



# Strengthening Solutions for Pasefika Rainbow

Le Va GPS 2.0 Conference – Key note speech,  
Phylesha Brown-Acton

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## Phylesha Brown-Acton

Phylesha Brown-Acton is a tireless champion for the rights of sexual minority groups within the Pacific. Fakaafine of Niuean descent, in her many roles Phylesha challenges the 'out of sight, out of mind' attitude held by many in the Pacific and firmly plants the rainbow flag within fertile soil.

Phylesha is the Pasefika LGBTQI support service manager at the Pacific Islands Safety and Prevention Project Inc. (The Project). Headed by Usufonoimanū Pesetā Betty Siō, The Project is a black feminist organisation committed to ending violence against women and girls, and offering a range of services to Pasefika families in Auckland.

In another of her many roles Phylesha is a technical adviser to the Pacific Sexual Diversity Network, a network of men who have sex with men (MSM) and transgender (TG) community organisations and projects.



The network provides advocacy and support for issues relevant to sexual minority groups within the Pacific. Cultivating long-standing relationships with Tonga, Samoa, Niue, Cook Islands, Fiji, Vanuatu, Hawaii and American Samoa, Phylesha continues to lobby rainbow groups in other Pacific Island countries and territories to join the membership of the network. Phylesha has a background in the HIV/AIDS sector in regional, national and international positions, which is still an extension of her current advocacy and work.

Phylesha is passionate about promoting her region and is a board member for the Auckland Pride Festival Incorporated Society.

Phylesha has worked in the Pasefika LGBTQI sector for 22 years and will continue for another 20 more to come.

## Maiava Carmel Peteru

Maiava has connections to Faleasi'u and Sapapali'i through her father, and to Safotu and Falealupo through her mother.

Maiava has spent the last 20 years in community-based Pacific research. She has an MA degree in (Applied) Social Science Research and majored in Phenomenology of Religions in her undergraduate degree.

Maiava has been involved in the area of violence against Pacific women and children over a period of 30 years. In 1983, she organised the Pacific and Maori section of the National YWCA of New Zealand conference: Violence against Women and Children, from which the Pacific Island Women's Project was established. Maiava was managing coordinator of the Making Waves: Pacific Sexual and Reproductive Health Pilot Project for Pacific People (Ministry of Health funded joint venture of Capital and Coast DHB, Hutt Valley Crown Health Enterprise,



Whitireia Polytechnic, Wellington Union Health Service, Hutt Valley Union Health Service and Porirua Union Health Service).

Maiava authored "o'Āiga o le 'anofale o afio'aga ma le fatu o le aganu'u: Samoan pathways to the prevention of sexual violence," Nga Vaka o Kāiga Tapu Conceptual Framework, Falevitu literature review and Tofa mamao conceptual framework to address violence in Samoan families.

She is currently co-writer of the Pasefika Proud Programme of Action: 2014-2019.

Maiava has served on various advisory groups including the National Health Committee (Ministry of Health), Expert Panel on Developing Guidelines on Pacific Health Research (Health Research Council) and the Working Group on National Standards Review of Regional Research and Treatment Ethics Committee (Ministry of Health).

# Bisexual, Gay, Transgender, Queer and Intersex communities

## **LGBTQI – What the letters represent:**

**L** – Lesbian

**G** – Gay

**B** – Bisexual

**T** – Transgender

**Q** – Queer or questioning

**I** – Intersex

**= Human beings.**

RAINBOW is often a term for the collective LGBTQI community, “The Rainbow Community”. Not forgetting our traditional terms for many Pasefika LGBTQI

individuals whom are of Pacific descent such as: MAHU (Hawaii), PALOPA (Papua New Guinea), FA'AFINE (Samoa, American Samoa), AKA'VAINE (Cook Islands), FAKALEITI (Tonga), FAKAFINE (Niue) and so on.

Bearing in mind we don't have encompassing traditional terms that refer to our Pasefika lesbian or intersex communities.

# Sex and sexuality are two dimensions **of the human condition that often generates fascination – or by which people are curious, obsessed and sometimes even disparaging of.**

Pasefika people are no different. In fact, it is seldom that innuendo or direct references made to sex or sexuality throughout the course of any conversation or *talanoa* amongst our people is not heard. The reproductive organs, and sexual habits and practices of others, are topics of fair game for sharing, ridiculing, admiring and passing judgment on. At some level, these insider conversations are a part of how we articulate our worldviews on human sex and sexuality.

As an increasingly visible population, Pasefika lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex peoples, more than any other group within Pasefika communities are profoundly challenging the social, religious and present day cultural notions of gender and sexuality – just by our presence, our very being here.

There is a silence and avoidance – a shaming and shunning of us within our families, churches and communities.

We are not a part of insider conversations, but are talked about and looked at as individuals and groups to be feared and ostracised, or used as a political or religious agenda as to why we do not fit with in the societal norms or standards.

We are viewed as outsiders, different, mistrusted, un-Christian; un-Samoan, un-Tongan, un-Cook Island, un-Niuean and so forth – dehumanised and removed from our cultural contexts.

Not surprisingly, issues of how we choose to identify and belong as Pasefika peoples are at the forefront of our work.

I wish to address the common beliefs Pasefika people use to reject gay or LBGTQI lifestyles.

Two core ideologies that challenge our presence are interpretations of Pasefika cultures and the Bible.

I say interpretation because I believe that many crucial meanings around relationships in our pre-contact cultural knowledge have been influenced and co-opted by Western thinking.

I do not have cultural expertise in my American Samoan or Niuean heritages, but in my reading of the *Nga vaka o Kāinga Tapu*<sup>1</sup> conceptual frameworks, I do know that genealogy is the authenticating virtue of how and where I belong in my Pasefika heritages.

All discussions about who I am must start from genealogy – not whom I sleep with or what sinful act I am supposedly committing.

From genealogy, *vā* relationships are defined.

Nor am I a Western trained theologian, but I believe that the Bible and the many interpretations of the six texts referring to homosexuality have been taken out of context. That is, the context of the Old Testament Judaic laws.

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<sup>1</sup> Pacific Advisory Group. 2012. *Nga vaka o kāiga tapu: A Pacific Conceptual Framework to address family violence in New Zealand*. Wellington: Ministry of Social Development



I refer to one commonly cited text in Leviticus 18: *“You shall not lie with mankind, as with womankind: it is abomination”*. Through discussions with well-read non-theologian colleagues, I have learned that the word abomination means **“unclean” – it does not mean sin.**

Other examples of abominations include eating shellfish and wearing clothes of mixed fabrics. Rabbi Jacob Milgrom writes that:

1. levitical prohibitions were never meant to apply to non-Jews; and only then to non-Jews living in the Promised Land
2. the Torah never intended to prohibit lesbian sex
3. gay Jewish men should adopt children, to fulfil the command to be fruitful and multiply.

The abomination refers to “the needless spilling of male seed” (**seed being equal to life**), and in the sexual act, one male taking the role of a woman. Lesbianism was prevalent in Jewish society, and was not forbidden because “the spilling of seed is not involved”.

Judaic scriptures not included alongside Old Testament scriptures also address approaches to Jewish children born with male and female genitalia. Their belief is one of **inclusion** rather than **exclusion** – **compassion for one's own, over hate.**

As a point of interest, Leviticus 20 and Deuteronomy 22 contain examples of **sin** that is punishable by death:

1. adultery
2. children who disobey their parents
3. a woman who is not a virgin on her wedding day, is to be taken to her father's house and stoned.

These views are one of the many in the complex debate around **knowledge and power**. It is not my intention to create a cultural or theological debate at this forum. Rather to raise the certainty that there is something amiss in the way in which we uncritically take on the knowledge of other cultures to the detriment of **liberative Pasefika cultural beliefs** and the centrality of vā relationships.

For Pasefika LGBTQI communities our cultural belonging and identity is anchored in genealogy and vā relationships.

Our Biblical status requires those with expertise to revisit the Old Testament theological interpretations embedded within Judaic Law, and to bring Paul's New Testament Christianity into the 21st century.

I have deliberately spent some time attempting to make sense of the misinformation surrounding Pasefika Rainbow peoples. It was necessary in order to bring into focus the issues that are of **significance and importance to our lives:**

“All [Pasefika] people in New Zealand regardless of sexual orientation and gender have points of references that direct them to their places and spaces of belonging and identity.

All [Pasefika] people in New Zealand regardless of sexual orientation and gender share an ethnic identity that is informed mainly by a common or shared pre-contact history, colonial history, migration, ancestry, folklore, language, ritual, physical features, and food.”

# Solutions

What is our best approach to solutions? The first is to reappraise the situation for Pasefika Rainbow peoples with **uncluttered eyes**.

Current literature such as the Youth '12 report, and publications by MSD and Le Va provide a platform which need strengthening in terms of knowledge and approaches.

There is an urgent need for research on Pasefika Rainbow people of all ages and backgrounds to understand where the gaps in knowledge and services lie. We need to know about the violence and violations perpetrated onto Pasefika LGBTQI people's that is occurring in homes and communities. We do not have adequate knowledge of the scope of impact in areas of mental health, addictions, and other risk related issues.

There is a need to understand families and community based organisations to change

**their attitudes** and behaviour based on cultural, religious, medical, social and media misinformation.

**From research**, the level of resourcing and a workforce required for services and ongoing developmental programmes **can be established**.

What we need are minds that are open to other ways of valuing difference that are based on humane, moral and compassionate principles.

Who should lead this? Pasefika Rainbow peoples. Who can we go to, to better understand the problems and therefore the solutions? Ourselves, our families, Pasefika people with multi-disciplinary expertise.

I ask you all today to no longer to keep us invisible, but to support us as a part of Pasefika communities to become healthier, to become accepted and embraced, to no longer be told we are a disgrace to our

cultures, but to nurture us, to love us, to hold our hands and support us through our journeys in life, so no more senseless losses of lives for those who commit suicide or contemplate suicide ideation because no one accepts them, to end the rivers and lakes of tears, people in my community weep because culture and religion strip us of our sense of belonging, that bullying is addressed, that hate crimes are no longer.

That children ostracised from family are reconnected with their families and families are given the support they need to better understand their child's identity and that parents understand that it is ok to have a lesbian daughter, that it is ok to have a gay son or a transgender daughter or son, and that equal rights become that, equal rights for all!

But my challenge for all of you here today is to factor people like myself, being LGBTQI, in all you do. We deserve the equal access

to services when begging for support. If you don't know or can't offer the support, don't turn them away, come looking for me or the organisation I work for or other rainbow friendly places that understand the vā, that understand the cultural attributes of this person screaming for support, to ensure that their healing pathway is navigated safely and that they grow to be people you will be proud of regardless of whatever path they choose in life.

Thank you,

Phylesha Brown-Acton.



# The Project

Pacific Islands Safety & Prevention Project Inc. - The Project - is a black feminist organisation, committed to ending violence against women and girls. The Project aims to enhance, develop and enrich the lives and wellbeing of Pasefika communities, by connecting communities, creating spaces to talanoa and challenging dominant and oppressive ideologies.

The Project's Pasefika LGBTQI support service was the first of its kind in New Zealand delivered by a Pasefika provider, with a strong focus on the Pasefika LGBTQI community and their families. The Project strives to offer a support service that has a holistic approach to wellbeing and health, family, mentoring, personal development, research, advocacy and pastoral care.

The Project is proud to be Pasefika grown and Pasefika led.



**THE PROJECT**  
PACIFIC ISLANDS SAFETY & PREVENTION PROJECT INC.





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