Manalangi

A concept that combines mana and langi, referring to inherent dignity, authority and spiritual worth derived from the heavens.

Rainbow+

An inclusive umbrella term favoured in the South Pacific and New Zealand in particular when referring to people of diverse sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions, and sex characteristics.

SOGIESC+

Acronym that Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression, and Sex Characteristics.

Gender-affirming care

Medical, psychological, or social support that affirms a person's gender identity (e.g., hormone therapy, counselling, make up, hair replacements etc.)

Cisgender

A person whose gender identity aligns with the sex they were assigned at birth.

Transgender

A person whose gender identity differs from the sex they were assigned at birth.

Non-binary

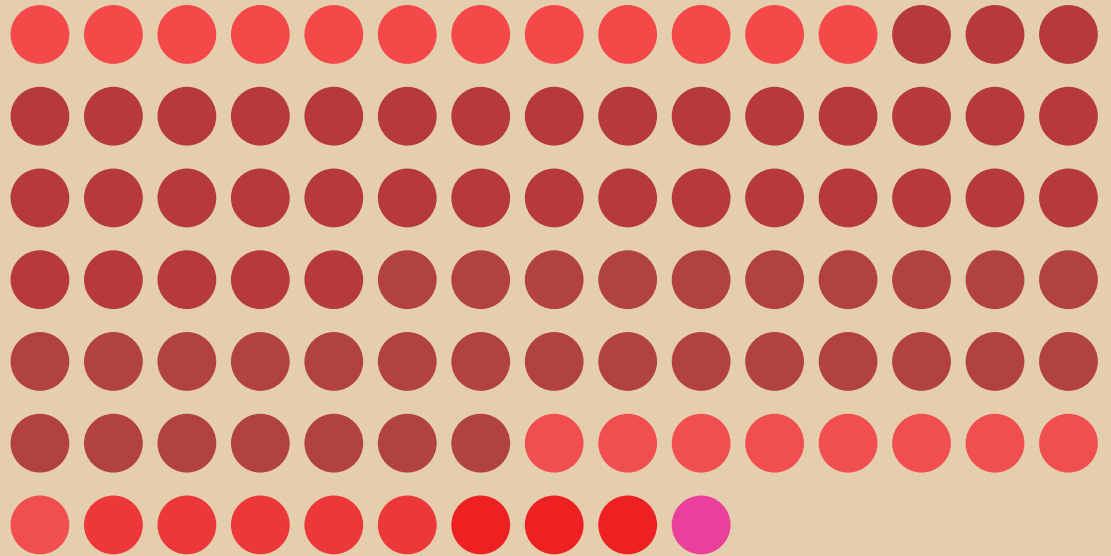
A gender identity or positioning that does not strictly fit into the man or woman categories.





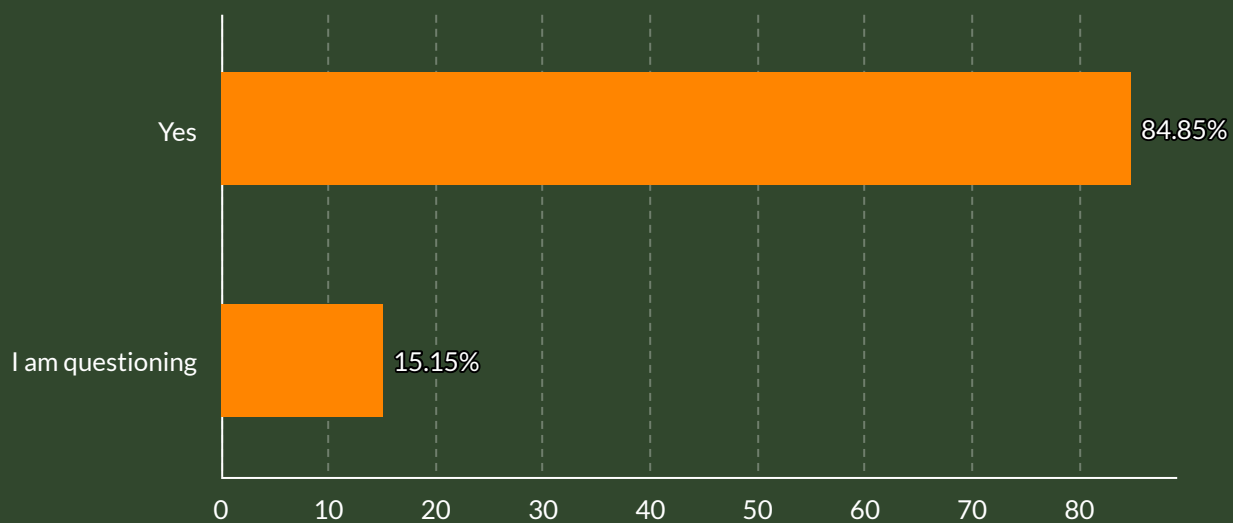
Part 1: Demographics

1A: How old are you? (n=66)

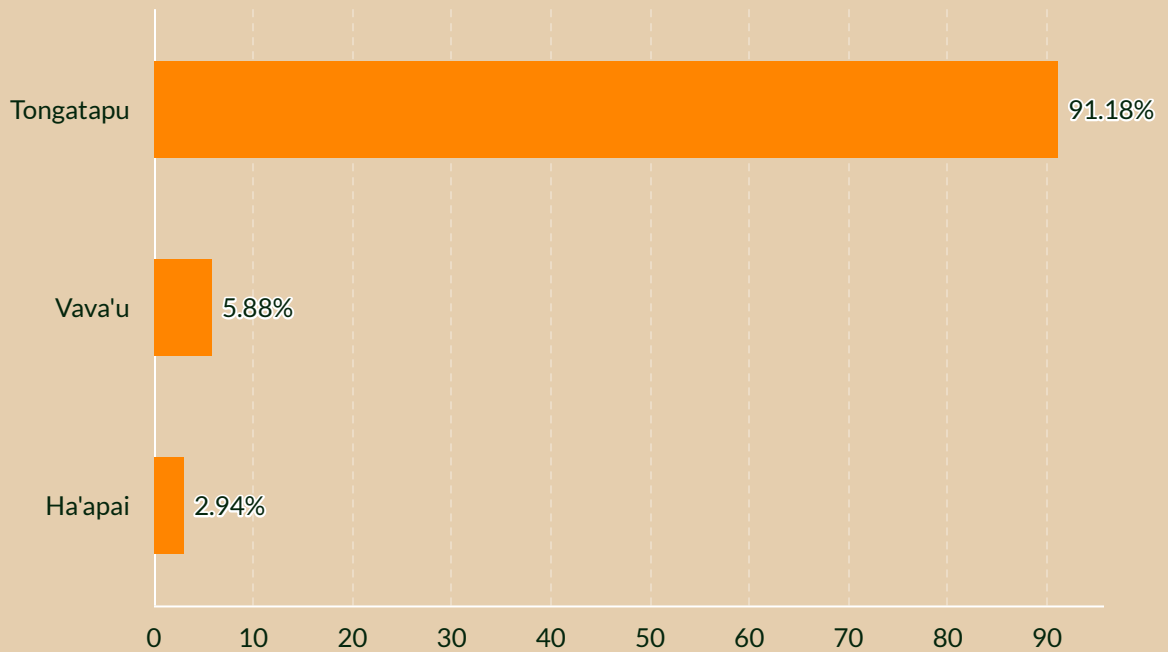


16-20 (12.12%) 21-29 (37.88%) 30-39 (31.82%) 40-49 (9.09%)
50-59 (4.55%) 60-65 (3.03%) 66+ (1.52%)

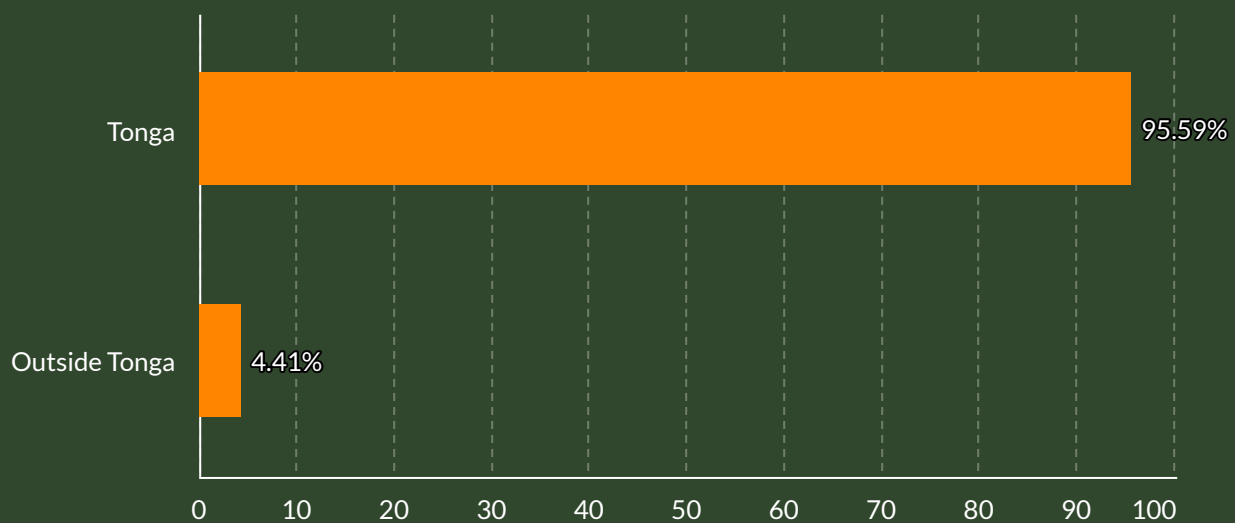
1B: Do you identify as part of the Rainbow+ community? (n=66)



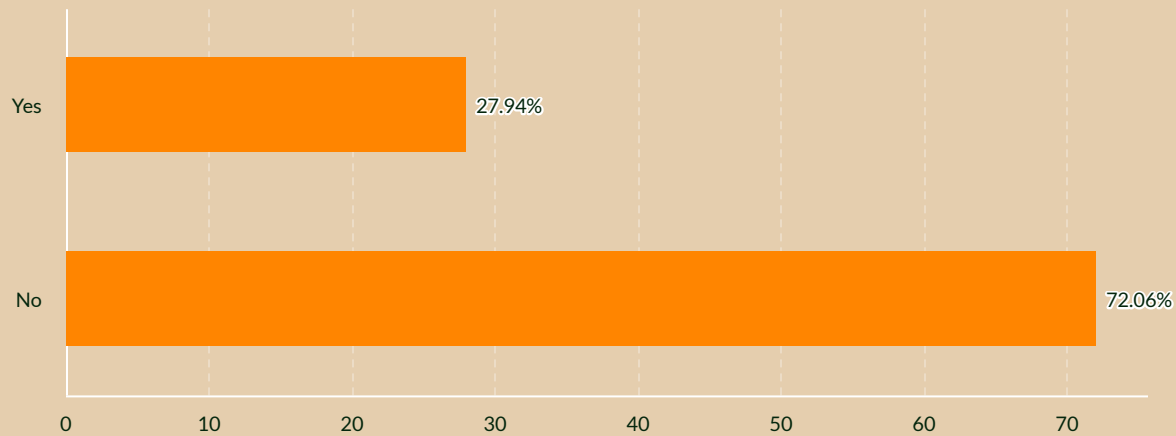
1C: Where in Tonga do you currently live? (n=68)



1D: Where were you born? (n=66)

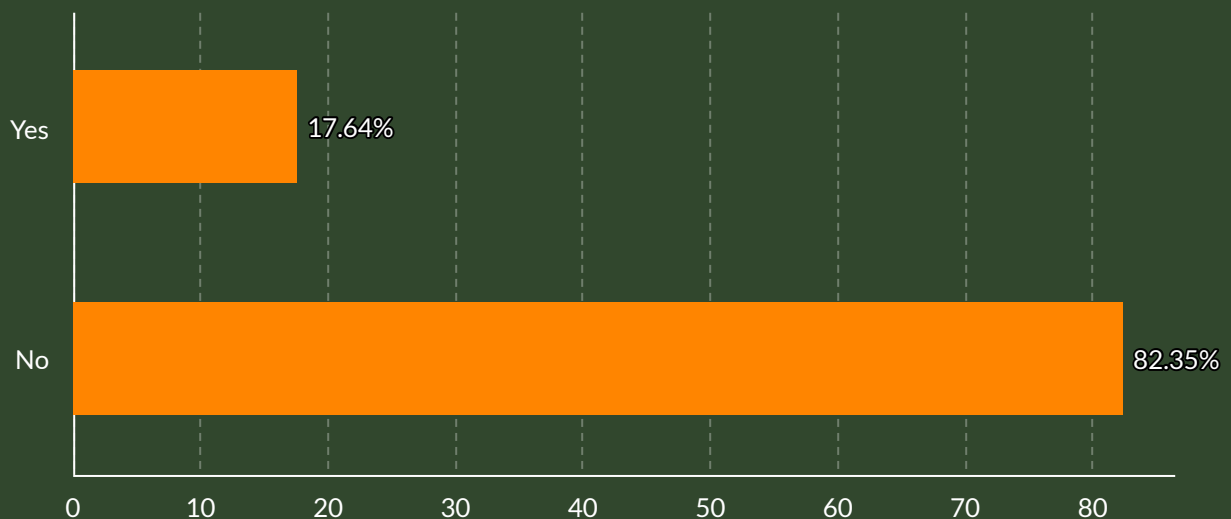


1E: Have you lived outside Tonga for 6 months or longer before? (n=68)



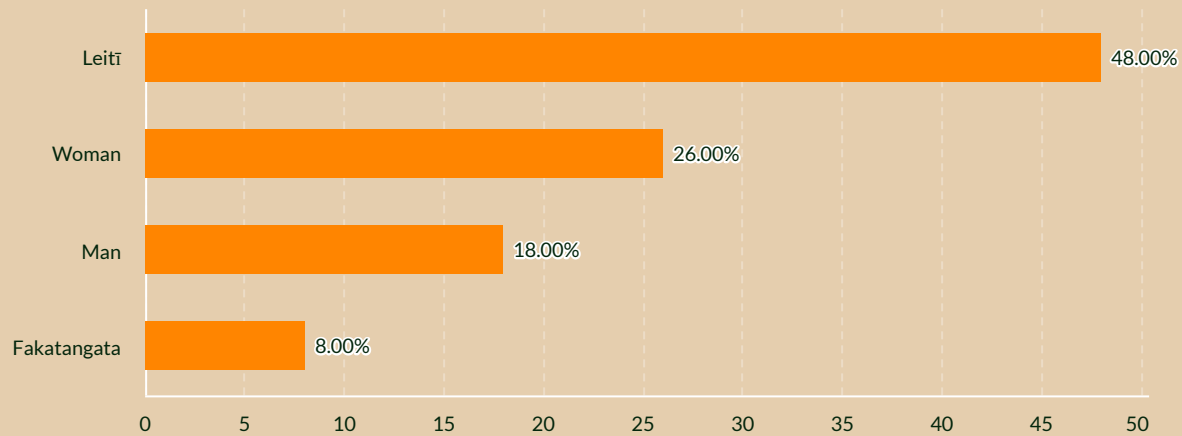
Those who indicated that they had spent more than 6 months living outside Tonga resided primarily in New Zealand, Australia, the United States with Fiji and China also mentioned.

1F: Do you have other nationalities/cultures/ethnicities outside Tonga? (n=68)



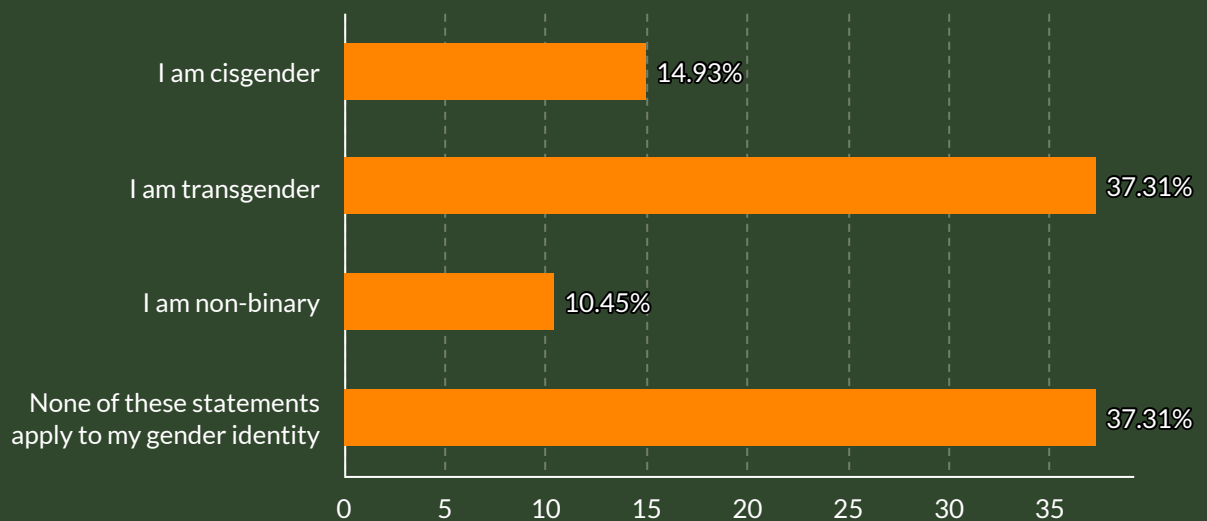
Respondents who indicated they had multiple affiliations were likely to mention their connections to New Zealand, Samoa and to some Asian countries as well.

1G: How do you describe your gender? (n=60)



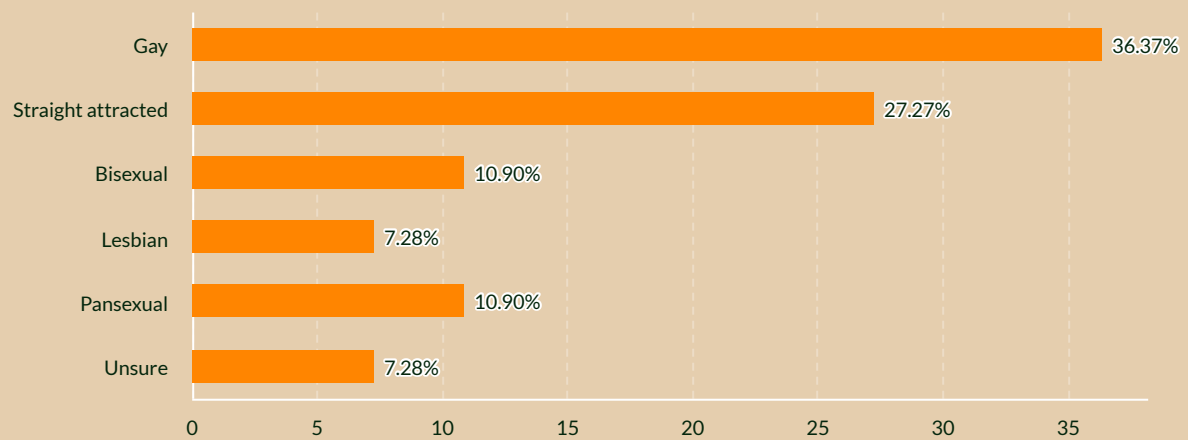
The majority of respondents identified as Leiti or as a woman, with relatively strong representation of men and fakatangata. Interestingly, respondents in Tonga did not use multiple (English and Tongan terminology) to describe their gender, rather, chose one or the other.

1H: Which of the following statements apply to your gender (n=67)



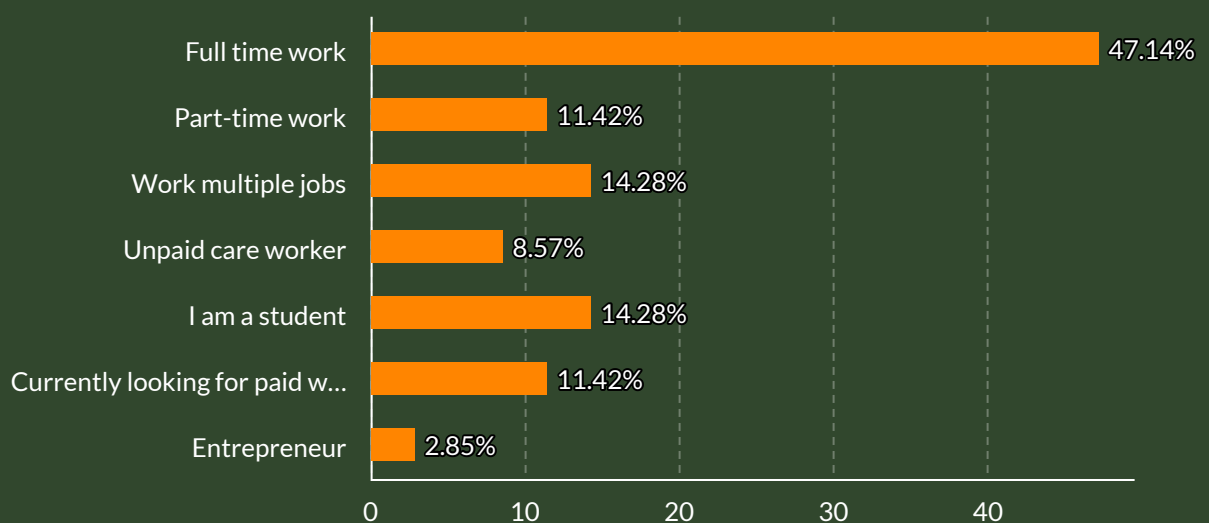
The number of respondents who selected the option of transgender was also the same for those who selected the option of none of these statements apply to my gender identity. This suggests that terminologies beyond transgender (cisgender and non-binary) was yet to find real resonance in Tonga at the time of the survey.

1I: How do you describe your sexuality? (n=63)

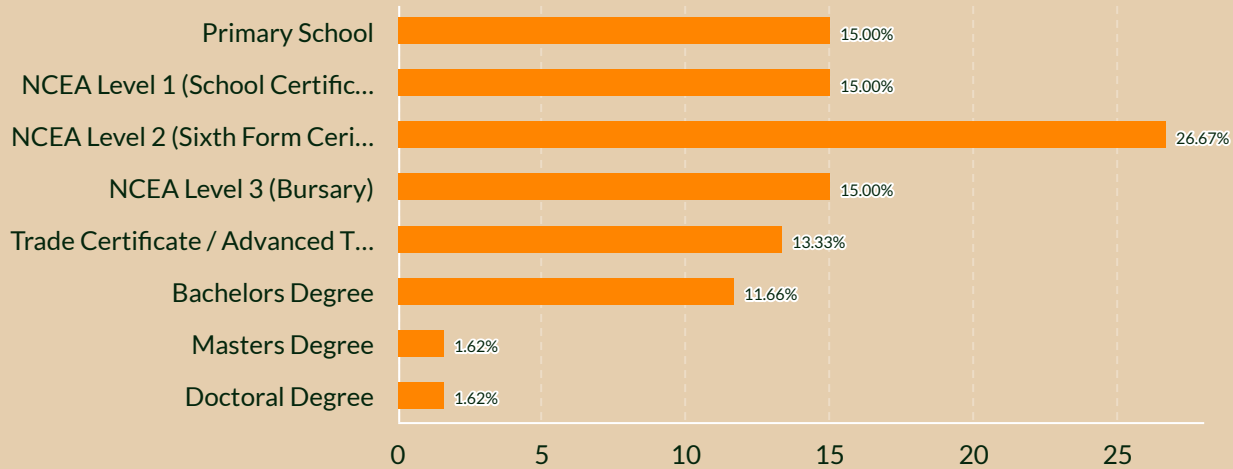


Whilst the most common term used by respondents to describe their sexuality was gay, more than a quarter indicated they were straight or straight attracted, reflecting the high number of leiti who completed the survey. A significant amount also wrote in the term pansexual, which suggests that some sexuality terms from outside Tonga have found some resonance locally.

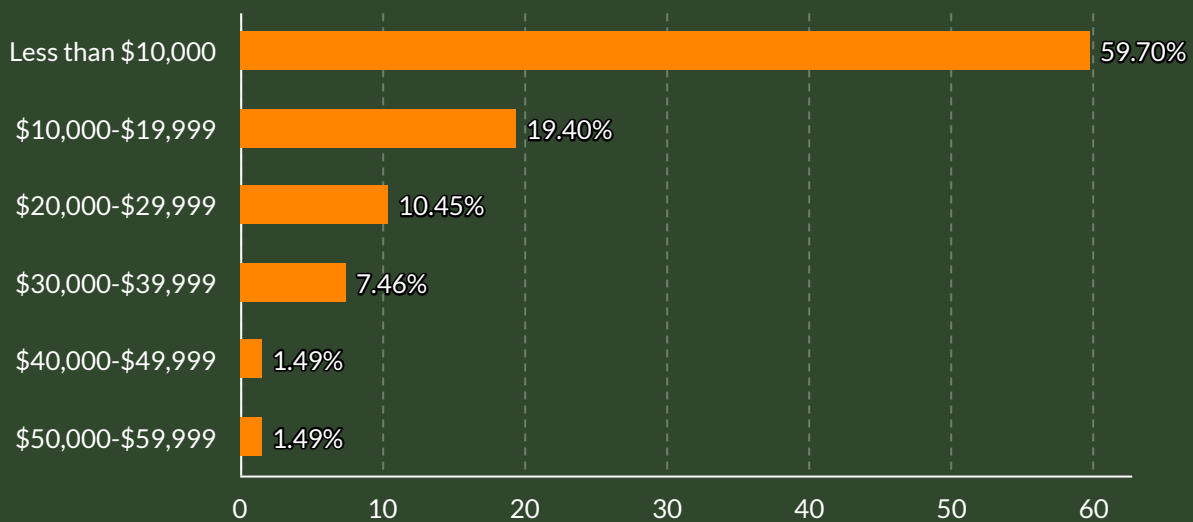
1J: Which of these describe your current employment situation (n=70)



1K: What is your HIGHEST level of formal education or qualification received? (n=60)

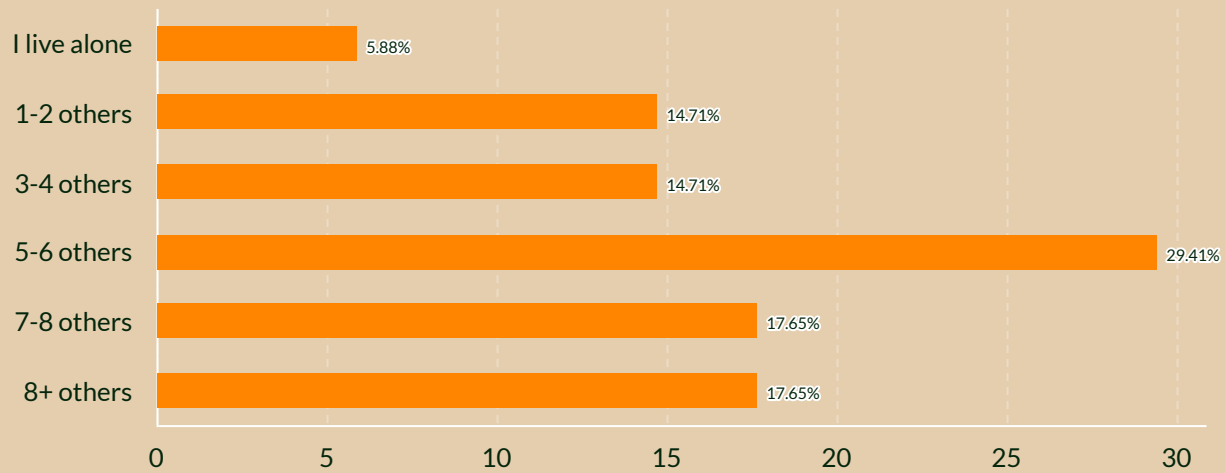


1L: What is your approximate personal annual income? (n=67)



Respondents were asked to quote their personal income in Tongan Pa'anga and to estimate this figure from all sources of income including wages/salary, part-time work, business income etc.

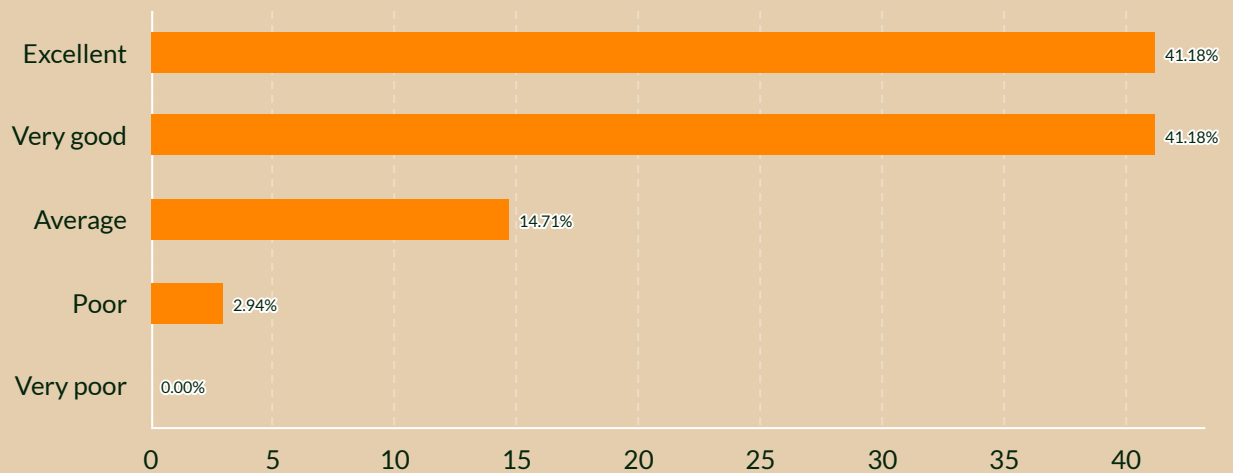
1M: How many people do you live with in your household? (n=68)



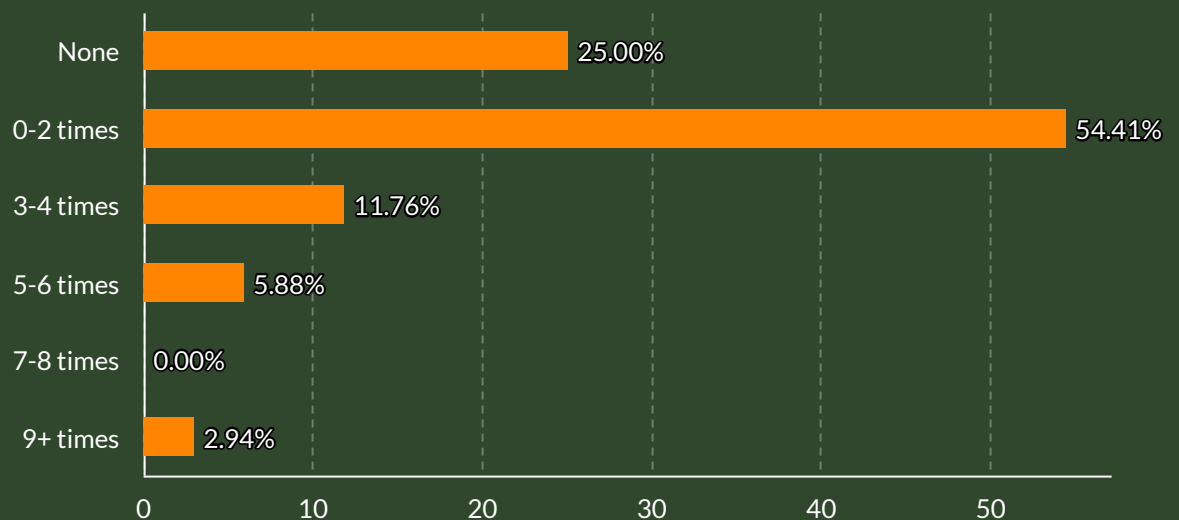


Part 2: Physical Health

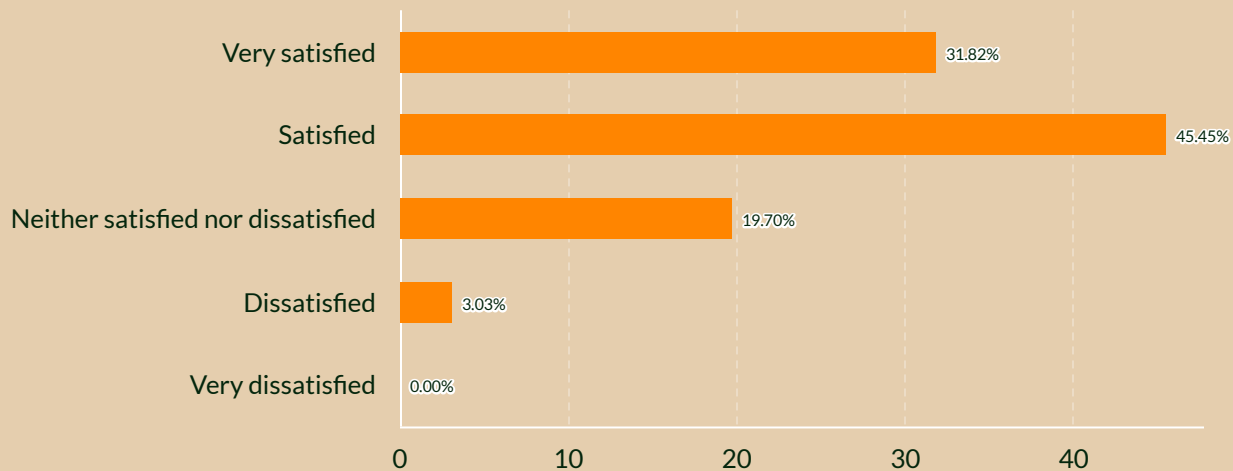
2A: In general, how would you rate your current physical health (n=68)



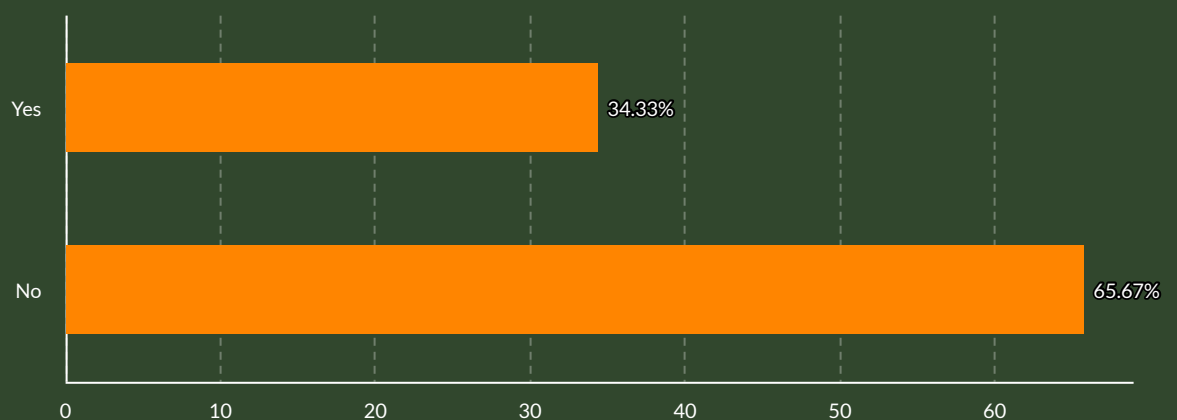
2B: Over the past 12 months, how many times have you visited your doctor, a medical clinic or hospital for your physical health? (n=68)



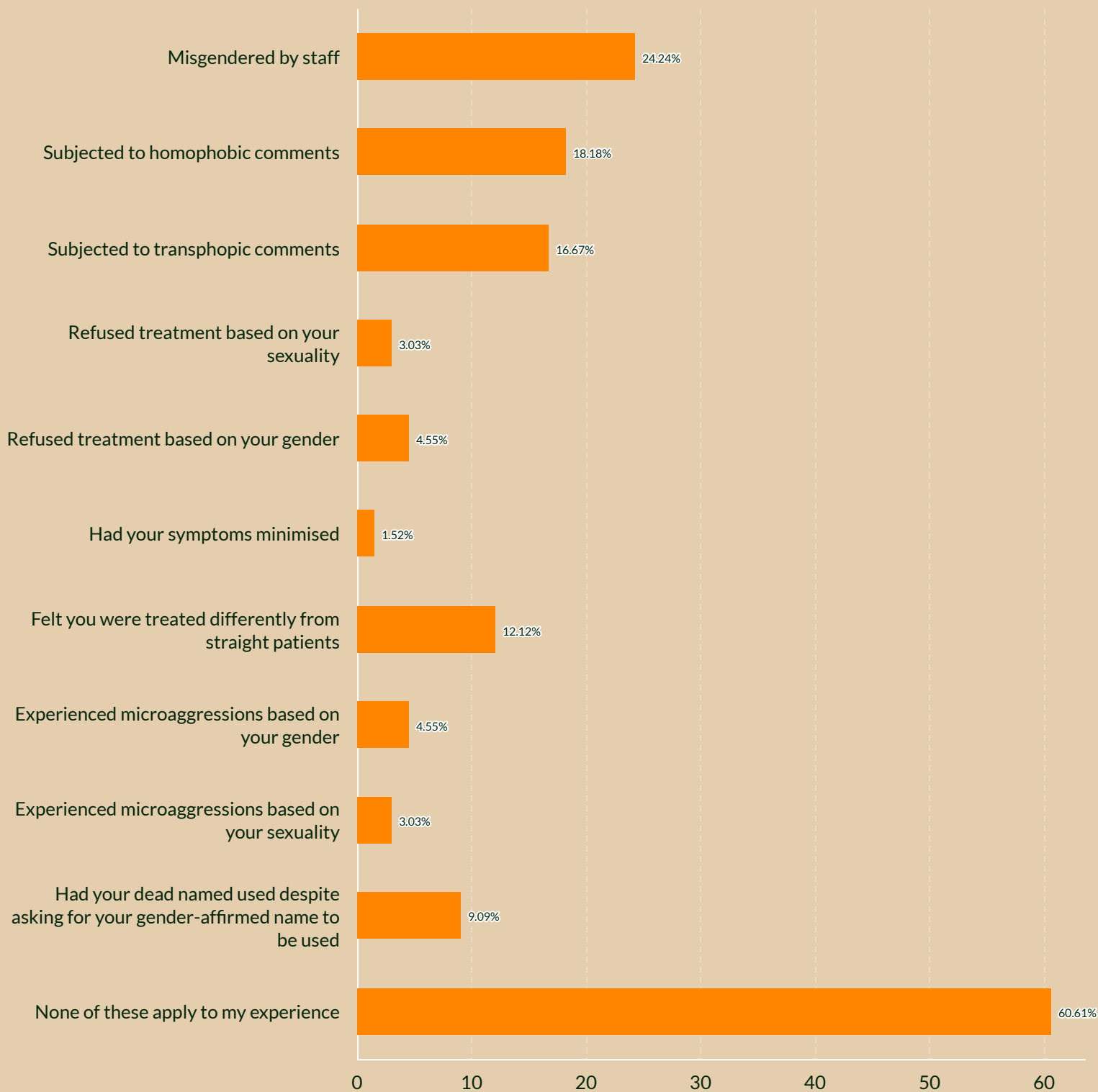
2C: How satisfied are you with the level of care you receive from your doctor/health professional, medical clinic or hospital? (n=68)



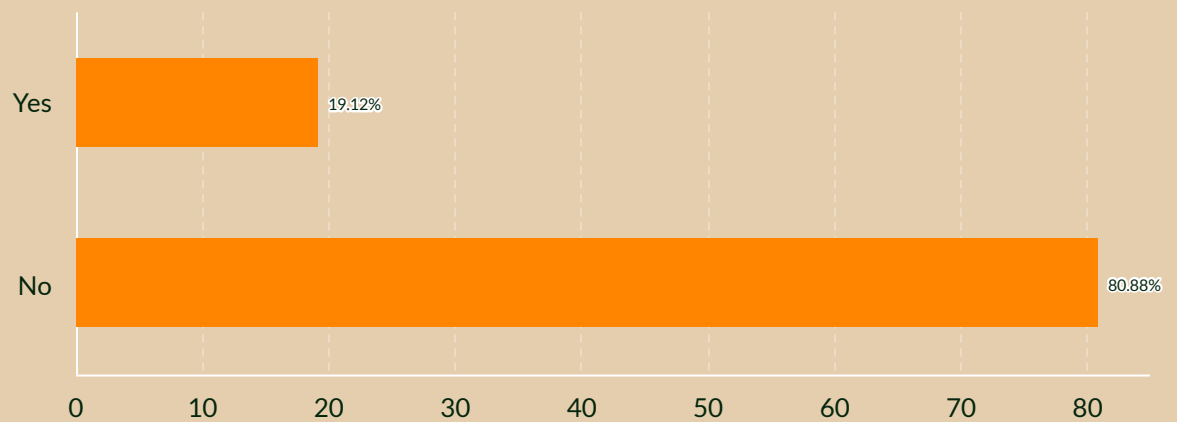
2D: Have you ever avoided seeing your doctor, or going to a medical clinic or hospital because of fear for your safety or repercussions in any way? (Discrimination, violence etc). (n=67)



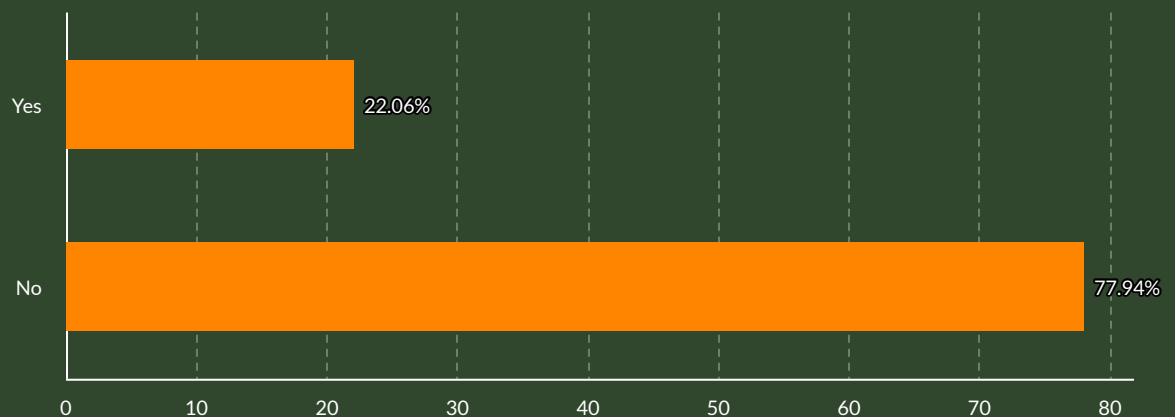
2E: Have you ever experienced any of these discriminatory behaviours at your doctor's office, a medical clinic or hospital in Tonga? Check all that apply (n=104)



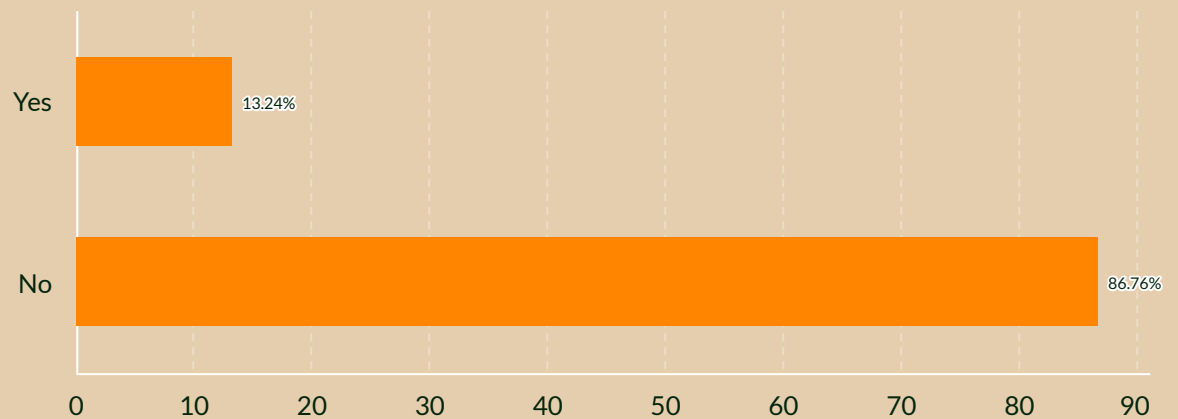
2F: Have you ever been diagnosed with a Non-communicable disease (NCD)? NCDs include diabetes, hypertension, cancer, lung disease etc. (n=68)



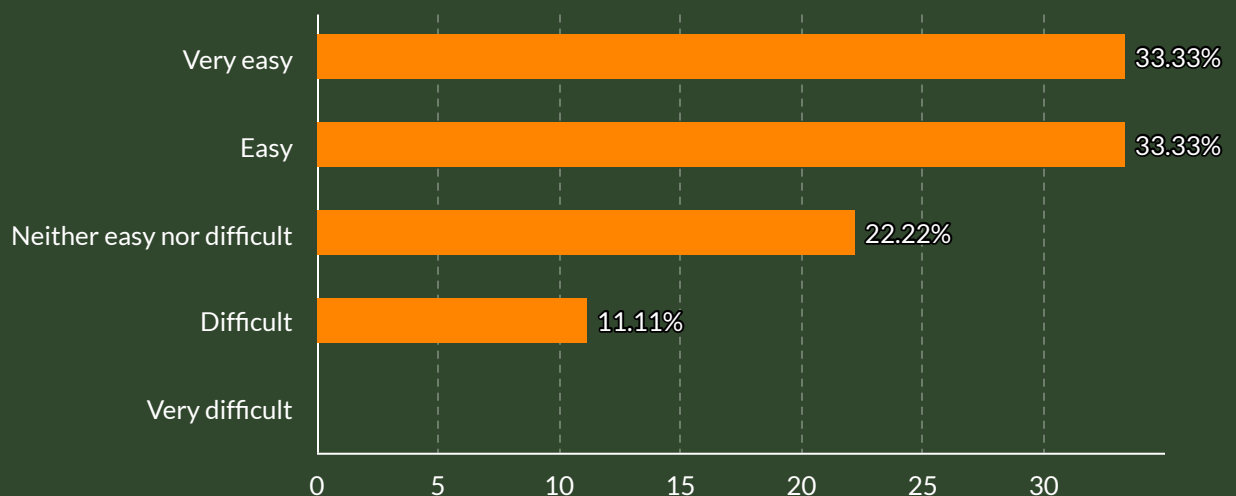
2G: Are you aware of any gender affirming care in Tonga? This includes hormone replacement therapy, etc. (n=68)



2H: Have you ever accessed any gender affirming care in Tonga? (n=68)



2H(1): In your opinion, how easy it is to access gender affirming healthcare services in Tonga?*

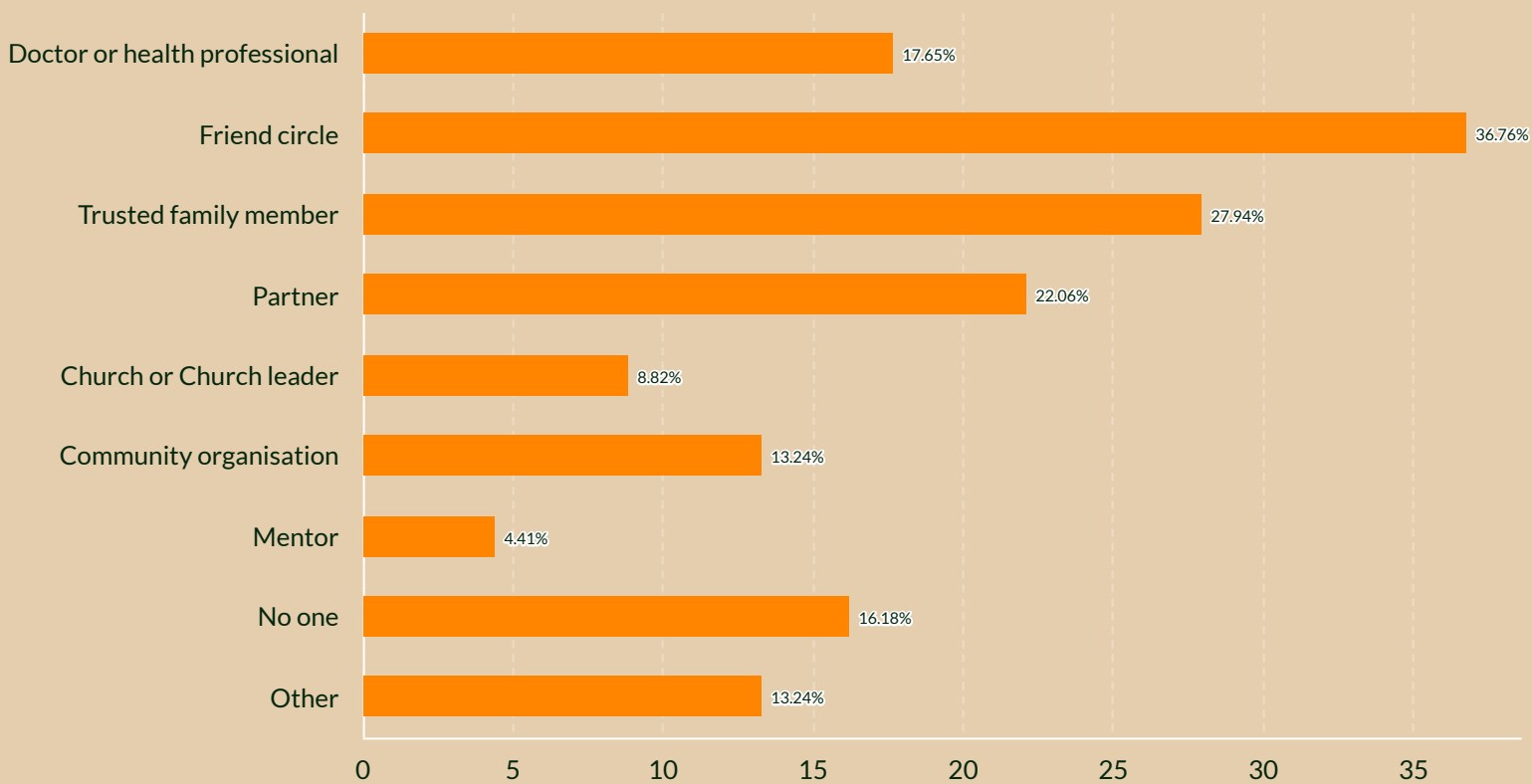


*Only those who answered yes to question 2H were given this additional question

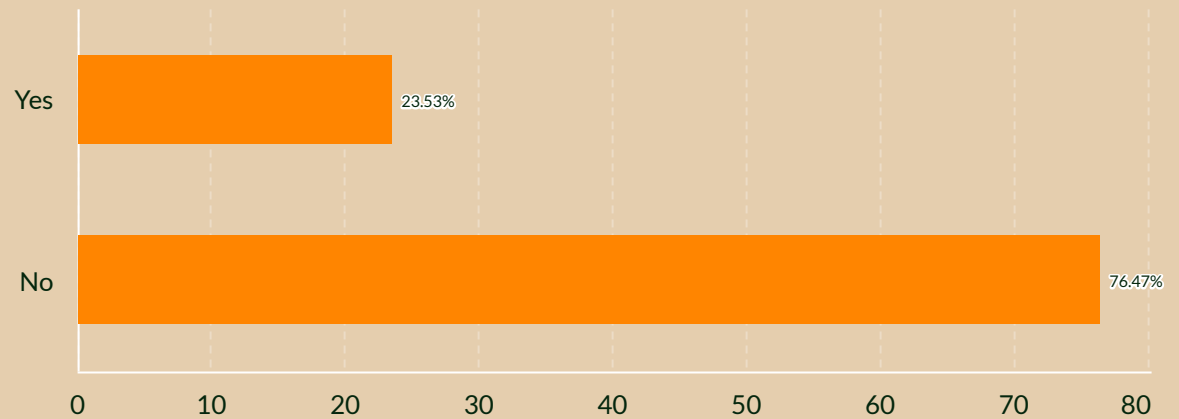


Part 3: Mental Health

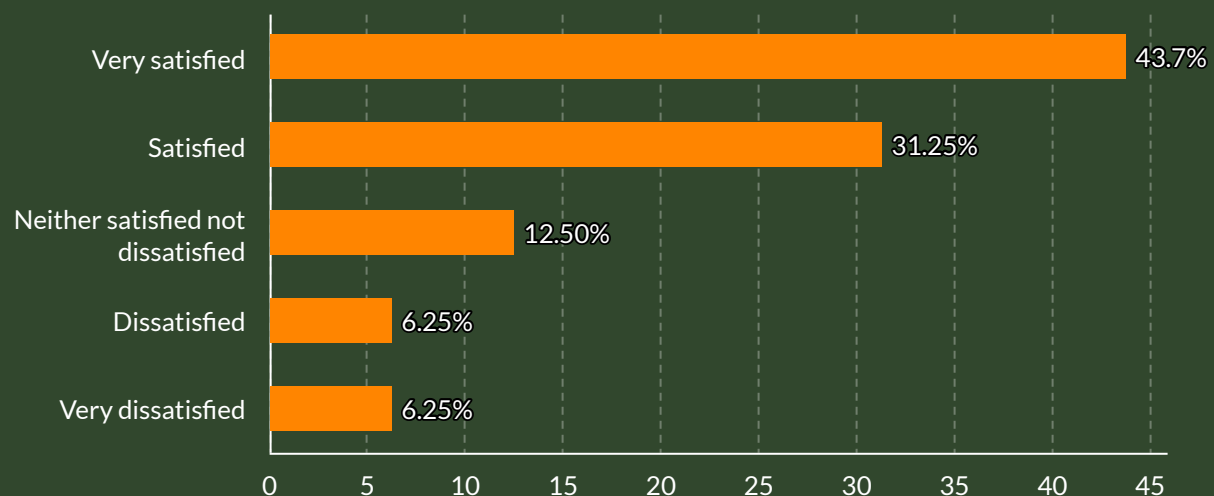
3A: When you are experiencing mental distress (this can be related to mental health, symptoms of depression, low self-esteem, thoughts of self-harm etc.) who are you most likely to seek support from if at all? (n=68)



3B: Have you ever used a mental health support service in Tonga before? (n=68)



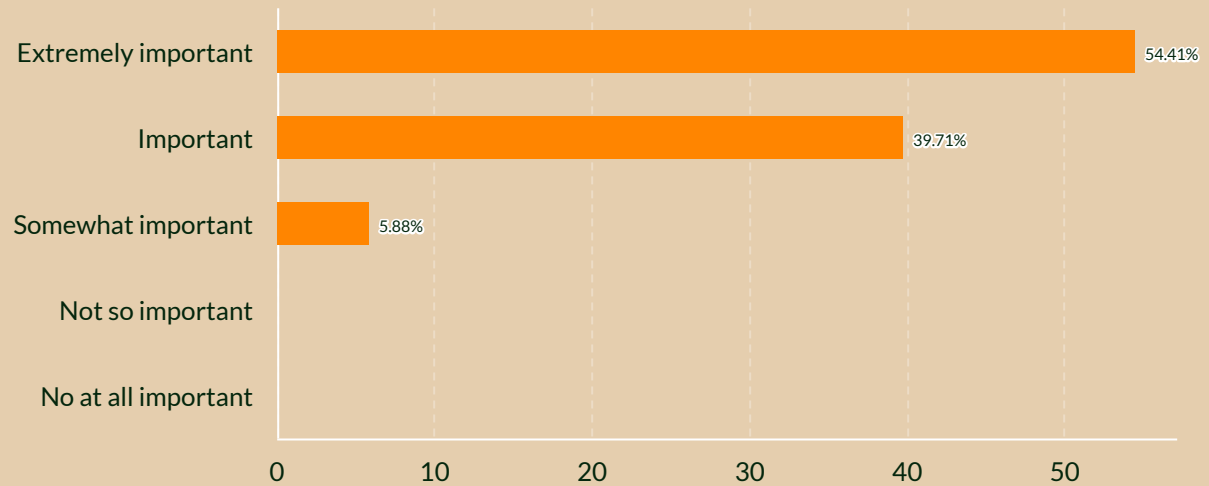
3C: Overall, how satisfied were you with the healthcare you received from the mental health support service and/or professional? (n=10)



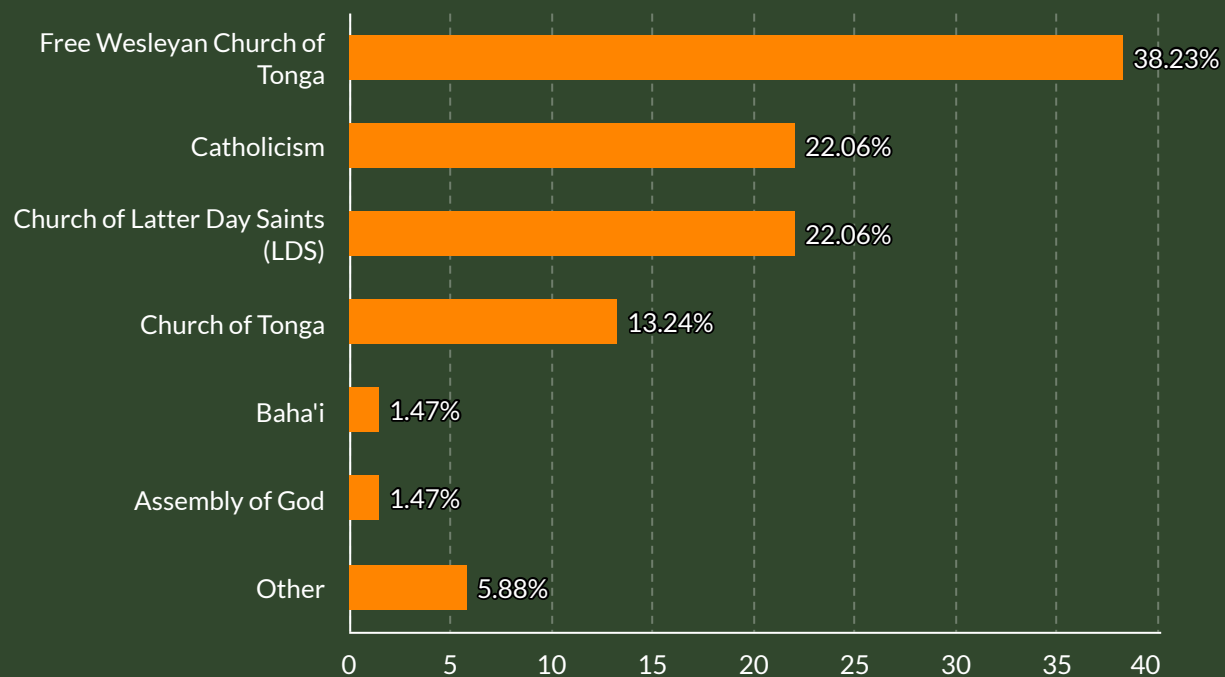


Part 4: Religion, Spirituality and Community

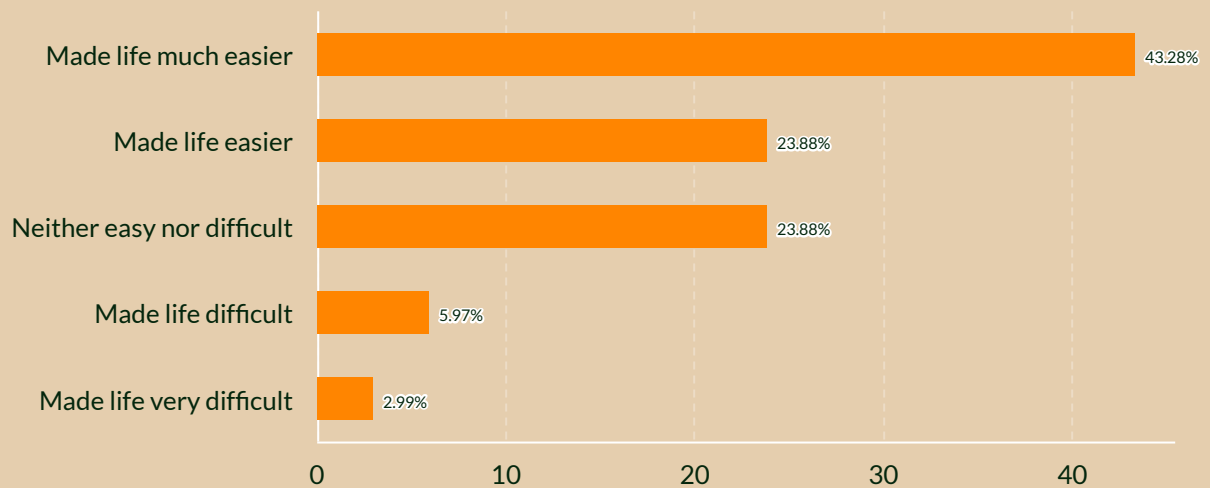
4A: How important is religion or spirituality to you? (n=68)



4B: Have you ever belonged to or are actively practising any of the listed organised religions/denominations/churches? (n=68)



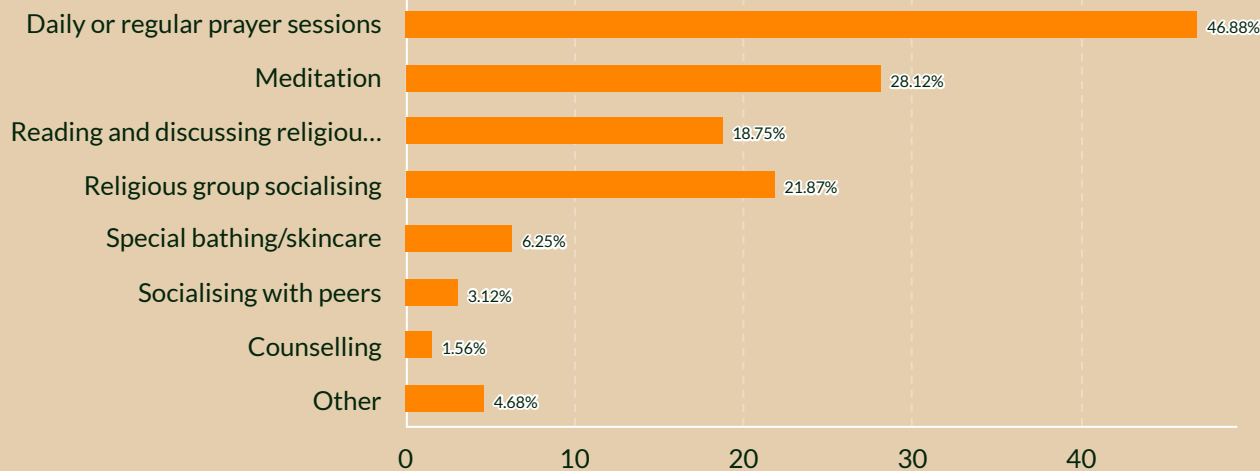
4C: How has religion impacted your ability to live your life as a member of the Rainbow or Leitī community? (n=67)



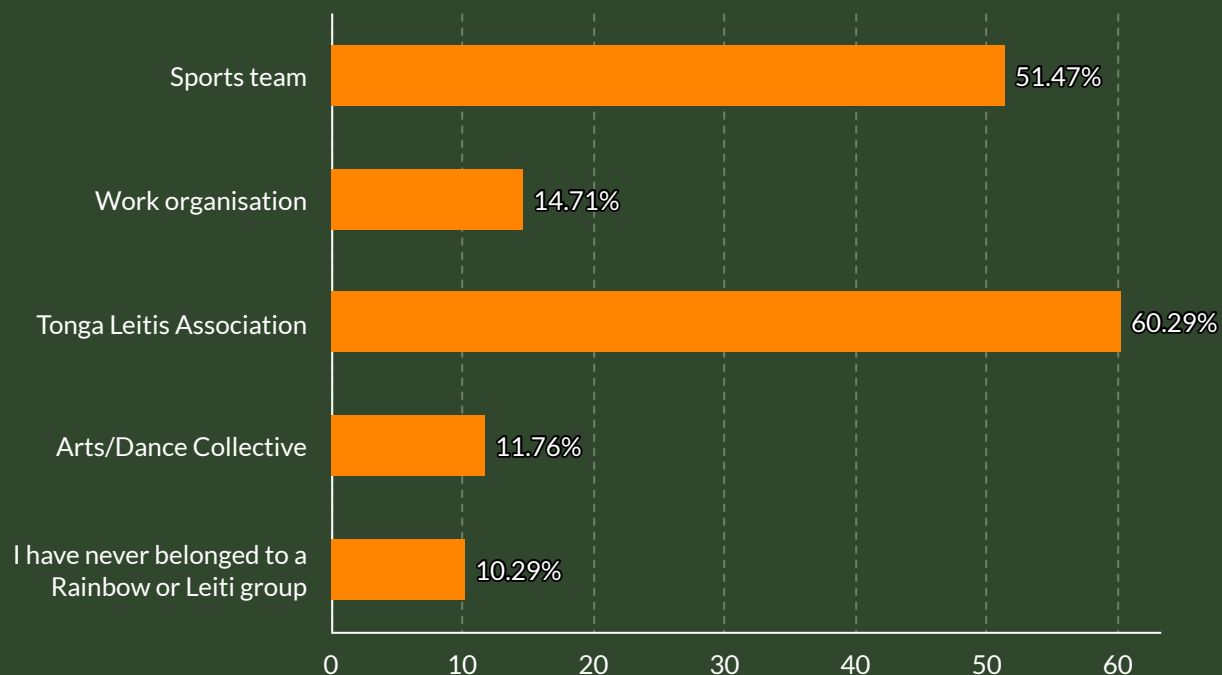
When asked to provide additional details, respondents wrote (summarised):

- Several described religion as a source of personal acceptance, reinforcing a sense that they are valued and legitimate as leitī or rainbow+ individuals.
- Faith was frequently described as a direct source of strength and guidance, with God providing emotional and spiritual support in daily life.
- Respondents linked religion to broader life skills and wellbeing outcomes, including economic awareness, self-discipline, and emotional growth.
- Religion was also described as enabling confidence in public identity, supporting individuals to stand openly as leitī in the face of stigma.
- Linked to empowerment, respondents described using faith as a way to respond to negativity or discrimination, reframing religious belonging as a space of strength rather than exclusion.
- *"It makes me more comfortable... to stand up as a leiti... that I can be who I am."*
- Not all impacts were positive. Some respondents highlighted burdens associated with church obligations, particularly where expectations exceeded personal capacity or financial means.

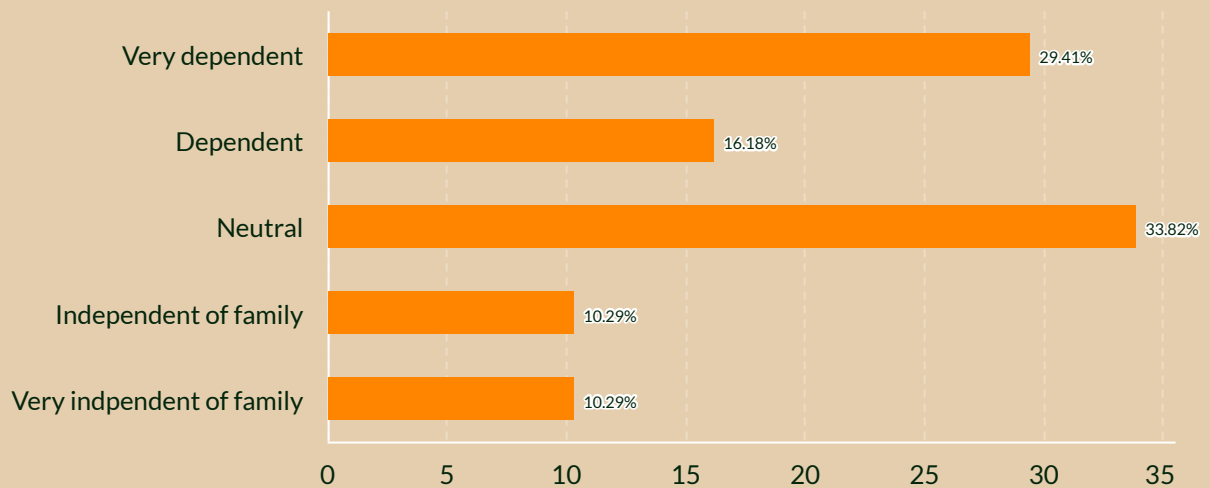
4D: Do you engage in any of these self-care practices that are related to your spiritual nourishment and fulfillment? (n=64)



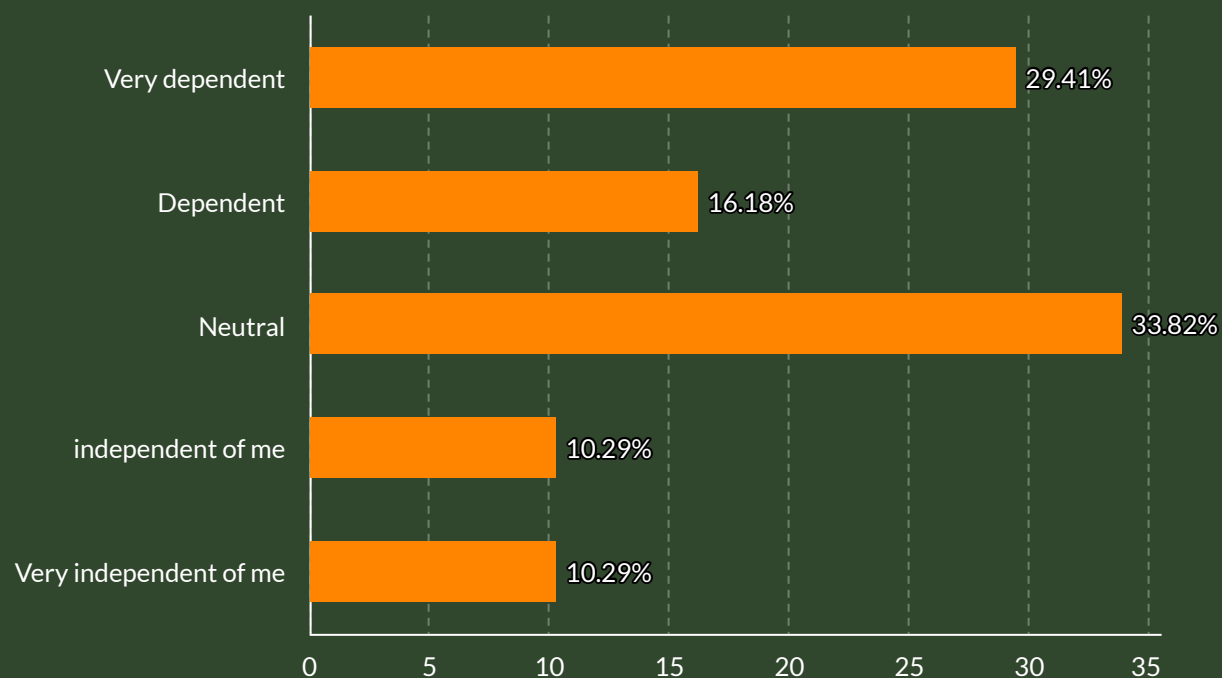
4E: Have you ever belonged to Rainbow or Leitī-specific community groups/organisations or sports teams? (n=68)



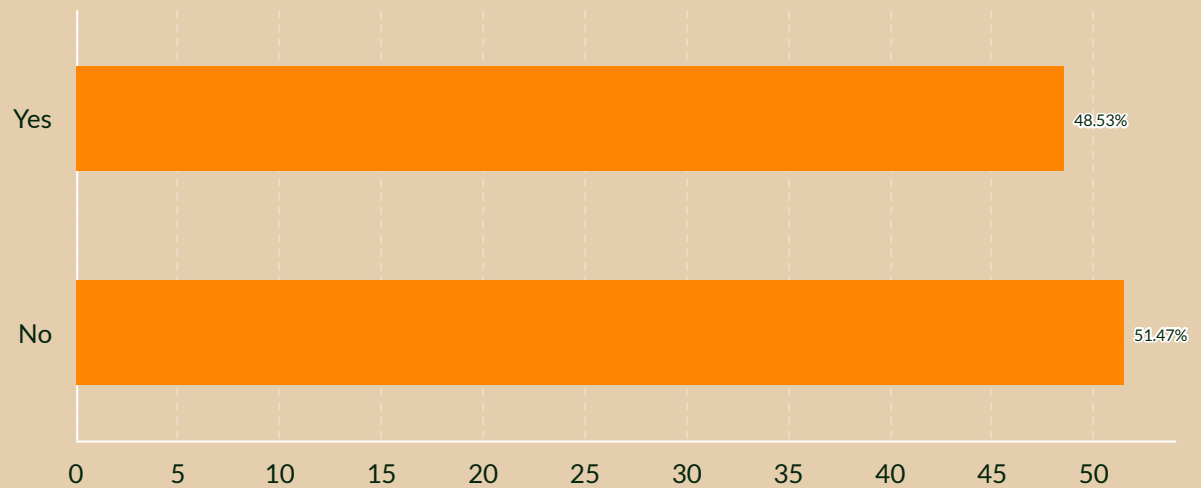
4F: On average, how dependent are you on your family (ie financially, help with chores, babysitting, emotional support/care, career planning, advice etc.) (n=68)

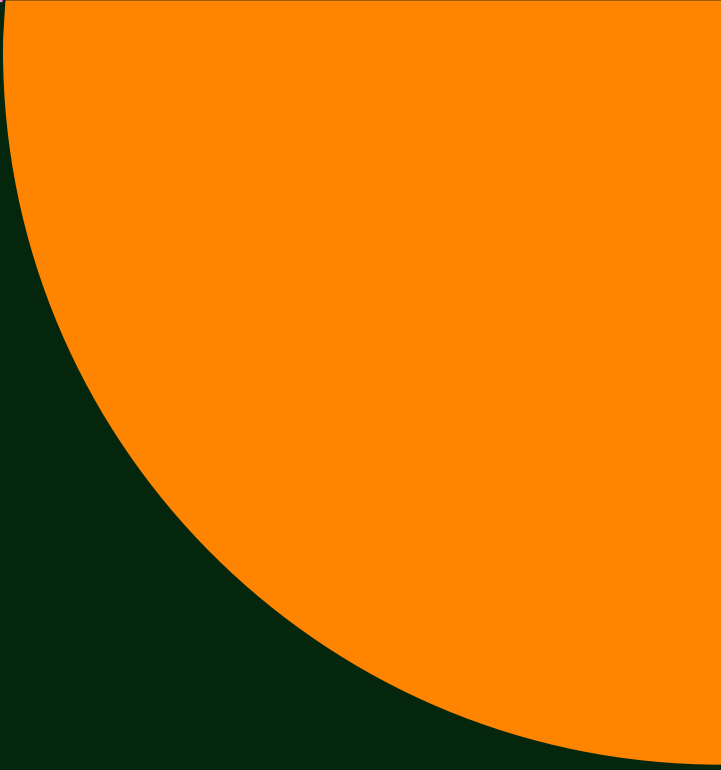


4G: On average, how dependent are you on your family for support? (ie financially, help with chores, babysitting, emotional support/care, career planning, advice etc.) (n=68)



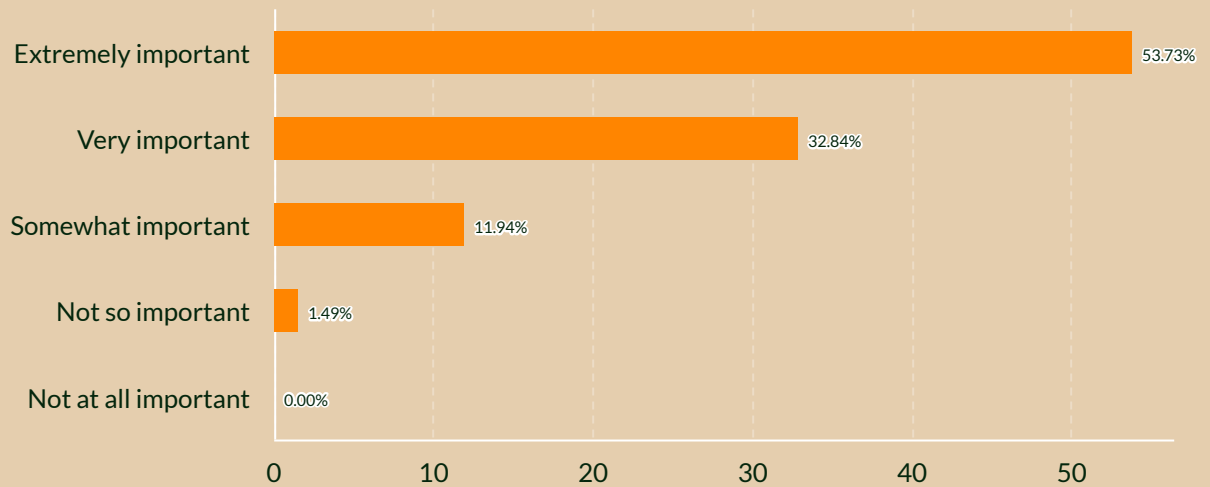
4H: Have you ever experienced exclusion from a community group/organisation/sports team in Tonga because of being Rainbow or Leitī? (n=68)



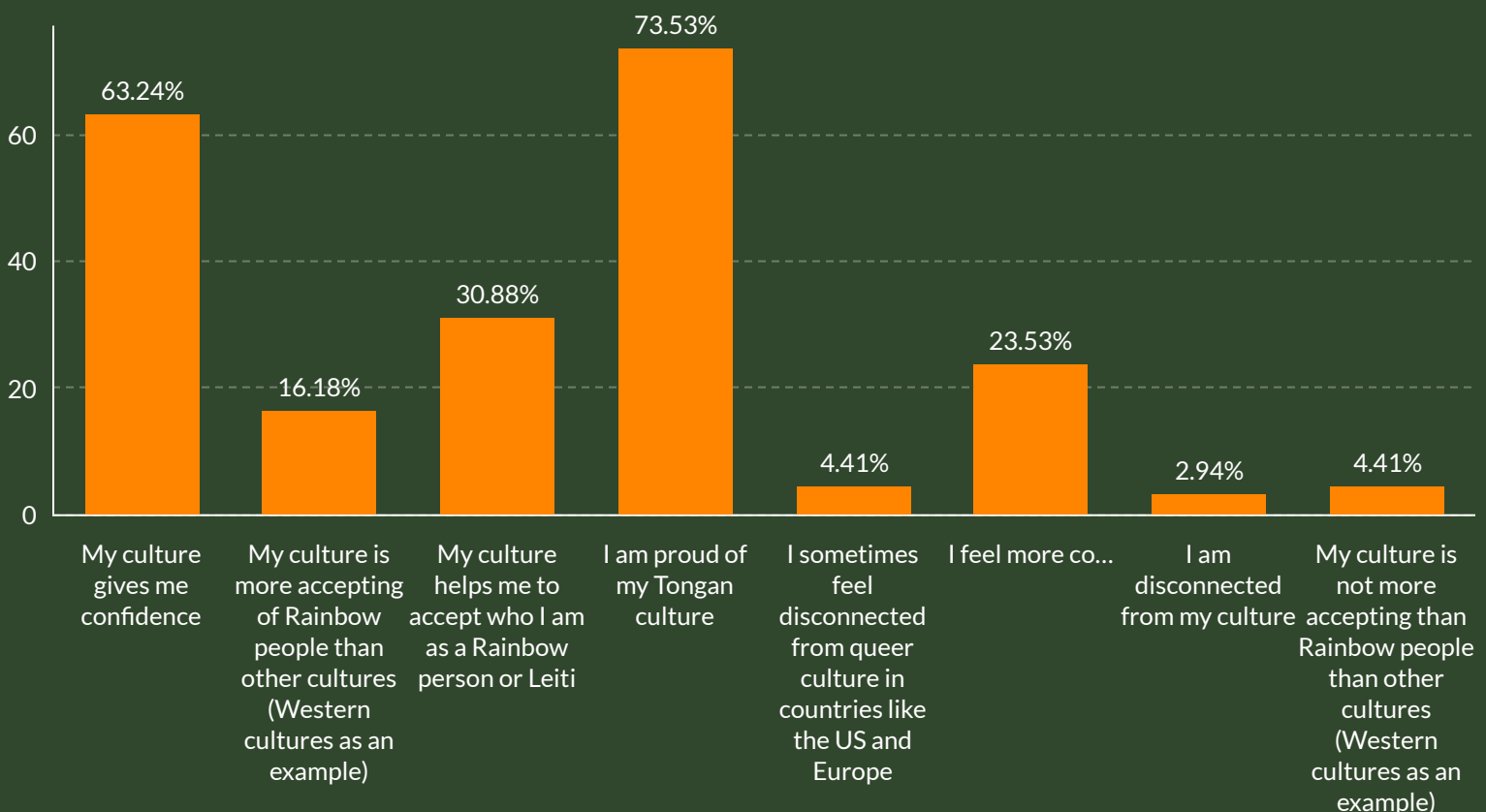


Part 5: Culture and Community

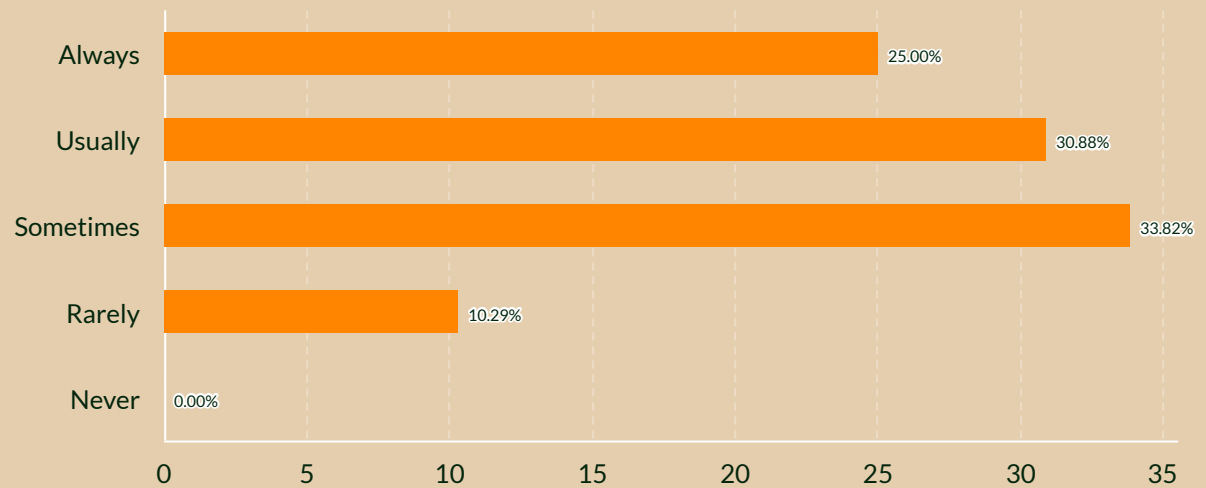
5A: As a Rainbow person or Leitī, how important is your culture to you? (n=67)



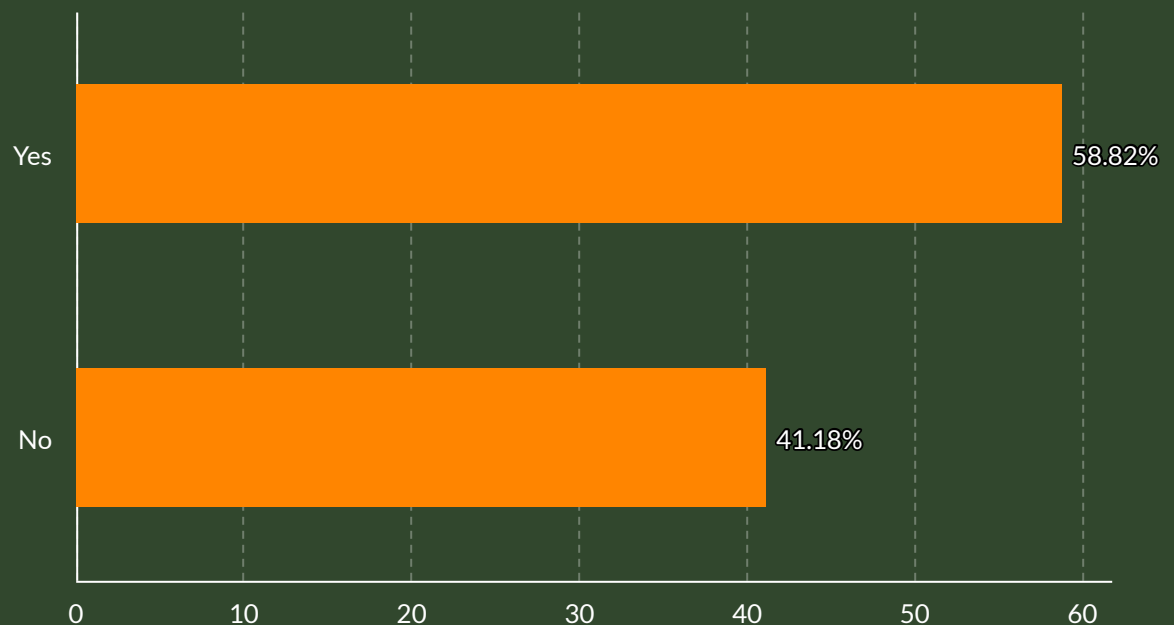
5B: Check all the statements that apply to you (n=68)



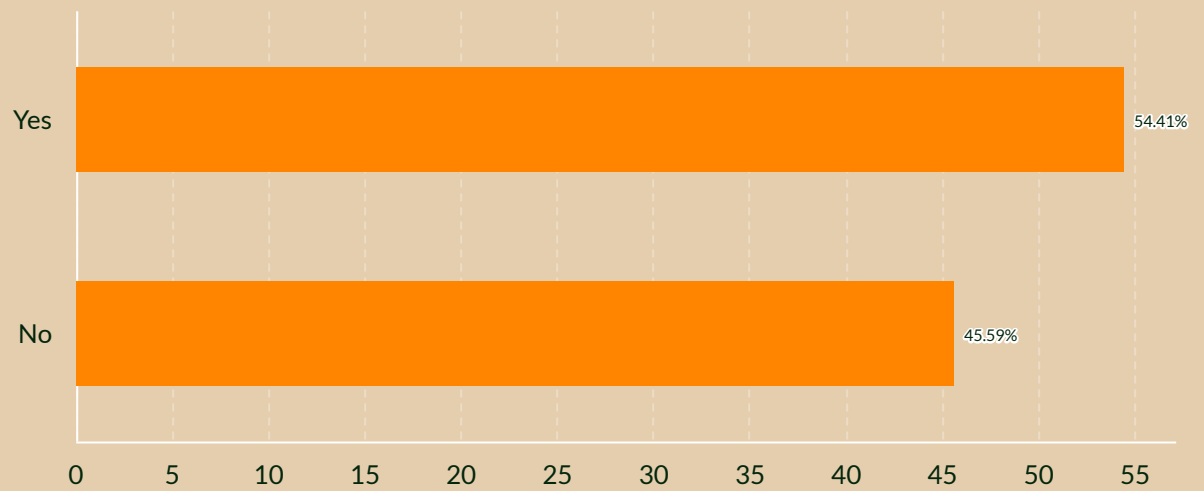
5C: How often do you participate in, or attend cultural events such as celebrations, independence days, fundraisers etc. (n=68)



5D: Have you ever organised a cultural event/celebration for your community or your workplace/family/organisation you're affiliated to? (n=68)



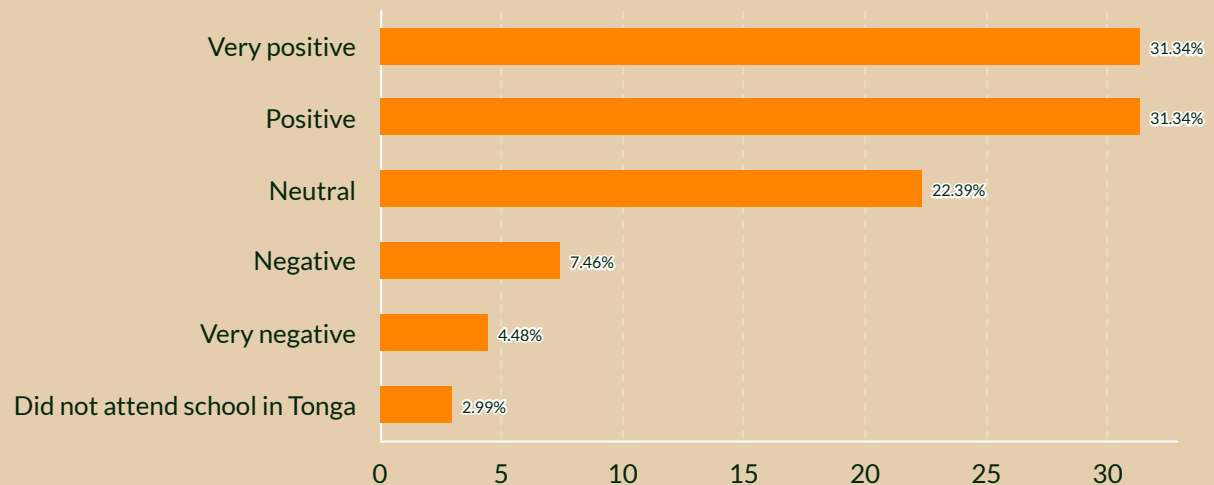
5E: Were you compensated for this work? (n=68)





Part 6: Education - School Experiences

6A: On average, how would you rate your overall experience as a Rainbow or Leitī student in school?(n=68)



6B: Did you feel comfortable expressing your Rainbow or Leitī identity at school? Why or why not? (n=68)

Responses to this question were mixed, shaped by safety, fear of stigma, family standing, and peer environments. Five key themes emerged:

1. Fear of judgment and stigma

A dominant barrier to expression was fear of negative reactions from others, leading some respondents to conceal their identity.

2. Limited or conditional inclusion

Some respondents described partial or inconsistent degrees of comfort in the school environment linked to uncertainty around safety.

3. Confidence and self-expression despite uncertainty of safety

A smaller group of respondents expressed confidence in openly presenting as Leitī or Rainbow, regardless of perception.

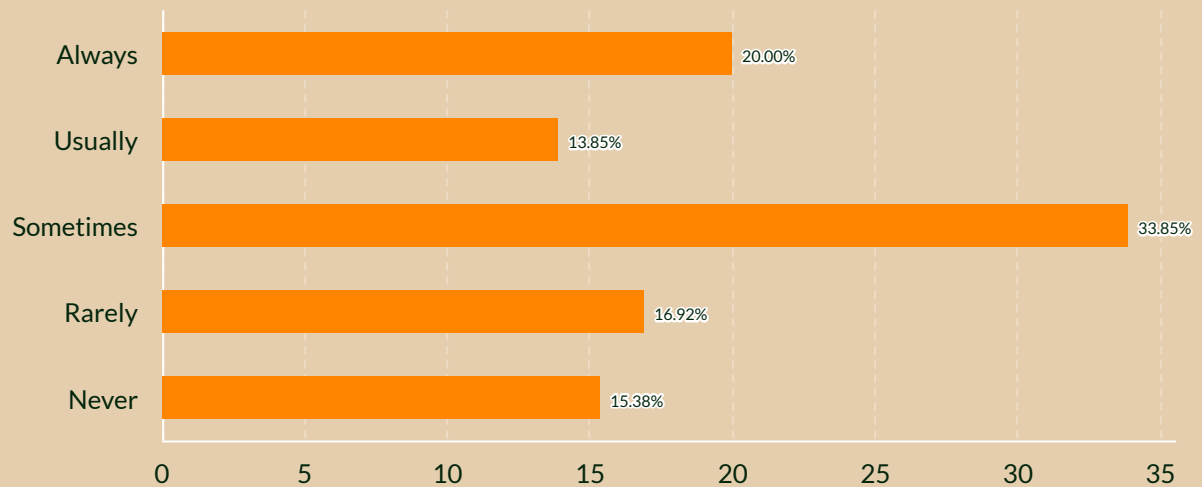
4. Safety within peer networks

Comfort in school contexts was also linked to being around other Leitī or supportive peers. Speaking to micro-environments of safety created in school settings.

5. Influence of family reputation and social standing

A few responses referenced the importance of social capital and genealogy, highlighting family status and history. One specific response spoke of the importance of the family being respected within their school context keeping them safe.

6C: How often were you bullied or harassed at school for being Rainbow or Leiti? (n=65)



6C(1): When asked to provide additional details:

Responses described bullying experiences in school as layered and from many different sources.

1. **Teacher-perpetrated harm**

Some respondents highlighted how teachers outed students and enabled bullying behaviour to take place at school.

2. **Persistent peer harassment and homophobic bullying**

Respondents described ongoing verbal harassment that came specifically from male peers of a homophobic nature.

3. **Gender policing and enforcement of norms**

Bullying also took place in the way some students would pressure respondents to "act like a boy" or to "walk like a boy."

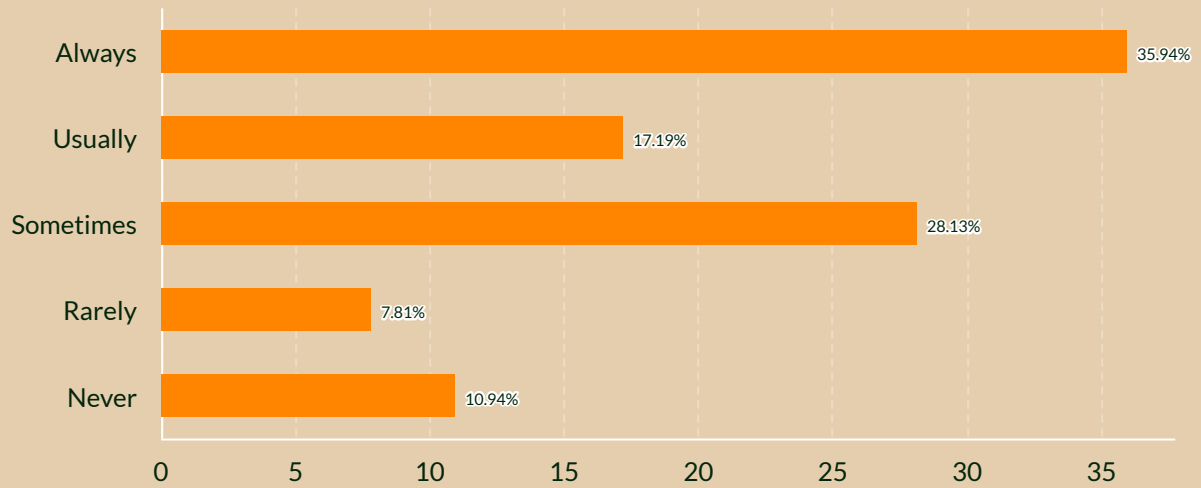
4. **Physical violence and intimidation**

Some experiences reported by participants related to being physically hit by other students and having personal property stolen.

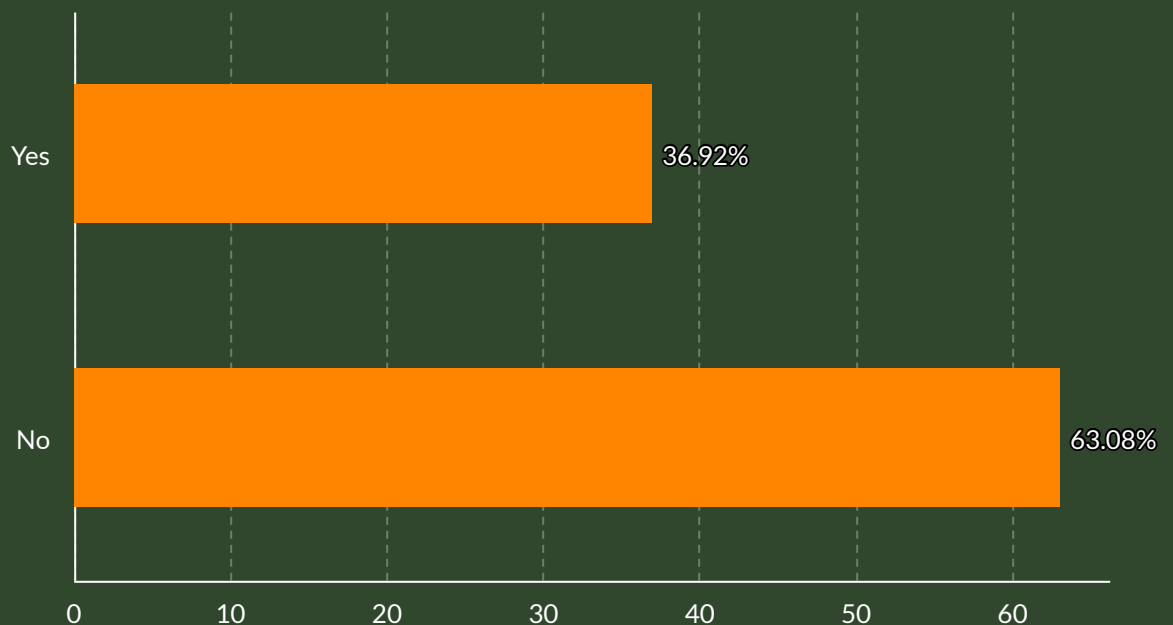
5. **Mixed experiences - social positioning**

Not all experiences reported were uniformly negative. A small number of respondents spoke of the significance of hanging around specific types of popular or of high status students that buffered them from the full effects of bullying.

6D: How often did you hear homophobic or transphobic comments at school? (n=64)



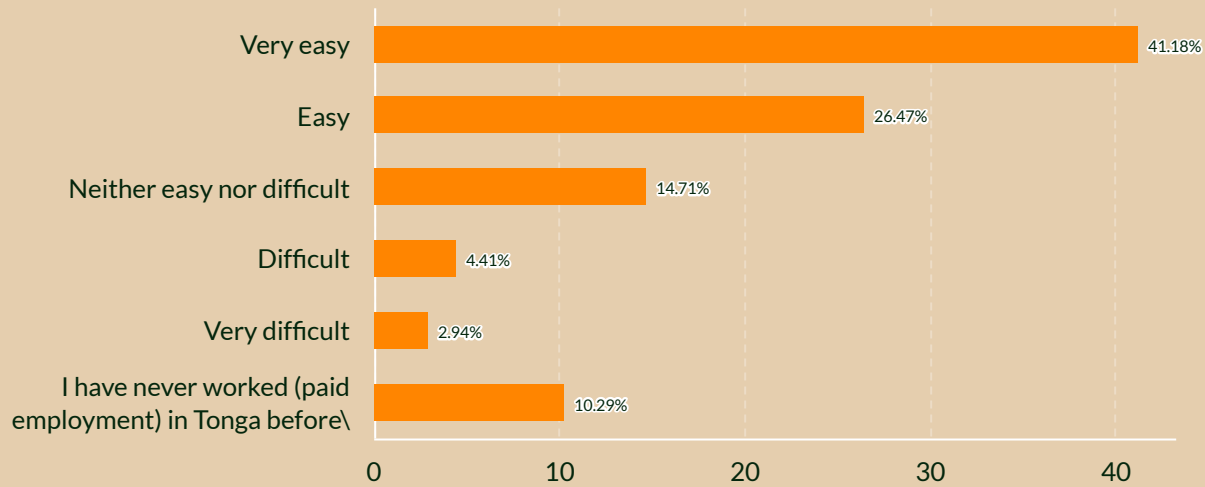
6E: Were Rainbow or Leitī topics, or the Tongan Rainbow community covered in your school curriculum?



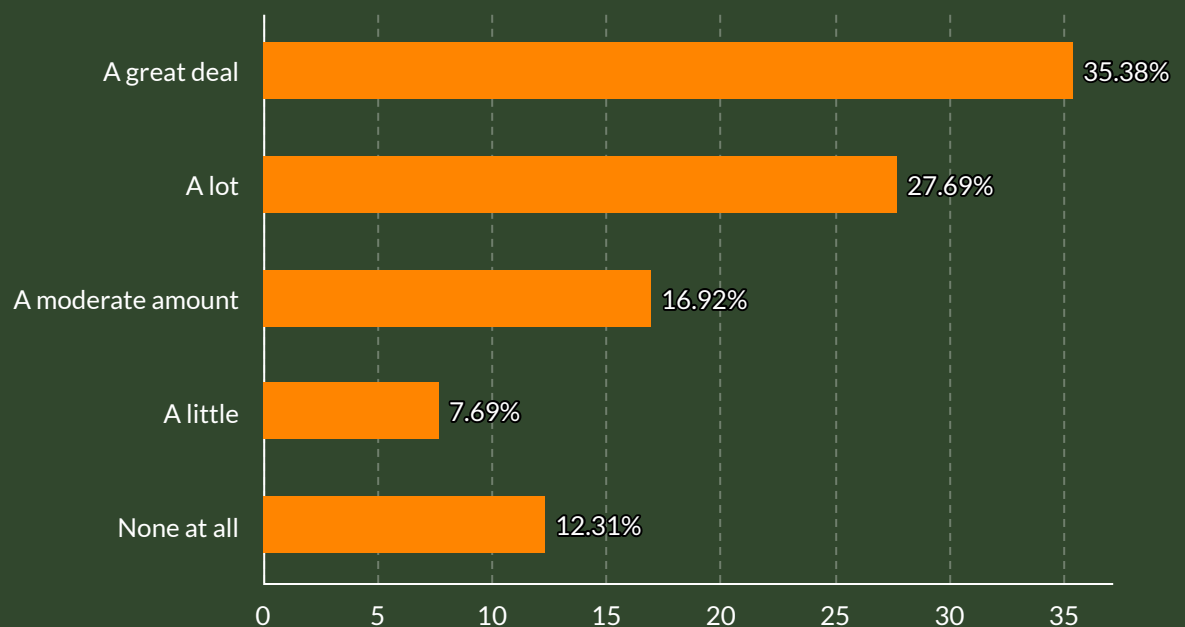


Part 7: Workplace Experiences

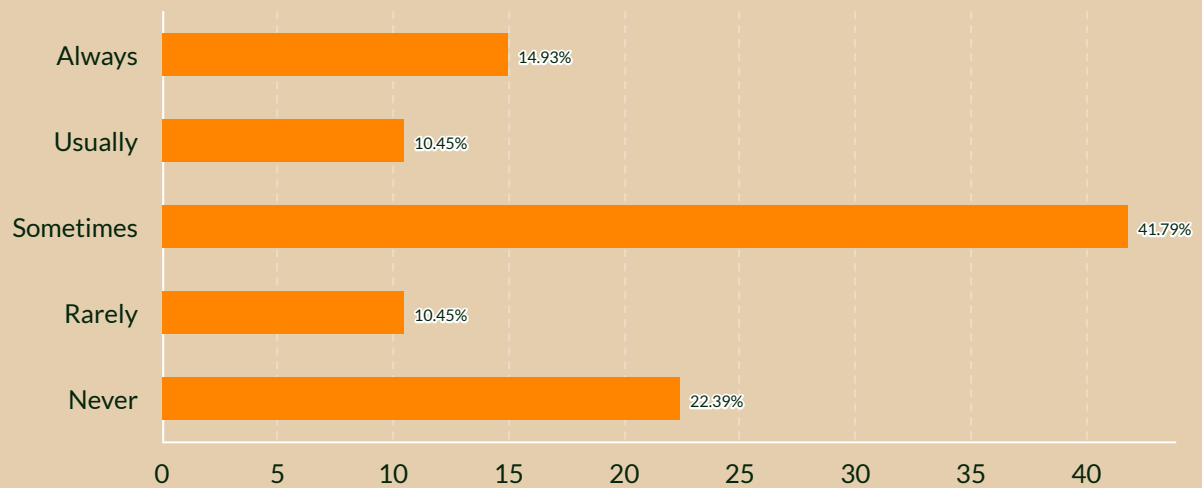
7A: How easy is it for you to share your Rainbow or Leitī identity at work? (n=68)



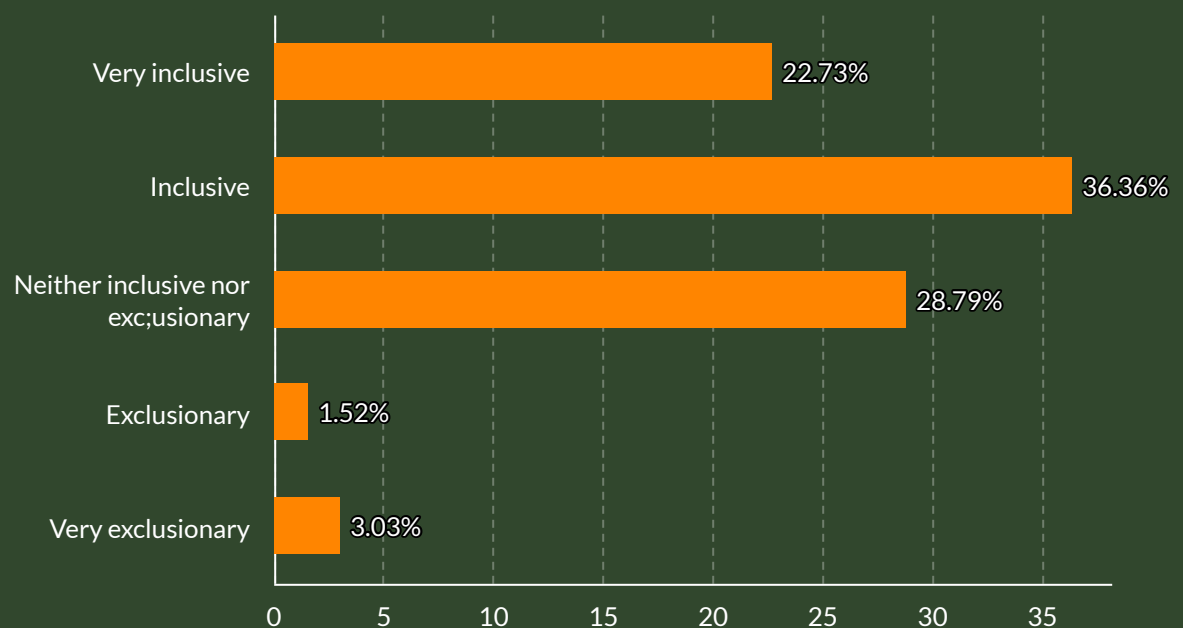
7B: To what extent do you feel supported by your employer in relation to being Rainbow or Leitī?



7C: Have you ever experienced discrimination from colleagues/clients/customers before because of being Rainbow or Leitī? (n=67)



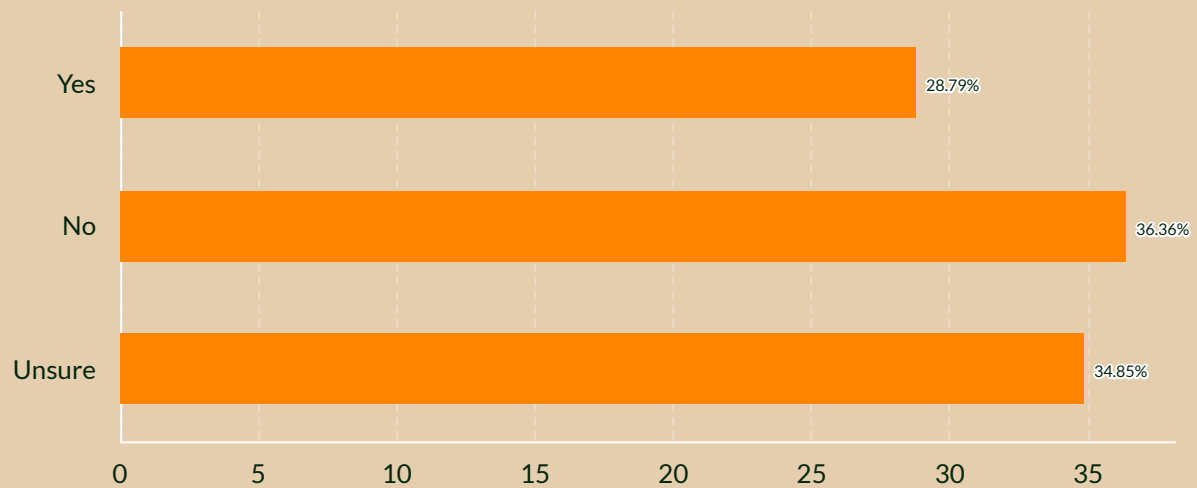
7D: How would you describe the overall climate at your workplace for Rainbow or Leitī employees? (n=66)





Part 8: Human Rights

8A: In your opinion, does Tongan legislation adequately protect the human rights of Rainbow people or Leitī? (n=66)



8A(1): When asked to provide details, respondents:

Were predominantly critical of existing legislation, or lack thereof in other areas. Respondents identified gaps, contradictions and ongoing criminalisation as areas of concern.

1. **Continued criminalisation of Leitī identities and expressions**

Some respondents homed in on outdated (never prosecuted) laws that state men should not impersonate or wear women's clothing.

2. **Absence of Leitī and Rainbow peoples in Tongan legislation**

Some respondents highlighted the fact that Leitī and Rainbow peoples are largely absent in Tongan legislation.

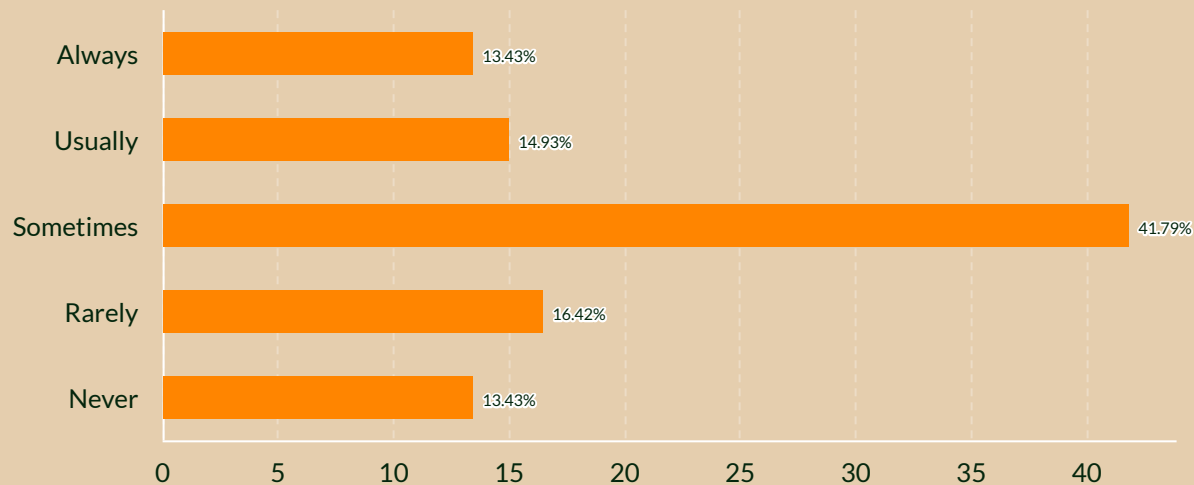
3. **Legal contradictions and gaps in protections**

Some respondents felt that Tongan law had loopholes that could hurt Leitī and Rainbow peoples; furthermore that anti-discrimination laws do not exist to protect Leitī and other Rainbow peoples in Tonga.

4. **Awareness of advocacy and reform efforts**

Some respondents did make mention of their awareness around ongoing efforts in Tonga, primarily led by the Tonga Leitīs Association around law reform.

8B: Have you ever experienced violence or harassment in public in Tonga due to you being Rainbow or Leitī? (n=67)



8B(1): When asked to provide more details, respondents stated that:

Violence was something that many had experienced before in public, and many respondents added that they had little trust in authorities to give Leitī complaints proper hearing and investigation.

1. Lack of trust in police and authorities

The most dominant theme in responses was around a belief that police do not take cases involving Leitī or Rainbow people seriously, representing significant breakdown in institutional trust.

2. Authorities perceived as unresponsive and slow

Respondents also mentioned that even if a complaint was progressed by authorities, there is a perception that complaints are not investigated properly and that follow up is ineffective.

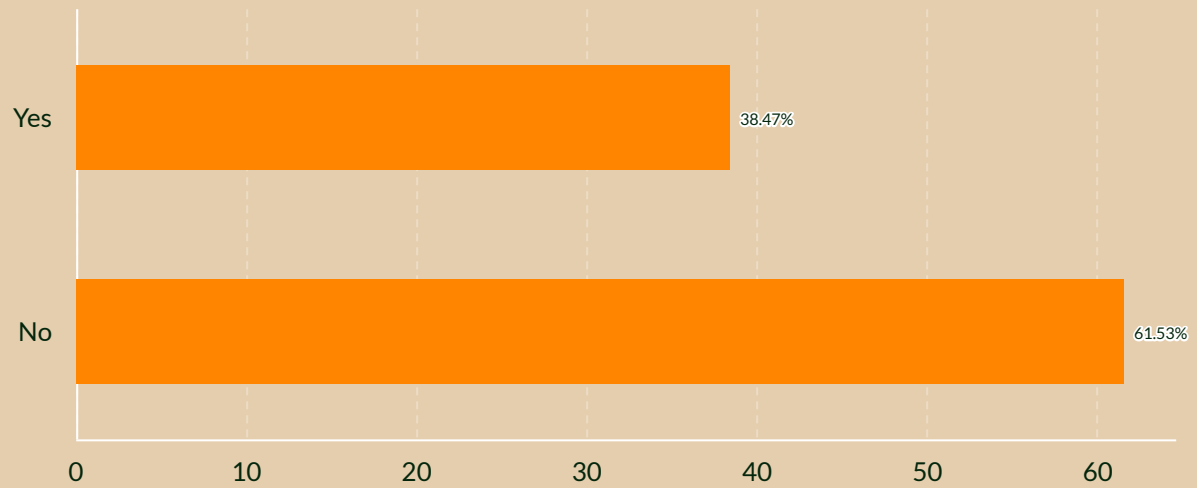
3. Fear of not being helped

A number of responses reflected what can be described as anticipatory anxiety, where they believed that reporting violence would not result in any kind of support or action.

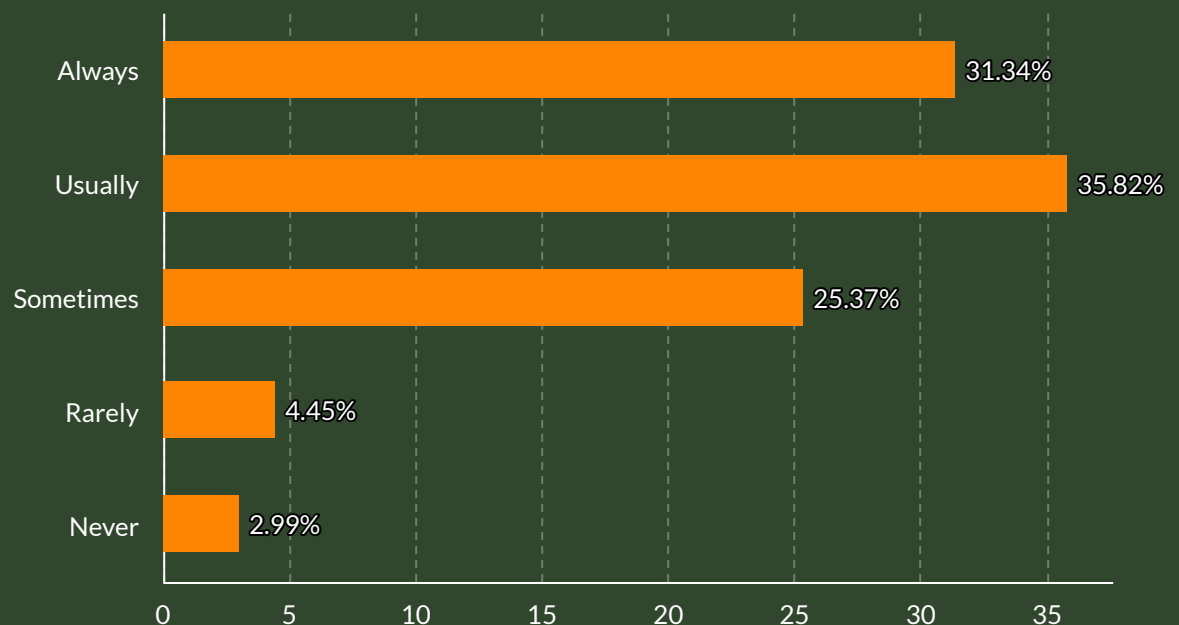
4. Perception of low priority or dismissal

Some responses suggest that there was a feeling that violence against Leitī or Rainbow people is not treated as important by authorities.

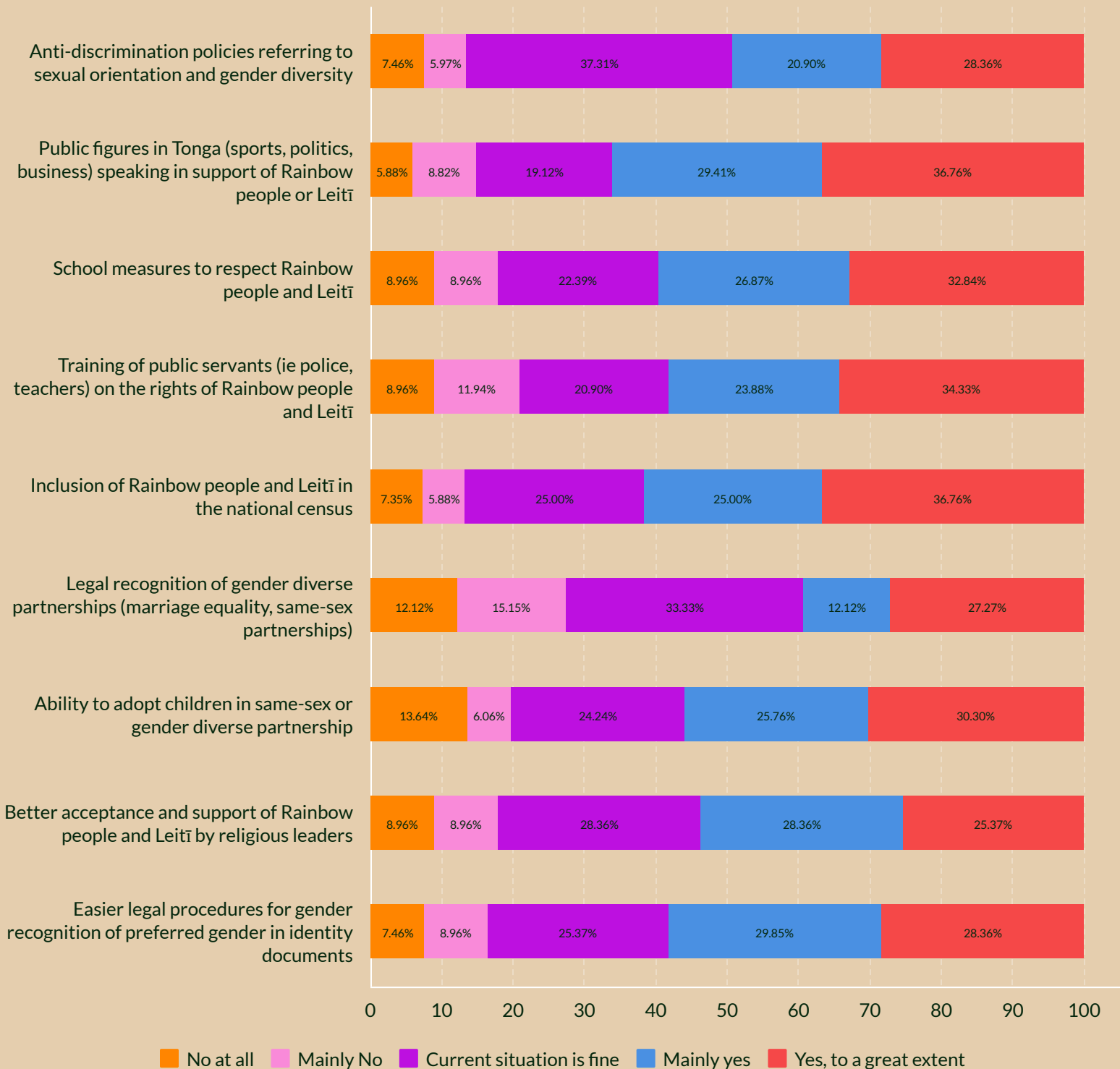
8C: If you have experienced violence or harassment in public, did you report the incident(s) to authorities or a support organisation? (n=67)



8D: How often do you think Rainbow people and Leitī in Tonga experience violence? (n=67)



8E: What would allow you to be more comfortable living as Rainbow or Leitī in Tonga? Please indicate to what extent the following measures would improve life for Rainbow and Leitī in Tonga (n=67)





Part 9: Discussion and Recommendations

Discussion

The Manalangi survey findings provide a grounded and careful insight into the lived experiences of leiti and Rainbow+ people currently living in Tonga. While it has been noted that the data should not be read as representing every leiti or Rainbow+ person in Tonga, it does offer an important community-informed picture of how identity, family, culture, religion, health, education, employment, safety and human rights are being experienced by respondents. When considered alongside existing literature, the findings suggest that life for leiti and Rainbow+ communities in Tonga is shaped by both strong societal positioning and visibility, alongside continuing forms of exclusion. This reflects what Besnier (2004) describes as the complex social positioning of transgender or Leiti Tongans, where visibility does not always translate into full social or institutional acceptance.

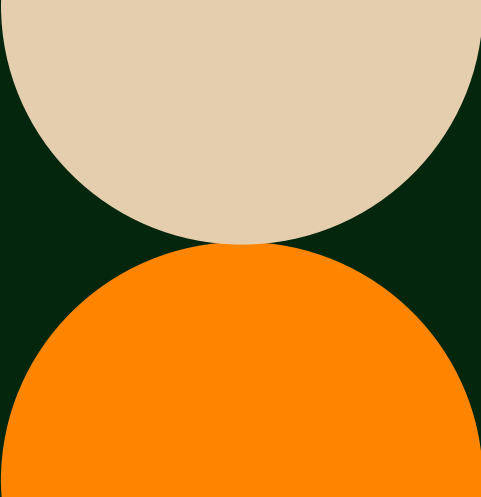
A recurring theme across the survey is that acceptance or inclusion is often relational. Many respondents appear to find belonging through family contribution, church participation, cultural service, community leadership and peer networks. This is consistent with Pacific understandings of identity as shaped through relationships, vā, reciprocity and collective obligation rather than individual identity alone (Farran, 2010; Thomsen, 2022). At the same time, the data suggests that belonging can sometimes be conditional, especially where social acceptance depends on whether leiti and Rainbow+ people are seen to contribute positively to family, church, workplace or community life.

Identity, visibility and belonging

Most respondents identified as part of the Rainbow+ or leiti community, with 84.85% answering yes and 15.15% saying they were questioning. All respondents who answered the question reported currently living in Tonga, and 95.59% were born in Tonga. This means the survey provides an important local snapshot of people whose lives, relationships and wellbeing are directly shaped by Tongan society, institutions and everyday community life. The age distribution also matters. Most respondents were young adults, with 37.88% aged 21–29 and 31.82% aged 30–39, suggesting that much of this data reflects the experiences of a generation navigating identity within contemporary Tonga, where local cultural values, Christian institutions, diasporic influences and digital media all intersect.

The gender identity responses show the importance of using both culturally grounded and open categories. While 37.31% selected transgender and 10.45% selected non-binary, another 37.31% indicated that none of the listed statements applied to their gender identity. In the open responses, several participants simply wrote “leiti” or “leiti”.





This matters because it shows that Western categories such as transgender, non-binary, gay or queer may be meaningful for some respondents, but not sufficient for all. Pacific scholarship has long argued that gender-diverse identities such as *leitī* in Tonga and *fa'afafine* in Samoa cannot be fully understood through imported Western LGBT categories alone (Thomsen and Brown-Acton, 2021; Thomsen, 2022; Besnier, 2002; James, 1994; Farran, 2010).

The qualitative responses show that participants describe themselves in fluid, practical and sometimes mixed ways. One respondent wrote, “I am a person of open sexuality,” while another described themselves as “homosexual and pansexual”. Others used language of attraction, such as “I am attracted to straight men”. These responses suggest that sexuality and gender identity are not always experienced through fixed labels. Instead, respondents often describe identity through lived relationships, attraction, presentation, community recognition and self-understanding at a particular moment in time.


This aligns with existing research showing that *leitī* visibility in Tonga is long-standing but complex. The Miss Galaxy Pageant, for example, has been described as an important public site where *leitī* identity is celebrated, performed and negotiated within Tongan society (Besnier, 2002; Good, 2014). At the same time, visibility does not necessarily remove vulnerability. Grey literature and human rights reporting continue to note that *leitī* and LGBT+ people in Tonga may experience prejudice, discrimination and violence, even where they are also socially known and culturally present (Kaleidoscope Trust, 2021; Human Dignity Trust, 2025).

Family, household responsibility and relational wellbeing

Family is one of the strongest protective factors in the survey, but it is also a place where vulnerability can emerge. A majority of respondents described their families as supportive or very supportive, with 29.41% saying very supportive and 35.29% saying supportive. A further 27.94% described family support as neutral. Only a smaller proportion reported unsupportive or very unsupportive family environments, but even this smaller group is important, particularly in a country where family networks are central to housing, economic support, emotional care and social standing.

The survey also shows that respondents are deeply embedded in family life. Only 5.88% live alone, while 64.71% live with five or more people. This aligns with wider Tongan population data showing an average household size of 5.3 people in the 2021 Census (Tonga Statistics Department, 2021). In this context, identity is not simply private or individual. It is lived in close proximity to parents, siblings, cousins, elders, church members and neighbours.





The survey suggests a strong pattern of mutual family dependence. 36.76% of respondents said their family was very dependent on them, and 23.53% said dependent. At the same time, 29.41% said they were very dependent on their family, and 16.18% said dependent. This likely reflects the relational nature of Tongan life, where wellbeing is often organised through family contribution and collective obligation. It also resonates with Farran's (2014) observation that fakaleitī are members of families, churches and social groups, with obligations and roles that help integrate them into community life.

However, this pattern can also create pressure. Existing literature suggests that leitī acceptance may sometimes be maintained through service, labour, performance, caregiving and contribution (Besnier, 2004; Amnesty International, 2019). Amnesty International's profile of Joey Joleen Mataele describes how leitī have often built respect through visible contributions to church and village life, including preparing flowers, cooking and supporting community events (Amnesty International, 2019). The current survey echoes this broader pattern, with respondents reporting high levels of cultural volunteering and family responsibility.

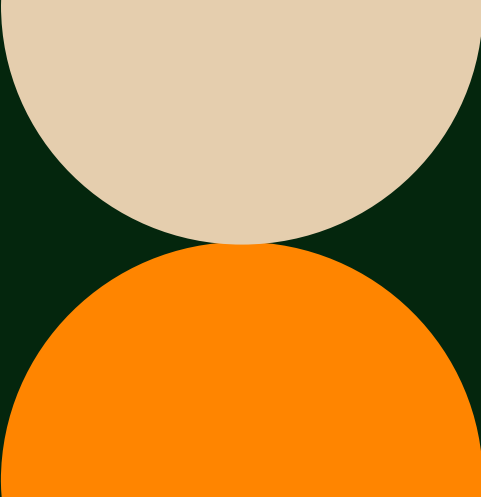
Culture, community and the strength of Tongan identity

Culture emerges as one of the clearest sources of strength in the survey. Among respondents, 53.73% said Tongan culture was extremely important to them as Rainbow+ or leitī people, and 32.84% said it was very important. A very large majority also expressed pride in Tongan culture, with 73.53% selecting "I am proud of my Tongan culture". In addition, 63.24% said their culture gives them confidence, and 30.88% said culture helps them accept who they are as Rainbow+ or leitī people.

These findings are important because they challenge simplistic narratives that can position Tongan culture as conservative, therefore a likely source of harm. The data suggests something more nuanced, for many respondents, culture is a source of identity, confidence, pride and belonging. This is consistent with wider Pacific scholarship in New Zealand that speaks to the significance of cultural identity as a buffer to discrimination (Manuela & Sibley, 2015), and also sits in-line with scholarship that argues for culturally grounded approaches to SOGIESC+ wellbeing, rather than models that assume Western queer identity frameworks are always the most appropriate starting point (Besnier, 2002; Farran, 2010; Thomsen et al., 2023).

The strength of cultural participation is also clear. One quarter of respondents said they always participate in cultural events, 30.88% usually participate, and 33.82% sometimes participate. More than half, 58.82%, had organised a cultural event or celebration for their community, workplace, family or organisation.





Two-thirds, 66.18%, reported regularly volunteering for cultural groups or events. These findings strongly suggest that respondents are not socially detached from Tongan community life. Rather, many are active organisers, contributors and cultural workers.

At the same time, 51.47% reported having experienced exclusion from a community group, organisation or sports team in Tonga because of being Rainbow+ or leitī. This finding sits alongside the positive cultural findings and should be interpreted carefully. It does not mean that culture is simply rejecting; rather, it suggests that cultural belonging is uneven. Many respondents are deeply involved in community life, while also experiencing moments where that belonging is tested, restricted or made conditional.

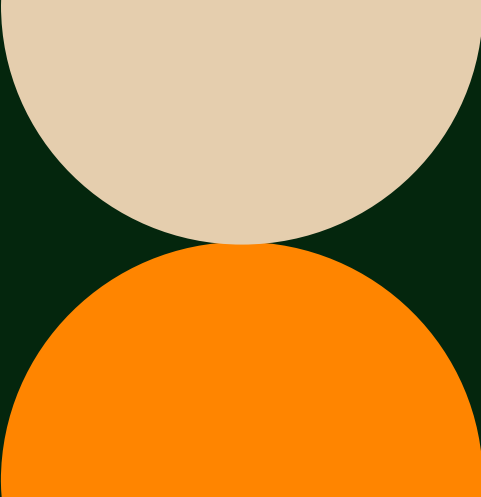
Religion, spirituality and church life

Religion and spirituality are central in the lives of respondents. Some 54.41% said religion or spirituality was extremely important, and 39.71% said very important. No respondents selected “not so important” or “not at all important”. This closely reflects wider Tongan society, where Christianity remains deeply embedded in family life, public life, education, politics and national identity (Farran, 2010; Australian Volunteers Program, 2024).

The survey does not support a simple conclusion that religion is only harmful for Rainbow+ and leitī people. In fact, 43.28% said religion had made life much easier, and 23.88% said it had made life easier. A further 23.88% said neither easier nor difficult. Only 8.96% said religion had made life difficult or very difficult. This suggests that, for many respondents, church and spirituality are not outside their Rainbow+ or leitī identity, but part of how they make meaning, maintain hope and participate in collective life.

This finding aligns with the way Amnesty International (2019) describes some leitī in Tonga as active church contributors whose service has helped build respect and relationships within religious communities. It also resonates with Farran’s (2014) observation that fakaleitī may be involved in choirs, fundraising, youth leadership and other church activities. However, the positive role of religion for many respondents should not erase the experiences of those who face judgement, rejection or exclusion from religious spaces. Reports from Tonga continue to note tensions between conservative Christian teachings, imported evangelical influence and the social position of Rainbow+ communities (Australian Volunteers Program, 2024; Human Dignity Trust, 2025).





The survey points towards a careful conclusion, religion in Tonga is not a single force. It can be protective, relational and life-giving for some; difficult and exclusionary for others; and often both at once. This means any policy or community response must engage religious leaders thoughtfully, not treat religion as an external problem to be avoided.

Education and school experiences

The education findings suggest that school is a major site where acceptance, misunderstanding and harm can begin early. While many respondents described their overall school experience positively or neutrally, the data also shows concerning levels of bullying and exclusion. Among respondents, 20.00% said they were always bullied or harassed at school for being Rainbow+ or leitī, 13.85% said usually, and 33.85% said sometimes. Combined, this means that 67.70% experienced bullying or harassment at least sometimes.

The qualitative responses deepen the meaning of these figures. One respondent wrote, “I was stigmatized and verbally abused a lot”. Another said, “No. Because most of the boys doesn't like Leitī.” Another offered a more mixed account, saying they felt comfortable expressing their identity “not all the time, but sometime when there is a social event in school.” These comments suggest that school experiences were not uniform. Some respondents found moments of visibility and expression, particularly around social events, while others experienced direct verbal abuse and stigma.

The survey also shows that homophobic and transphobic comments were common in schools. Some 35.94% said they always heard such comments, 17.19% said usually, and 28.13% said sometimes. Only 10.94% said never. In addition, 63.08% said Rainbow+ or leitī topics, or the Tongan Rainbow community, were not covered in the school curriculum. This aligns with grey literature noting that sexuality education in Tonga does not adequately include LGBTQIA+ themes and that young people often rely on sources such as Facebook and YouTube for information about sexual and reproductive health (Australian Volunteers Program, 2024).

The findings should be read alongside broader population trends. Tonga has high school enrolment and literacy rates, with the Tonga Statistics Department reporting 96.2% school enrolment among 5–14-year-olds and high literacy in both Tongan and English (Tonga Statistics Department, 2021). This means that schools are a powerful site for population-wide change. If schools become safer and more inclusive, the impact could extend beyond Rainbow+ students to families, teachers, churches and future workplaces.



Employment, income and economic security

The survey suggests that many respondents are economically active, but also experiencing financial precarity. Nearly half, 48.53%, reported being in full-time work. Others reported part-time work, multiple jobs, unpaid care work, study, or actively looking for paid work. However, personal income was low for many respondents: 59.70% reported earning less than TOP \$10,000 annually, and 19.40% reported earning TOP \$10,000–\$19,999.

These figures need to be interpreted in the wider economic context of Tonga. National poverty and equity data show that Tonga continues to face development challenges, with the Asian Development Bank reporting that 20.6% of the population lived below the national poverty line in 2021 and the World Bank reporting a 21.5% poverty rate below the US\$6.85 per day line in 2021 (Asian Development Bank, 2024; World Bank, 2024). The Tonga Statistics Department also reports multidimensional poverty at 24% in 2021, down from 27% in 2015 (Tonga Statistics Department, 2021).

These wider statistics are important because they show that low income is not unique to Rainbow+ communities. However, the survey suggests that Rainbow+ respondents may face additional pressures linked to discrimination, gender expression, family obligations and limited workplace protections. While 41.18% said it was very easy to share their Rainbow+ or leiti identity at work and 26.47% said easy, workplace discrimination was still common. Some 14.93% said they always experienced discrimination from colleagues, clients or customers, 10.45% said usually, and 41.79% said sometimes.

This points to a careful but important conclusion, many respondents are participating in employment and may feel able to be visible at work, yet this does not mean workplaces are free from discrimination. It suggests that some participants may be “visible but still vulnerable”. International and regional evidence shows that employment discrimination against SOGIESC+ people can affect income, career progression, job security and mental wellbeing (ILGA World, 2024). In Tonga, the absence of explicit legal protection from discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity and expression compounds these concerns (ILGA World, 2024; Human Dignity Trust, 2025).



Physical health, healthcare access and discrimination

Respondents generally rated their physical health positively, with 41.18% saying excellent, 41.18% saying very good, and 14.71% saying average. Only 2.94% rated their physical health as poor, and no respondents selected very poor. These findings suggest that many respondents see themselves as physically well. However, healthcare access and trust present a more complicated picture. One quarter of respondents had not visited a doctor, clinic or hospital for physical health in the previous 12 months, while 54.41% had attended only zero to two times.

Barriers to healthcare were both practical and relational. Cost was selected by 28.79%, transport by 19.70%, and not knowing how to access help by 13.64%. These practical barriers are consistent with broader challenges in small island health systems, where access can be shaped by geography, affordability, workforce availability and service capacity. However, the survey also shows barriers more directly connected to stigma and trust, 21.21% said they were too embarrassed, 19.70% said they were too scared, 15.15% said they did not feel comfortable with the person providing care, and 34.33% said they had avoided healthcare because of fear for their safety or possible repercussions, including discrimination or violence.

Healthcare discrimination was reported by a meaningful minority. While 60.61% said none of the listed discriminatory behaviours applied to them, 24.24% reported being misgendered by staff, 18.18% reported homophobic comments, 16.67% reported transphobic comments, 12.12% felt they were treated differently from straight patients, and 9.09% had their dead name used despite asking for their gender-affirmed name. These findings are consistent with Pacific Rainbow+ evidence from Aotearoa New Zealand, where the Manalagi Survey found healthcare discrimination to be associated with healthcare avoidance; a recent New Zealand Medical Journal study reported that each additional discriminatory encounter increased the odds of healthcare avoidance by approximately 60% (Thomsen et al., 2026).

This comparison must be made cautiously, because the Aotearoa New Zealand context differs from Tonga. However, it is relevant because it concerns Pacific Rainbow+ communities and shows a pattern also visible in this survey of when healthcare spaces are experienced as unsafe, people delay or avoid care. For Tonga, where health system capacity is already stretched, even small barriers may have significant impacts.



Mental health, informal support and service gaps

Mental health service use was low among respondents. Only 23.53% had ever used a mental health support service in Tonga, while 76.47% had not. Among those who had used a service, 81.25% had done so only one to two times in the previous 12 months. This suggests that formal mental health services are not a regular source of support for most respondents.

When experiencing mental distress, respondents were most likely to turn to friends, selected by 36.76%, followed by trusted family members at 27.94% and partners at 22.06%. Only 17.65% selected a doctor or health professional. Concerningly, 16.18% said they were most likely to seek support from no one.

These findings suggest two things at once. First, friends, partners, family and community networks are central sources of care. This is consistent with Pacific models of wellbeing, where mental health is closely tied to family, spirituality, belonging and relational safety (Thomsen et al., 2023). Second, the low use of formal services suggests unmet need. Wider research on Pacific LGBTQIA+ health shows that stigma, family rejection and discrimination are associated with poorer mental health outcomes, including depression, anxiety and suicidality (Thomsen et al., 2021).

Gender-affirming care and bodily autonomy

The survey points to limited awareness and use of gender-affirming care in Tonga. Only 22.06% of respondents were aware of any gender-affirming care in Tonga, including hormone replacement therapy, and only 13.24% had ever accessed such care. Among the nine respondents who had accessed gender-affirming healthcare, experiences of ease varied, with three saying very easy, three saying easy, two saying neither easy nor difficult, and one saying difficult.

These findings should be interpreted carefully because only a small number had accessed such care. However, the low awareness and low uptake suggest that gender-affirming care is not widely known, visible or accessible to the broader respondent group. This has implications for health rights, bodily autonomy and informed decision-making. International human rights frameworks increasingly recognise that trans and gender-diverse people should have access to safe, informed, non-discriminatory healthcare, including care that affirms gender identity (Yogyakarta Principles, 2007; Yogyakarta Principles plus 10, 2017). For Tonga, any development of gender-affirming care must be culturally grounded, clinically safe, community-informed and appropriate to the scale and capacity of the health system.



Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Strengthen legal protection and reduce structural stigma

The survey suggests that legal protection is a significant area of concern for respondents. Only 28.79% believed Tongan legislation adequately protects the human rights of Rainbow+ people and leitī, while 36.36% said it does not and 34.85% were unsure. This uncertainty is important in itself, as rights that are unclear, unknown or difficult to enforce are unlikely to provide meaningful protection in everyday life.


The first implementation priority should be a careful review of laws and policies affecting Rainbow+ and leitī communities, including provisions criminalising consensual same-sex conduct, laws affecting gender expression, and the absence of explicit anti-discrimination protections. This review should be led in partnership with Tongan legal experts, government ministries, the Tonga Leitīs Association, church and community representatives, and human rights bodies. The aim should not be to import an external model of reform, but to develop a Tongan approach that upholds dignity, safety and equality while recognising local cultural and religious contexts.

In practical terms, this could begin with a legal and policy mapping exercise. The mapping should identify laws that directly or indirectly affect Rainbow+ and leitī people, assess gaps in protection, and develop staged reform options. In the medium term, Tonga could consider explicit protection from discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics in employment, education, healthcare, housing and public services. Over time, further dialogue may be needed on gender recognition, family law, adoption and relationship recognition, recognising that survey respondents expressed varying levels of support across these areas.

Recommendation 2: Build safer and more inclusive healthcare services

Healthcare access is a clear priority. Although most respondents rated their physical health positively, 34.33% had avoided healthcare because of fear for their safety or repercussions, and many reported barriers such as cost, transport, embarrassment, fear and discomfort with providers. Healthcare discrimination was also reported, including misgendering by staff, homophobic comments, transphobic comments, and deadnaming.





The immediate implementation step could be the development of a short, practical Rainbow+ and leitī cultural safety training package for health workers. This should be designed with Tongan clinicians, community representatives and TLA, and could cover respectful language, confidentiality, gender-affirmed names, non-judgemental sexual health care, mental health referral pathways, and the importance of not minimising symptoms. Training should begin with frontline services most likely to interact with Rainbow+ and leitī patients, including primary care, sexual health, emergency services and mental health providers.

A second implementation step could be the establishment of a confidential Rainbow+ health access pathway that draws on the expertise of TLA, funding and consolidating their work in this space. This does not necessarily require a separate clinic at the outset. It could begin as designated trained staff, clear referral points, visible confidentiality commitments, and periodic community outreach clinics in partnership with TLA. Over time, this pathway could include mental health support, hormone-related advice where clinically appropriate, and referral pathways for gender-affirming care.

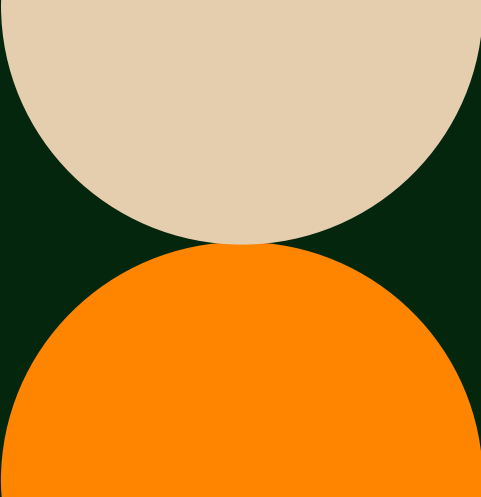
Success should be measured not only by service numbers, but by trust. Indicators could include reductions in healthcare avoidance, increased awareness of where to seek help, increased satisfaction with care, and reduced reports of misgendering, deadnaming or discriminatory comments.

Recommendation 3: Develop culturally grounded mental health and peer support services

The survey suggests that formal mental health service use is low, with 76.47% of respondents never having used a mental health support service in Tonga. When experiencing mental distress, respondents were more likely to turn to friends, family or partners than health professionals, while 16.18% said they were most likely to seek support from no one.

A practical implementation approach would be to strengthen peer-led and community-based mental health supports, such as those provided by TLA, alongside formal services. This could include training Rainbow+ and leitī peer supporters in mental health first aid, suicide prevention, referral pathways, confidentiality and crisis response.





Because religion and spirituality are important to 94.12% of respondents, mental health initiatives should also allow space for spiritual wellbeing where appropriate. This may include partnerships with affirming church leaders, pastoral counsellors, or community elders who are trusted by Rainbow+ and leiti people.

Implementation could begin with a pilot programme in Tongatapu, where 91.18% of respondents live, followed by adaptation for Vava'u, Ha'apai and 'Eua. Evaluation should include community feedback, referral outcomes, uptake of support, and whether participants feel safer seeking help. They could act as trusted bridges between community members and services.

Recommendation 4: Make schools safer through inclusive education and teacher support

School-based bullying and exclusion were among the clearest findings. Around two-thirds of respondents reported being bullied or harassed at school at least sometimes for being Rainbow+ or leiti, and more than half frequently heard homophobic or transphobic comments. At the same time, 63.08% said Rainbow+ or leiti topics were not covered in the school curriculum. Qualitative responses such as "I was stigmatized and verbally abused a lot" and "most of the boys doesn't like Leiti" show the real human impact behind these numbers.

The implementation priority should be to develop age-appropriate, culturally grounded school guidance on respect, bullying prevention and student wellbeing. This does not need to begin with politically contentious curriculum reform. It could begin with pastoral care guidance, anti-bullying procedures, teacher training and student wellbeing resources that affirm the dignity and safety of all students, including Rainbow+ and leiti students.

Teacher training should be practical and Tonga-specific. It should help teachers recognise bullying, respond to harmful language, maintain confidentiality, and support students without escalating family or community tensions unnecessarily. Schools should also be supported to include accurate information about health, identity, consent, respect and relationships in ways that align with Tongan values of care, dignity and responsibility.

Progress could be measured through student wellbeing surveys, reports of bullying, teacher confidence, and whether Rainbow+ and leiti students feel safer at school.





Recommendation 5: Support families and strengthen housing safety

Most respondents reported family support, but a smaller group experienced unsupportive or very unsupportive family environments. In Tonga, where extended family is central to social and economic life, family rejection can have serious consequences. Existing reporting also notes that some adolescent *leitī* are forced to leave home and that TLA has supported safe housing responses (Australian Volunteers Program, 2024; Amnesty International, 2019).

Implementation should focus on strengthening family understanding rather than blaming families. Family education resources could be developed in Tongan and English, using accessible language and grounded in shared values such as *'ofa*, respect, care, family unity and the dignity of every person. These resources could include stories from families who have supported *leitī* or Rainbow+ relatives, guidance on responding to disclosure, and information on where to seek help.

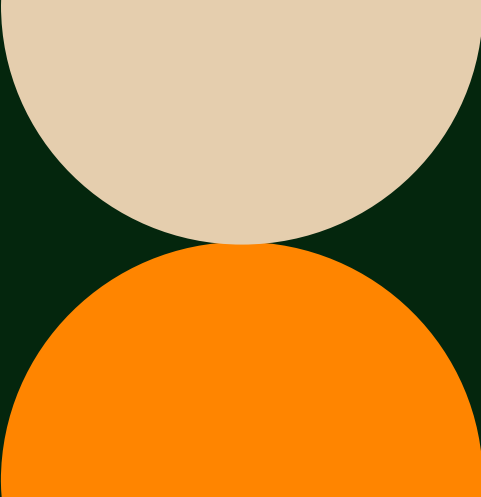
At the same time, there must be practical support for those who are unsafe at home. This should include sustained funding for emergency accommodation, safehouse support, food assistance, counselling referrals and pathways back to education or employment, all of which are TLA-led at present. A small housing insecurity fund could be established in partnership with TLA and relevant ministries, with careful confidentiality protections.

Recommendation 6: Improve workplace inclusion and economic security

The survey shows that many respondents are active in work, but low income and workplace discrimination remain concerns. Nearly 60% reported earning less than TOP \$10,000 annually, and more than half reported workplace discrimination at least sometimes. These findings sit within Tonga's wider poverty and employment context, but also suggest that Rainbow+ and *leitī* workers may face additional barriers. Implementation could begin with voluntary workplace inclusion guidelines for employers. These could be developed with government, business leaders, unions or worker representatives, and community organisations. Guidelines should cover respectful language, anti-bullying procedures, confidentiality, fair recruitment, customer harassment, and support for staff who experience discrimination.

A second step should be economic empowerment. This could include vocational training, small business grants, mentoring, creative industry support, hospitality and tourism training, digital skills development, and pathways into public sector employment. Given the strong cultural and community contributions of respondents, investment in arts, events, fashion, beauty, health promotion and cultural industries may be especially appropriate.





Recommendation 7: Recognise Rainbow+ and leiti communities in national data systems

A strong survey finding was support for inclusion of Rainbow+ people and leiti in the National Census, with 61.76% saying this would improve life mainly yes or to a great extent. This reflects a broader human rights data principle where communities that are not counted are often not visible in policy planning.

Implementation should proceed carefully. Data collection on SOGIESC+ communities must protect privacy and avoid exposing people to harm. Tonga could begin with consultation on how to ask questions safely, whether through national surveys, health surveys or community-led research before census inclusion. Questions should be culturally appropriate and allow for terms such as leiti, fakatangata and other local identities, not only imported categories.

A staged approach would be best. First, government and community partners could develop data standards and ethical safeguards. Second, pilot questions could be tested in anonymous health or wellbeing surveys. Third, if safe and appropriate, census inclusion could be considered. Data should always be used to improve services and rights protections, not to monitor or police communities.

Recommendation 8: Strengthen public leadership and positive visibility

The most strongly supported human rights measure in the survey was public figures in Tonga speaking in support of Rainbow+ people or leiti, with 66.17% saying this would improve life mainly yes or to a great extent. This is an important finding because it suggests that respondents see leadership, visibility and public messaging as practical tools for social change.

Implementation could begin with a respectful public awareness campaign led by trusted Tongan figures, including cultural leaders, health professionals, sportspeople, artists, faith leaders, educators and family members. The message should be framed around dignity, respect, safety, family and contribution. It should avoid language that feels imported or confrontational and instead build on values already present in Tongan society.

Public visibility should also recognise the historical and ongoing contribution of leiti to culture, church life, HIV prevention, caregiving, events, sports and community service. This kind of visibility is not only symbolic. It can help reduce stigma, improve help-seeking, and create safer conditions for young people.



Recommendation 9: Work with churches and faith communities

Because religion is very or extremely important to 94.12% of respondents, churches must be part of any meaningful wellbeing response. The survey also suggests that religion is positive for many respondents, with 67.16% saying it makes life easier or much easier. This means recommendations should not frame churches only as barriers. Rather, churches should be engaged as potential partners in care, dialogue and inclusion.

Implementation could begin with quiet, relationship-based talanoa with willing church leaders. These conversations could focus on reducing violence, preventing family rejection, supporting mental health, and ensuring that all people can access care and safety. This may be more effective than beginning with polarising legal debates. Faith-based resources could be developed around compassion, pastoral care, family unity and the harm caused by bullying and exclusion.

Over time, churches could support referral pathways to safe services, participate in anti-violence messaging, and help families respond with care when a young person discloses their identity.

Recommendation 10: Sustain and resource community-led leadership

The Tonga Leitis Association and wider community networks are central to any realistic implementation framework. The survey shows high community contribution. 66.18% volunteer regularly for cultural groups and events, and 58.82% have organised cultural events or celebrations. This suggests that Rainbow+ and leiti communities are already doing significant unpaid social and cultural labour. Implementation should therefore include stable funding for community-led organisations, not only short-term project grants. Funding should support staffing, safe housing, health promotion, research, legal advocacy, youth work, mental health peer support, outer island outreach and monitoring of discrimination and violence. Community organisations should also be resourced to participate in policy design, not only service delivery.


A national implementation group could be established with representation from TLA, government ministries, health providers, education leaders, church representatives, youth voices and legal experts. This group could oversee the recommendations, set priorities, coordinate funding, and report annually on progress.



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