



Beyond the binary: queer inclusion and invisible labour in Samoa's fisheries value chains

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Abstract

This pilot study examines how individuals of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities and expressions (SOGIE), specifically *fa'afafine*, *fa'atama*, and lesbian/bisexual women, navigate and contribute to Samoa's fisheries value chains. Drawing on a culturally grounded Pacific Research Paradigm and employing *talanoa* driven focus group discussions, in-depth interviews, and vendor surveys conducted between October and December 2021, we document the informal yet essential roles these communities play across reef gleaning, nearshore fishing, post-harvest processing, and fish vending. Grounded theory analysis reveals that, while SOGIE individuals possess extensive ecological knowledge and adaptive livelihood strategies, their participation remains largely invisible to formal fisheries programs due to binary driven policies, systemic stigma, and restrictive village governance. *Fa'afafine* are encouraged and accepted in taking on “feminine” tasks (e.g. processing and retail), and similarly, *fa'atama* performing “masculine” fishing methods and roles are also accepted, though without formal recognition. Lesbian/bisexual women sustain critical gleaning niches that underpin household food security. Economic resilience often relies on kinship networks and livelihood diversification, yet access to training, credit, and decision-making forums is constrained. By centring relational values, this study not only broadens gender analysis in fisheries beyond men and women but also offers practical recommendations: policy frameworks must explicitly include SOGIE individuals in training, microfinance, and governance; and fisheries extension services should co-design interventions with local SOGIE organizations. Our findings underscore the transformative potential of queering fisheries policies in Pacific contexts and chart pathways for more equitable and inclusive marine resource management.

Keywords Samoa · Fisheries · Sexual orientation and gender identity expression (SOGIE) · *Fa'afafine* · *Fa'atama* · Talanoa · Pacific research paradigm · Queering

Introduction

The understanding and use of gender as a category of analysis in fisheries research and policy making have traditionally followed narrow, binary framings propagated by international development and regional regulatory bodies. This focus on gender has been, and in the great majority of literature continues to be, expressly defined as a focus on men and women. Indeed, the conflation of sex and gender

in the majority of international programmes seeking to address gender inequality has resulted in a pervasive understanding of ‘gender equality’ as synonymous with women’s programming (Mangubhai and Lawless 2021; Mangubhai et al. 2022). Even where research has critiqued the narrow definition of “woman” in development literature, this work continues to overwhelmingly centre cis-heterosexual¹ womanhood (e.g., Galappaththi et al. 2021; Koralagama et al. 2017) and too rarely attends to how class, age, ethnicity, locality, and religiosity intersect with sexuality and gender to shape women’s diverse experiences of injustice,

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¹ Cis heterosexual refers to people who are both cisgender (their gender identity aligns with the sex assigned at birth) and heterosexual (they are primarily romantically or sexually attracted to people of a different gender). Where we use cisgender on its own, it refers only to alignment of gender identity with sex assigned at birth and does not imply any particular sexual orientation.

inequality, and privilege in fisheries and agrifood systems (Erwin et al. 2021).

The international policy and research landscapes began to shift in 2011 with international leaders and multilateral agencies advocating for LGBTQA+ rights, sparking an expansion in development literature and practice which began to include diverse sexual orientations and gender identities (Badgett et al. 2019; Bergenfield and Miller 2014; Jolly 2022; Keller 2020). Despite this progress, research specifically addressing the perceived challenges faced by individuals of diverse Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, and/or Expression (SOGIE) within rural and agrifood systems remains scarce (Bett et al. 2021; Hoffelmeyer 2020; Knott and Gustavsson 2022). This oversight not only further marginalizes these individuals but also fails to recognize their potential contributions to, and interactions with agrifood value chains.

Scholarship in agrifood systems has documented the barriers women face in accessing resources and opportunities. However, the literature retains a persistent blind spot regarding people whose sexual orientation, gender identity, and expression (SOGIE) fall outside binary and cis-heteronormative frameworks (Jolly 2011, 2022; Rao 2020). We extend this literature by analysing how SOGIE diverse actors' labour and participation are rendered visible or invisible along fisheries value chains, while recognising intersectional positions among participants (including cis and trans identities, and differences of class, age, and ethnicity) (Crenshaw and Vistnes 1989; Roy et al. 2021). In Samoa, kinship and village governance (including matai status), church affiliation, and access to family capital intersect with SOGIE to shape visibility, safety, and access to fisheries opportunities (Persson et al. 2022; Tuimaleali'ifano 2001; House et al. 2023).

Consistent with Pilgeram's (2007) observation that success in agriculture is often calibrated against masculinized norms, we examine how such norms shape the visibility, valuation, and risk experienced by SOGIE diverse fishers and vendors in Samoa. Our framing is culturally grounded, and we acknowledge Samoan identity terms and avoid collapsing them into western categories (Schmidt 2016; Treagus and Enari 2024). This study aims to provide empirically grounded evidence on SOGIE diverse participation across harvesting, post-harvest processing, and small-scale marketing in Samoa. To this end, we present a culturally grounded case study informed by Pacific research protocols, integrating the Samoan values of *va tupuia* (the sacred covenantal relationship between people and environment) and *va fealoaloa'i* (mutual respect in social relationships) throughout the research design (Tuimaleali'ifano 2001; Persson et al. 2022).

In this study, we utilize the acronym SOGIE throughout for methodological precision. Our study design, instruments, and coding schema were explicitly organised around these constructs, and to respect Samoan cultural descriptors that do not map cleanly onto western categories. In our usage, queer functions as an inclusive shorthand that expressly encompasses trans and non-binary people alongside locally grounded identities; we do not treat these identities as isomorphic with Western labels (Jolly 2011, 2022; Rao 2020; Schmidt 2016; Treagus and Enari 2024). This combined approach balances accessibility for international readers with fidelity to Samoan categories of personhood, aligning with Pacific scholarship that cautions against subsuming Indigenous terms within exported frameworks. We therefore use *fa'afafine* to refer to Samoan people assigned male at birth who express femininity in behaviour, affect, and/or dress in ways that unsettle binary gender frameworks, and *fa'afafine* to refer to Samoan people assigned female at birth who identify with or express masculinity (some, but not all, are attracted to women). We treat these as culturally grounded descriptors rather than fixed or exhaustive labels and attend to heterogeneity within groups (Schmidt 2016; Treagus and Enari 2024).

The paper is organised as follows. Section “[Theoretical background](#)” sets out the theoretical background and conceptual framing. Section “[Methods](#)” describes the methods, including the study context, data collection, and analysis. Section “[Results: participation of samoans of diverse SOGIE and Pathways for inclusion in Samoan fisheries value chain.](#)” presents the results. Section “[Discussion: SOGIE labour in Samoan fisheries: visibility, autonomy, and access](#)” discusses the findings in relation to existing literature. Section “[Conclusions](#)” concludes with the main contributions and recommendations

Theoretical background

Queering international development

Efforts to “queer” international development begun in the late twentieth century, when activists, scholars, and NGOs began challenging heteronormative assumptions embedded in mainstream development policies (Bell and Valentine 1995; Jolly 2011, 2022). Early critiques argued that established models largely ignored the realities of sexual and gender minorities, perpetuating the notion that same sex desires or nonconforming gender expressions were “invisible” or peripheral to broader development goals (Jolly 2011; Rahman 2014; Rao 2020). The flow of development assistance from the Global North to South contributed to a dominant discourse in which the Global North was tacitly

framed as the locus of “progressive” LGBTQIA+ rights, while the Global South was depicted as lagging, a narrative often referred to as “homocolonialist” (Rahman 2014; Rao 2020). Though advocacy and policy development by and for LGBTQIA+ communities across the Global North has also failed to adequately consider queer experiences of farming and rurality (Hoffmeyer 2020; Keller 2020).

These critiques catalyzed a movement to integrate gender and sexual diversity within development work. Building on the health advocacy and community led programs developed to address the HIV/AIDS crisis in the early 1980s, particularly HIV initiatives, were among the first arenas in which LGBTQIA+ communities gained some recognition (King et al. 2020). However, attention soon expanded to socio-economic and cultural dimensions: scholars demonstrated how family structures, kinship obligations, and community norms shape the lived experiences of individuals with non-normative sexualities (Sadgrove et al. 2012). This broader lens highlighted visibility as a key, and contested, strategy. On one hand, increased visibility of LGBTQIA+ issues can yield international donor support and policy traction (Currier 2011); on the other, it risks exposing communities to scapegoating and hostility (Angotti et al. 2019). Uganda stands out as an emblematic case, where international attention to LGBTQIA+ rights intersected with accusations of foreign imposition, fuelling both activist momentum and political backlash (Kretz 2012; Saltnes and Thiel 2021).

Meanwhile, a variety of stakeholders from multilateral organizations and bilateral donors to grassroots NGOs, have begun to incorporate the concerns of people of diverse SOGIE into their agendas. Governments across the Global North often tie LGBTQIA+ rights to aid conditionalities, prompting complex responses in recipient countries (Saltnes and Thiel 2021). In parallel, the growth of South–South Cooperation (SSC) challenges older donor–recipient binaries. Advocates of SSC tout it as a more egalitarian form of development exchange, yet research shows that heteronormative assumptions can persist among Global South actors as well (Amar 2013; Rao 2020). Consequently, no single development framework escapes critique as even non-Western donors may also reinforce conservative gender and sexual norms.

In this evolving context, human rights organizations, academics, and local advocacy groups have identified gaps in understanding the experiences and needs of people of diverse SOGIE across various domains. Over the past three decades, although some academic and policy-oriented work has addressed these gaps, much of the literature continues to note the lack of comprehensive research (e.g., Hoffmeyer 2020; Keller 2020; Knott and Gustavsson 2022).

To address these gaps, researchers have adopted methodologies that integrate qualitative methods such as interviews

and ethnographic fieldwork, and policy analysis to examine intersections of gender, sexuality, and development (Fish and Russell 2018; Goffnett and Pacey 2020; Reed 2022; Slovin 2020). For example, innovative approaches such as photovoice and mobile interviewing enable LGBTQIA+ youth to share their experiences in ways that are both empowering and insightful (Leung and Flanagan 2018). Central to these approaches is a focus on everyday practices (how people of diverse SOGIE navigate family pressures, social expectations, and state policies) and how these processes are shaped by power dynamics within and across national boundaries. By prioritizing local perspectives and real-world contexts, researchers can better assess the outcomes of aid programs and the beliefs that influence whether and how people of diverse SOGIE are included or excluded in development initiatives.

Despite these efforts, significant gaps remain in understanding the knowledge and experiences of LGBTQIA+ communities beyond topics like public, sexual, and reproductive health. This is particularly evident in sectors such as agriculture, fisheries, and forestry, where issues of gender and sexuality are seldom explored in research (Bett et al. 2021; Hoffmeyer 2020; Knott and Gustavsson 2022; Leslie 2017, 2019a). Addressing these gaps requires a commitment to ethical research and practices that combines theoretical frameworks with culturally and geographically located methodologies. Such approaches would not only advance a human right–centered paradigm in international development but also ensure that the voices and needs of LGBTQIA+ individuals are respected and fully integrated into global efforts.

Queer agrifood scholarship identifies parallel mechanisms in rural economies that are directly relevant to fisheries: the erasure of queer identities in data systems (Dentzman et al. 2021); the ways heteropatriarchal norms structure labour, viability, and wellbeing (Hoffmeyer et al. 2023); the use of peer/quiet strategies and networks to manage visibility risk (Wypler 2019; Raj 2024); and how household and kinship institutions mediate access to land, capital, and infrastructure, often privileging family-sanctioned arrangements (Leslie et al. 2024). Conceptual work likewise extends agrarian politics to rural sexualities (Gagliano and Liebman 2024). We draw on these insights to analyse Samoa's fisheries value chains, linking data visibility, market access, and *āiga*-based infrastructures to the visibility and valuation of SOGIE labour.

Being queer, and queer theory in the Pacific context

Queer theory, as Browne and Nash (2010) explain, contests normative social organization along a heterosexual/homosexual binary, challenging the perception of heterosexuality

as ‘natural’ and homosexuality as ‘deviant.’ Adopting a queer perspective in this study provided a framework to critically examine conventional gender dynamics and how they are promoted, assumed, or reinforced across various domains, academic and grey literature, national, regional, and international human rights and development policies, and, most importantly, the socioeconomic, cultural, and religious lives of participants. A queer perspective guides us to partner with communities of diverse SOGIE, to question unspoken hierarchies (e.g., how and why certain gender identities garner more social legitimacy than others) to situate these hitherto marginalised identities within the cultural, economic, and political forces that define everyday life (Duong 2012; Fish and Russell 2018).

The success of gender equality policy and programming is closely tied to broader social structures that can either alleviate or exacerbate discrimination (Singh Peterson et al. 2019). In many modern Pacific societies, including Samoa, a prevailing Christian cis-heteropatriarchal context contributes to the discrimination and violence experienced by Pacific Islanders of Diverse SOGIE (PIDSOGIE) (Dwyer and Woolf 2018; Gerber 2014; Idris 2021). Although there is growing recognition of the hostile or legally restrictive environments facing SOGIE diverse Pacific communities (Anderst et al., 2022), relatively little attention has been paid to their current or potential economic and labour contributions, particularly in agriculture and fisheries (Fisk et al. 2023; House et al. 2023).

Given the lack of recognition of workers of diverse SOGIE in agrifood sector, we argue for a gender analysis within fisheries that accounts for the diversity of identities, orientations, geographic and cultural contexts. In Samoa, as explained above, these identities include *fa’afafine* and *fa’afafine*. People of diverse SOGIE exist throughout the Pacific and its diaspora. The image of a cohesive interconnected whole, described by Hau’ofa as ‘our sea of islands’ (1994) depicts a unified Pacific but glosses over tensions endemic within the region. The reality in the diverse, modern Pacific with its small island social spaces, is that many people of diverse SOGIE live in fear of rejection and social exclusion (Dwyer and Woolf 2018), at best tolerated, superficially accepted, or treated with indifference within various Pacific Island nations and communities. More often, these communities face sustained institutional, cultural and social discrimination, as well as cultural, physical and sexual violence (Gerber 2014; Idris 2021, p. 9–10). A combination of hegemonic masculinity and heteronormativity, including compulsory heterosexuality (Rich 2003), combined with Christian nationalist discourse in the Pacific is largely responsible for intolerance and non-acceptance of non-heteronormative individuals (Presterudstuen 2019). Pulotu Endemann argues that heterosexuality privilege in Pacific

cultures exists today because of the Christian missionary agenda which colonised Pacific paradigms of sexuality, gender and identity (Pulotu Endemann and Peteru 2001). The extent to which people and communities of diverse SOGIE are visible in mainstream Pacific societies vary. For instance, the Human Dignity Trust reports that although *fa’afafine* are very visible in Samoa – the Prime Minister is the Chair of the *Fa’afafine* Association – lesbians and gay men are not nearly as visible or well supported (Human Dignity Trust 2019).

Fa’afafine and *fa’atama* are historically embedded in *āiga*² obligations and cultural performance, yet their social position is context-dependent, public visibility and service often coexist with conditional acceptance in policy, church, and village governance (Schmidt 2016; Treagus and Enari 2024; Tuimaleali’ifano 2001; Persson et al. 2022). Missionary and colonial projects institutionalised Christian cis-heteropatriarchal norms³ that continue to shape discourse and respectability politics (Jolly 2011; Rao 2020; Dwyer and Woolf 2018; Idris 2021). Community organising by gender-diverse Samoans has contested these norms in specific arenas, but ambivalence persists in law, church practice, and everyday life (House et al. 2023).

Moreover, strongly gendered systems in Samoan society (Persson et al. 2022; Tuimaleali’ifano 2001) and in coastal or subsistence fisheries (Anderson et al. 2023; Fisk et al. 2023; Weeratunge et al. 2010) underscore the need to contextualize the experiences of Samoans of diverse SOGIE within wider socio-cultural frameworks. This includes examining how gender norms are received, performed, and enforced in village life, and the consequences for those who “transgress” patriarchal standards, whether they are queer, trans, disabled, or cis heterosexual individuals who deviate from traditional expectations. Treating gender as a dynamic category of analysis, rather than an immutable biological identity, can illuminate why certain individuals succeed or fail economically and culturally in fisheries and help make visible the crucial role of gender presentation in social acceptance and labor market opportunities (House et al. 2023; Mangubhai et al. 2024; Salguero Velazquez et al. 2022). To capture these complex and intersecting identities, while also acknowledging Samoan understandings of gender and sexuality, it is necessary to adopt a methodology that is both culturally grounded and community driven. In what follows, we outline our use of a Pacific Research

² *Āiga* is the Samoan term for extended family or kin group (blood, marriage, adoption) under a matai (chief), organizing mutual support, ceremonies, and family land and resources.

³ Cis heteropatriarchal norms are the combined expectations of cis-normativity, heteronormativity, and patriarchy. They privilege cisgender heterosexual men, enforce a rigid gender binary, and marginalize those who do not conform.

Paradigm, to position Samoan expertise at the center of our investigative approach.

Pacific Research Paradigm: localising and empowering the research approach

The Pacific Research Paradigm incorporates methods indigenous to Pacific contexts and is anchored in Indigenous cultures and beliefs (Bear 2000; Brant 2000; Meyer 2001). By grounding our research in this local and contextual perspective, Pacific peoples become experts, knowledge holders, and research leaders, rather than merely passive subjects of inquiry (Naepi 2019). However, Western centered methodologies, which often prioritize the researcher's worldview, risk marginalizing communities by overlooking culturally embedded practices and modes of knowledge transmission (Simonds and Christopher 2013). In response to these concerns, scholars have called for research approaches that resonate with Indigenous ways of knowing and being (Drawson et al. 2017; Tuhiwai Smith 2012). Specifically in the Pacific Islands, relational worldviews, strong ties to land and ocean, and collective decision-making processes serve as the foundation for a range of Indigenous methods that challenge Western paradigms (Nabobo Baba 2008; Naepi 2019).

Within this broader context, *talanoa* has emerged as a culturally embedded methodology practiced in various Pacific nations, including Fiji, Samoa, Fiji, Tonga, and Tokelau (Farrelly and Nabobo Baba 2014; Otsuka 2005). Although definitions vary across cultures, *talanoa* broadly refers to an open, inclusive form of conversation that fosters trust and reciprocal engagement (Vaioloti 2006). Scholars highlight that *talanoa* can take both formal and informal forms, ranging from large community gatherings to small group discussions in everyday spaces such as the beach, plantations, or communal halls (Farrelly and Nabobo Baba 2014). Unlike structured Western interviews, *talanoa* sessions do not hinge on rigid questionnaires or time limits; rather, participants collectively shape the direction and depth of the discussion (Prescott 2008). When guided by cultural protocols such as *sevusevu* in Fijian communities, *talanoa* can offer an environment where participants speak candidly "from the heart," thereby ensuring that local values, needs, and aspirations remain at the center of the research process (Farrelly and Nabobo Baba 2014; Vaioloti 2006). Hence the centrality of 'va tapuia' philosophy and 'va fealoaloi' practices throughout the process ensuring the valuing, acknowledging and reciprocating of relationships gifted through and embraced in the *talanoa* process (Ami-tuanai Toloa 2006).

Talanoa here is, therefore, both a method and a methodology – a set of practices, as well as a culturally located

system of ethical engagement which centres interpersonal, intracommunal and ecological relationships. Adopting *talanoa* involves cultivating meaningful, long-term relationships built on mutual respect and shared cultural norms (Fa'avae et al. 2016; Meo-Sewabu 2014). By foregrounding relationality "the idea that everything is interconnected" (Wilson 2008, p. 7) researchers acknowledge the communal ethic at the heart of many Pacific societies (Hau'ofa 2005). Pacific peoples also live in relation with the non-human environments, a set of relations which is often erased in 'the ecosystem services perspective that underpins many models of small-scale fisheries co-management'. *Talanoa* becomes more than a data gathering technique; it is also a method, a relational practice that honors local customs, invites empathetic dialogue, and fosters collective reflections on topics ranging from health and education to climate change (Vaka et al. 2016). Researchers have reported that incorporating *talanoa* can deepen community trust, enhance cultural sensitivity, and lead to more contextually grounded outcomes and this has also been our experience. For instance, Otsuka (2005) demonstrated how *talanoa* illuminated the interplay of cultural influences in Fijian and Indo Fijian educational settings, while Farrelly and Nabobo Baba (2014) identified how empathy and emotional openness can help decolonize the relationship between investigators and participants. Such work points to the necessity of flexible timelines, non-hierarchical facilitation, and ongoing reciprocity, principles that stand in stark contrast to conventional, time bounded Western research protocols (Koster et al. 2012; Stewart Withers et al. 2017). Researchers must be prepared to share their own experiences and respect group decisions regarding session length or discussion topics (Prescott 2008). These aspects of *talanoa*, such as empathy, emotional openness, and non-hierarchical facilitation, are especially relevant when engaging with marginalised groups, including people of diverse SOGIE, because they help create safe spaces, trust and mitigate power imbalances, ensuring that historically excluded perspectives can be fully recognized and valued.

Despite these clear advantages, critiques have noted that *talanoa* is not without challenges in practice (Farrelly and Nabobo Baba 2014). Power differentials, such as those arising from gender, rank, or outsider status, may still shape who speaks openly or how decisions are reached, and the absence of strict structure can be unsettling to researchers accustomed to interview guides or formal consent protocols (Simonds and Christopher 2013). Furthermore, academic led projects and international policy forums sometimes overlook or undervalue the depth of Indigenous methodologies, leading to questions about whether local voices actually influence tangible outcomes (Drawson et al. 2017; Feetham et al. 2022). Critics caution that *talanoa*, like other

Indigenous frameworks, must avoid becoming tokenistic. Instead, it requires genuine relational commitment, significant time investment, and a willingness among non-Indigenous researchers to adapt, relinquish control, and integrate the findings into meaningful, community led action (Halapua 2008; Meo-Sewabu 2014). *Talanoa* disrupts extractive models in which local communities merely supply “data” by emphasizing relationships, empathy, and the co construction of knowledge (Koster et al. 2012; Wilson 2008). The resulting collaborative inquiry can yield rich insights, foster trust, and produce outcomes that resonate with local realities.

Methods

Context of Samoan fisheries

Samoa is comprised of two primary islands, Savai'i and Upolu, and two considerably smaller inhabited islands, Manono and Apolima (Gillett and Tauati 2018), accommodating a total population of around 220,000 inhabitants, 82% of which live in rural areas (World Bank, 2024), along

with several small, uninhabited islands (Gillett and Tauati 2018) (see Fig. 1). The crucial components of Samoa's marine fisheries include offshore tuna longline fishery, and coastal subsistence and commercial fisheries. Additional fishing methods encompass pelagic trolling by small vessels and deep slope bottom fishing (Gillett and Tauati 2018). Samoa's coastal fisheries catch is remarkably diverse, with approximately 500 species.

Fisheries are foundational to Samoan cultural and economic life. In 2019, the industry accounted for 0.4% of total employment, and in 2023 it contributed 1.8% of GDP (OECD, 2023) with tuna dominating fish exports (approximately 90%). In 2018, fisheries products comprised over 30% of total merchandise exports (OECD, 2023). However, official statistics are incomplete, and small scale and subsistence production, especially nearshore gleaning, are difficult to measure. Postharvest processing and market vending are irregularly enumerated and statistical capacity to monitor and disaggregate ocean economy data remains limited. As the OECD notes, estimating the ocean economy in Samoa is complex and a precise picture is not yet available (OECD, 2023). Consequently, reporting systems

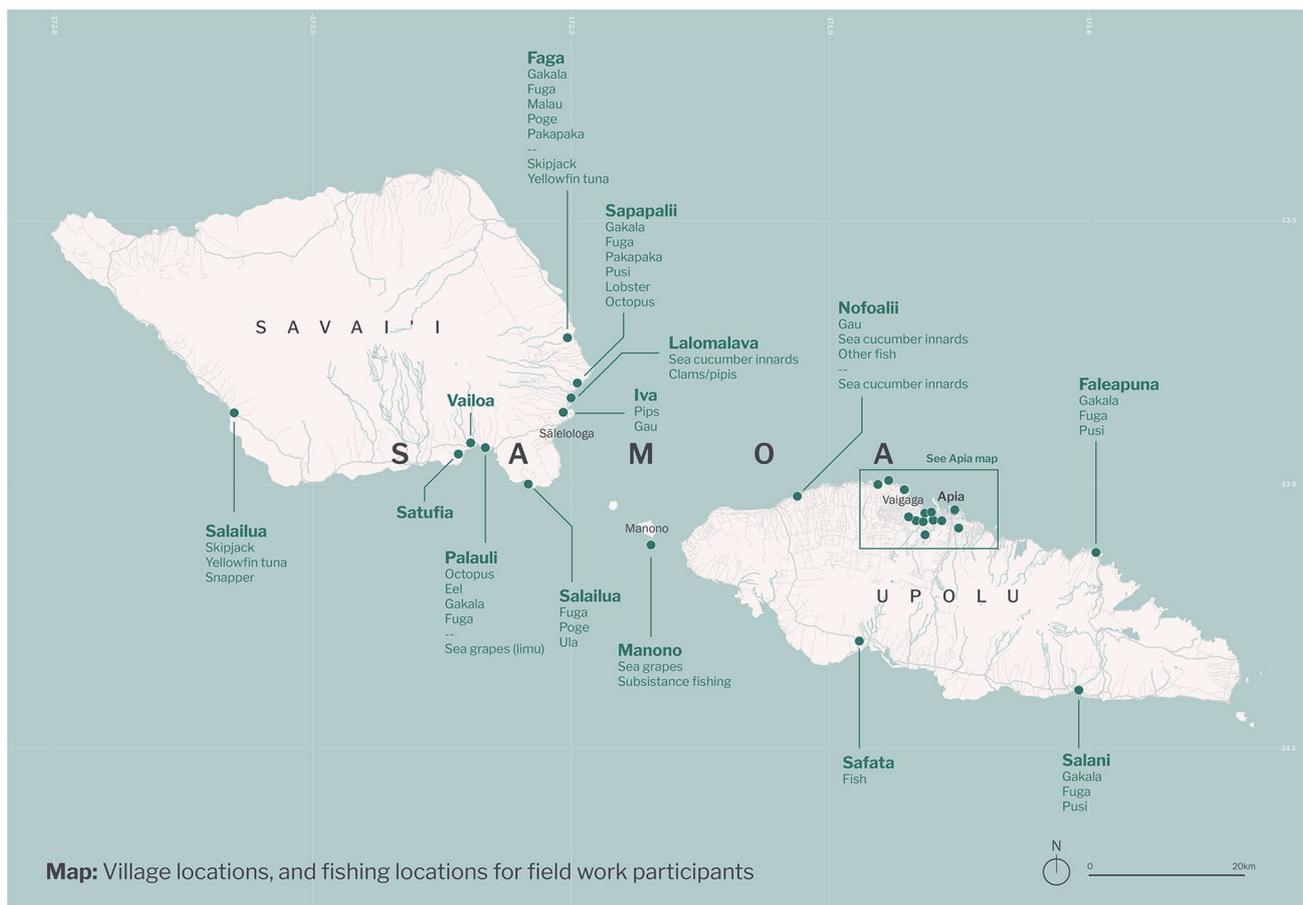


Fig. 1 Mapping fieldwork: participant villages, and fishing locations and catch types in the study area

capture offshore commercial activity (e.g., tuna longline logbooks) more consistently than activities in coastal and post-harvest nodes, leading to systematic underestimation across both commercial and subsistence sectors (Gillett and Tauati 2018; Pacific Community 2019). Additionally, in the cited national sources (the national Samoa Socioeconomic Fisheries Survey), “gender” is recorded male and female only, and no SOGIE variables are collected, limiting visibility of queer and SOGIE participation (OECD, 2023; Tiitii et al. 2014).

Management of coastal fisheries is predominantly the remit of the 230 coastal villages, aided by the Community based Fisheries Management Programme (CBFMP), introduced in 1995/96 (Pacific Community 2019). Aquaculture and artisanal fisheries offer income to families who sell products in markets or by the roadside. Most fishers market their catch soon after returning to shore, rendering any formal, accurate assessment of economic impact difficult (OECD, 2023). In villages involved in the CBFMP, fish are chiefly sold within the village to individuals and to neighbouring villages, with a minor quantity also taken to markets. Most communities encompass both subsistence and small-scale commercial fishers (Quimby et al. 2023; Tiitii et al. 2014).

Context of gender in the fisheries value chains in Samoa

Traditionally, women harvest shellfish, *beche de mer*, sea urchins, octopus, crabs, and seaweeds from reef flats and other nearshore areas (often at low tide), and some dive from canoes for urchins, and seaweeds. Women also predominantly undertake post-harvest processing and small-scale marketing (Pacific Community 2019). By contrast, men more commonly engage in boat based artisanal and commercial fisheries, including diving with spears or spear guns, offshore/deep sea fishing, and tourism related sport fishing (Pacific Community 2019; Tiitii et al. 2014). However, the sector wide data quality issues are compounded by concomitant gaps in knowledge of women's contribution and experiences working across fisheries agrifood systems (Mangubhai and Lawless 2021). Identifying and addressing this literature gap to “critically assess potential gender disparities in fishing practices, ecological knowledge and views about fishery management” has also been deemed a critical issue (Purcell et al. 2020). The combined lack of understanding about coastal and subsistence fisheries practices and the paucity of knowledge about women's fishing practices and contribution means that there is scant insight into fisheries practices primarily led by women or, more broadly, any practices not led by men and/or falling outside the practices of commercial fisheries. We therefore reference

operational knowledge, for example, tidal timing for reef flat access, substrate and micro habitat cues for shellfish and invertebrates, and species specific size/season windows and market grading/sorting, while noting that roles and knowledges vary across villages, seasons, gear access, and household composition (Pacific Community 2019; Anderson et al. 2023; Purcell et al. 2020).

The historical, colonial marginalisation of women's knowledge and expertise has continued throughout the post-colonial period, reinforcing the marginalisation of women and the devaluing of their knowledge and fishing practices (Thomas 2023). Wong (2024) argues that, although extensive traditional and contemporary local knowledge systems exist, they remain largely undocumented in the literature and therefore are not incorporated into debates on cultural and ecological resilience under conditions of environmental change. Despite these constraints, the literature notes that women engage with distinct components of marine ecosystems, targeting species in habitats that differ from those typically exploited by men (Purcell et al. 2020). Consequently, women are documented as key holders of traditional knowledge in particular fisheries contexts, including seaweed value chains (Anderson et al. 2023) and mangrove ecosystems (Quimby et al. 2023).

In addition to the incomplete understanding of women's fisheries knowledge and practices, literature and policy design in fisheries have, like the vast majority of the agrifood literature, overlooked the contributions and expertise of people of diverse SOGIE. This neglect has material effects for populations who often experience profound and compounding marginalisation across access to their educational and economic opportunities, and cultural and religious lives. Furthermore, the experiences of people whose sexuality, gender expression and/or identity exists outside the heteronormative structures offer valuable insights into how gendered labour is understood in community, and whether and how difference is accommodated.

Data collection

The fieldwork engaged with fishers who were of diverse sexual (SOGIE), as well as fish sellers who comprised of both heterosexual people and people of diverse SOGIE. The fieldwork was conducted in two simultaneous phases: (1) focus group discussions (FGDs) and (2) in-depth interviews (IDIs). By combining these phases, the study aimed to capture both community driven insights from SOGIE participants and practical market level observations from sellers. Participants in FGDs were compensated for their time, travel and food were provided in keeping with Samoan cultural expectations of reciprocity and hospitality.

Prior to initiating the investigation, ethical approval was secured from the appropriate Human Ethics Committee, ensuring that the study's design and objectives complied with established guidelines. Informed consent was acquired from all participants, with transparent communication regarding the study's aims, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their entitlement to withdraw at any time without consequences. Confidentiality and anonymity were upheld throughout the research process by employing unique identifiers for participants, securely preserving data, and guaranteeing that published findings did not disclose personal information traceable to individual respondents. Moreover, the researcher remained vigilant of potential biases and power dynamics during data collection and analysis, striving to ensure accurate representation and respect for all participants' perspectives.

Engaging with people of diverse SOGIE

This study operationalized *talanoa* methodology in two pillars. Firstly, the local senior researcher drew upon her Samoan expertise to engage deeply in daily community life and field decisions, aligning her practice with Vaoleti's (2006) framework of "values and lived realities" rooted in Samoan epistemologies. Secondly, the research was founded on over ten years of deep collaboration with *fa'afāfine* and *fa'atama* communities. This partnership encompassed joint research and advocacy work with their representative bodies (the Samoa *Fa'afāfine* Association and The Rogers community-based group representing the *fa'atama* community) including active participation in community events, provision of health and wellbeing education, and support for funding initiatives. This relationship guaranteed that local perspectives and priorities guided the research design and implementation from the very beginning.

A preliminary community consultation phase was conducted to ensure that the research was guided by the issues and expectations of the partner communities. This phase involved collaboration with several identity groups within Samoa's SOGIE community, specifically with *fa'afāfine*, *fa'atama*, lesbian and bisexual women. Unfortunately, cis homosexual men could not be included, given the social, cultural, and physical risks they face in Samoa, which made safe involvement unfeasible. The Samoa *Fa'afāfine* Association (SFA) and The Rogers both facilitated FGDs, assisted in participant recruitment, and hosted meetings at their offices and meeting places. Each organisation's deep and complimentary understandings of Samoa's diverse SOGIE communities was essential for safeguarding participant welfare, including selecting meeting sites that would not inadvertently reveal anyone's identity.

Table 1 Summary of participants by group and data collection method

Participant group	Partner(s)/recruitment	Interviews (composition)	Focus groups (composition)
Fa'afāfine (Fisher and market seller)	Samoa Fa'afāfine Association	2 (fa'afāfine participants)	1 (6 fa'afāfine participants)
Fa'atama (Fishers)	Samoa Fa'afāfine Association & The Rogers	-	1 (7 fa'atama participants)
Lesbian & bisexual women (Fisher and road seller)	Samoa Fa'afāfine Association & The Rogers	-	1 (8 women participants)
Roadside sellers	Direct recruitment (vendors)	11 (3 men, 8 women)	-
Market sellers	Direct recruitment (vendors)	10 (2 men, 1 fa'afāfine, 7 women)	-
Total / - /		23/ 3	

From October to November 2021, the local researcher worked with her established networks and these organisations to identify and connect with community leaders representing *Fa'afāfine*, *Fa'atama*, lesbian and bisexual women. Through these efforts, the researchers conducted two interviews with *fa'afāfine* fishers, one with fa'afāfine market seller, and held three FGDs (one with *fa'afāfine*, one with *fa'atama*, and a third with lesbian and bisexual women) in Upolu. The remaining IDI participants did not disclose their SOGIE (see Table 1).

This community led recruitment strategy proved vital for upholding trust and confidentiality, and thus participant safety. Indeed, working with these communities demands careful, inclusive methods of participant identification, especially in close knit societies where activities such as scheduling interviews or selecting meeting locations can inadvertently "out" individuals (Lewis & Reynolds, 2021; Lewis & Redshaw, 2024). The local researcher's reputation as a safe and respectful collaborator with this communities, and her familiarity with Samoan language and customs was invaluable in selecting safe venues, clarifying informed consent procedures, and minimizing the risk of unintentionally revealing participants' identities. Although the researcher's links to these groups facilitated a close relationship, we acknowledge that the participants in this work were already sharing their identities publicly in their families and community or were comfortable to speak on the guarantee of anonymity. Despite these safeguards, community led recruitment cannot fully overcome stigma, confidentiality concerns, and mistrust of research in close knit societies, which suppress participation and elevate perceived risk

(Lewis and Reynolds, 2021; Lewis and Redshaw, 2024). In Samoa's small communities, these constraints meant that safe inclusion of cisgender gay men was not feasible in this study.

Crucially, *talanoa* served as the principal mode of communication during these discussions. In practical terms, participants could speak in either Samoan or English and follow a free-flowing conversational style rather than a rigid interview guide. This structure minimized hierarchical dynamics between researcher and participant, aligning with Samoan social norms and fostering greater trust. When needed, semi-structured interviews were also used, allowing specific thematic prompts, such as fishing practices or experiences of discrimination, to surface organically. Following this approach, the Samoa Fa'afāfine Association facilitated FGDs, assisted in participant recruitment, and hosted meetings at their offices. Their deep understanding of Samoa's diverse SOGIE communities was essential for safeguarding participant welfare, including organizing meetings and selecting meeting sites that would not inadvertently reveal anyone's identity.

Engaging with sellers

The engagement with sellers, conducted from November to December 2021, involved two categories: roadside and market sellers. Interviewing these sellers provided firsthand insights into the visibility, economic participation and social experiences of Samoans of diverse SOGIE within the fisheries value chains, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of their roles and challenges in this sector. This perspective complemented the broader community consultations and helped identify potential areas for intervention and support to promote greater inclusion and equality. A total of 21 interviewees were surveyed: 11 roadside vendors and 10 market vendors, predominantly women. Among the market vendors, two identified as men, one as fa'afāfine, and the remainder identified as women. Three roadside vendors identified as men, and the rest as women. Participants reported gender identity in their own words (self-described). We present these terms verbatim (woman, man, *fa'afāfine*, and *fa'atama*). Cisgender status was not collected, and we do not infer it.

Data analysis

All interviews and focus group discussions were transcribed and translated into English by the lead Samoan researcher who is fluent in both Samoan and English. Once transcription was complete, we used a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014). We began with initial coding, reading transcripts line by line to capture actions

and meanings related to fisheries, social identity, and community life. We then undertook focused coding to synthesise the most significant and recurrent codes and to specify relationships among categories when themes appeared together in the same discussion. Finally, theoretical coding integrated these categories into core themes. Analysis continued until theoretical saturation, at which point no new themes emerged.

Throughout the analysis, we maintained analytic memos that documented evolving insights, methodological reflections, and emergent hypotheses, a practice integral to grounded theory's emphasis on iterative engagement with data (Bryant and Charmaz 2010). Early findings from the first interviews and focus groups informed subsequent data collection, with the research team adapting semi-structured interview prompts to reflect concepts identified in earlier transcripts. Although grounded theory remained the principal framework guiding our coding and theme development, *talanoa* and queer methodologies shaped the ways in which we interpreted participants' narratives during analysis. In practice, *talanoa's* emphasis on respectful, reciprocal dialogue led us to preserve participants' own words and contextual cues within the coding process, ensuring that culturally specific expressions and emotional undertones were not flattened into generic categories. Simultaneously, a queer methodological lens encouraged us to question taken for granted binaries, such as male/female or normative/deviant, in participants' accounts. This approach prompted us to look for places where diverse gender expression and sexuality were fluidly expressed and received in local contexts rather than assumed. Operationally, we integrated queer theory by (i) coding for the construction and policing of gender through everyday performances (e.g., feminised and masculinised nodes, conditional recognition), (ii) tracking where binaries (male and female; formal and informal; productive and reproductive) were invoked, contested, or reworked, and (iii) reading access to resources, spaces, and markets as effects of these performances. Consequently, as codes were refined and core themes were selected, both *talanoa* and queer perspectives helped ensure that the emergent theoretical constructs accurately reflected participants lived realities, rather than imposing rigid foreign or heteronormative interpretations on the data.

Validation

Validation involved multiple stages of collaboration and feedback to ensure that the findings accurately represented the lived experiences of the communities of diverse SOGIE who participated. Members of The Rogers community group and executives from the SFA reviewed preliminary analytic summaries and provided clarifications or critiques

that informed the refining of categories and enhanced the interpretive accuracy of the results. In February 2022, a workshop was organized with *fa'atama* participants to discuss emerging themes and draft recommendations. This forum offered participants an opportunity to affirm or challenge the interpretations, while also contributing additional context that deepened the research team's understanding of relevant cultural and social dynamics. By integrating participant reflections into the final analysis, the study maintained a principle of co-produced knowledge, reflecting the importance of accountability to local communities in research with marginalised populations (Tuhiwai Smith 2012). This collaborative validation process ultimately strengthened the credibility, relevance, and ethical grounding of the research outcomes, facilitating a deeper alignment with both the realities and the priorities of SOGIE individuals in Samoa's fisheries value chains.

Results: participation of Samoans of diverse SOGIE and pathways for inclusion in Samoan fisheries value chains

Engagement and roles across the fisheries value chains

This section analyzes how individuals of diverse SOGIE participate in fisheries, highlighting their informal roles and the challenges they face in achieving visibility across various nodes of the fisheries value chains. It further explores the economic strategies participants employ in response to structural constraints, community stigma, and market limitations.

The study shows extensive, often informal, engagement across harvesting, processing, and sales. Participants described gleaning sea cucumbers, clams, octopus, and other invertebrates on the reef flat, nearshore fishing using spear, rod and line, and nighttime lama (torchlight), small-scale processing of catch (cleaning, cutting, and preparing roe or shellfish innards), and retail sales fish at roadside stalls or local markets. For many, gleaning and nearshore activities were embedded in everyday household subsistence, with early exposure through family shaping later livelihood choices. As one participant reflected:

I have always collected tugane (mud clams) behind our village. We would go digging with my cousins, aunties, and uncles. It was part of everyday life in the village. (Lesbian/bisexual FGD participant).

These accounts illuminate how early learning and routine domestic practices carry forward into adult income

generation, sometimes as supplementary and, in a few cases, primary earnings.

Additionally, patterns of participation were closely tied to gender identity. Many *fa'afafine* described roles culturally framed as “feminine,” particularly post-harvest work, cooking, and retail sales. Participants linked their fisheries involvement to early recognition within families of non-binary or feminine gender expression, which shaped the responsibilities assigned to them. One participant recalled:

I was told *fa'afafine* made cuppa tea better. I think at a young age my father could see that I was like a girl, so he had me help with tea preparations, but I also helped with some fishing later. (*Fa'afafine* FGD participant).

Another participant emphasized intergenerational transmission of knowledge, explaining that she learned to fish nearshore from her grandmother:

When [my] grandmother got older and could not do it herself, we did all the fishing and we loved it. Our foreshore had many marine invertebrates, and we always collected them for food and also to sell. (*Fa'afafine* FGD participant).

These quotes illustrate how perceived gender roles within families shape the kind of fishing knowledge individuals acquire from an early age. Yet, *fa'afafine* stressed that their acceptance is often conditional. While many families welcome *fa'afafine* in roles aligned with “feminine” tasks (e.g., gleaning, cooking, retail sales), the significantly more lucrative deep sea fishing and heavy manual labor remain coded as “men's work” and are almost entirely off limits. Their gender expression outside fishing and the market is also much less reliably accepted, and all *fa'afafine* participants reported instances of discrimination, violence or abuse in other important social contexts including religious, educational and other social and communal spaces and events. Conversely, *fa'afafine* participants, transmasculine or masculine presenting individuals assigned female at birth, were more able to engage in fishing methods commonly regarded as “masculine,” including nighttime spear fishing and reef or open water fishing from small boats. One participant said:

I fish using lama [night fishing] and matau [spear]. I have always helped my uncles, and we catch good fish. I do not collect invertebrates [like women]; I go with the boys for ‘serious’ fishing. (*Fa'atama* FGD participant).

However, several *fa'afafine* participants described discomfort asserting themselves in village spaces where “real men”

congregate and reported adapting their presentation across contexts to manage risk, for example, wearing men's attire at home and for fishing but reverting to women's clothing for church events to avoid confrontation. Some accounts also noted forms of recognition mediated by family ties, such as acceptance within the *aualuma* (girls/women's village grouping).

Lesbian and bisexual women generally reported gleaning in the nearshore zone or assisting with fish sales. Many described subsistence level or small-scale economic pursuits, such as retail sales clams or crabs to neighbours. One participant noted how fishing skills came from watching older relatives:

My father fishes a lot and we own a boat. Our village is near the sea, so I learned from him how to catch certain types of fish. Sometimes I only collect sea grapes or smaller things because he handles the deeper waters. (Lesbian/bisexual FGD participant).

Across groups, continued participation depended on family expectations, perceived safety, time, access to sites and equipment, and local acceptance of gender expression. Although participants did not report explicit written prohibitions on fishing, many described a broader cultural invisibility of diverse SOGIE within fisheries spaces that shaped which roles were encouraged, recognized, or economically rewarded.

Overall, the evidence illuminates active yet uneven participation across the value chain. Early socialization channels individuals into specific tasks, identity shapes which activities are feasible or sanctioned, and acceptance is frequently contingent, particularly for roles associated with higher earnings or visibility. Participants show how they navigate these conditions by drawing on kin networks, adjusting public presentation across settings, and sustaining engagement through nearshore and post-harvest work that can be integrated with household responsibilities.

Economic strategies and market visibility

This section analyzes how individuals of diverse SOGIE participate in fisheries commerce, highlighting informal market roles, reliance on kinship economies, and adaptive livelihood strategies in response to structural constraints, community stigma, and market limitations.

The study shows that roadside stalls and community markets are key sites where participants supplement or earn income. Participants noted that vending is culturally read as "feminine," which can make such roles less accessible or acceptable for *fa'atama*. Market activity finds its footing largely through family networks. Vendors that were

cisgender women or *fa'afafine* described relying on relatives to source fish, set up stalls, transport catch, and build clientele. For some *fa'afafine*, kin-based arrangements also determined how revenue was shared, sometimes limiting personal earnings despite high stall turnover. One *fa'afafine* vendor explained that while stall takings ranged from roughly 100 to 1000 tala per week.

These accounts show how kinship structures facilitate entry into sales while simultaneously constraining control over income and pricing decisions. Reliance on *āiga* (extended family) extended beyond sales to logistics and compliance. Participants described turning to relatives for transport, licenses (where required), and equipment such as canoes and fishing supplies. As one roadside vendor explained:

I sell fish for my aunty and her business. She has a stall at the market in town, and if there is leftover then I sell it here by the road. I just work for them. It is a good job. I always get about 150 tala if I work a full week. (woman road seller, interview participant).

Such arrangements illuminate a support system that lowers entry barriers but may reproduce hierarchical decision making in which SOGIE members have limited say over capital or market strategy. Participants also show resilience through diversification. To stabilize income and manage risk, many combined fish sales with other activities, selling flowers, sewing, decorating, or participating in micro credit schemes, alongside gleaning and nearshore fishing. One *fa'afafine* participant described:

I sew not only for the family but also to sell. Even my decorating business, I just learned to do these things naturally. My talents now support our family financially. I support three of my sister's children. I pay for their school fees because I do not have children of my own. (*Fa'afafine* market seller, interview participant).

Despite these strategies, participants consistently reported that limited access to formal trainings, bank loans, and dedicated market spaces constrained expansion beyond subsistence or small-scale commerce. Taken together, the evidence illuminates a market pathway that is accessible yet precarious: visibility carries social risk; kinship ties open doors but can limit autonomy; and diversification buffers income while formal opportunities remain scarce.

Social and economic barriers to inclusion

This section analyzes institutional and social factors that limit economic opportunities and social inclusion for people

of diverse SOGIE within the fisheries sector. It illuminates how binary driven policies, intersectional discrimination, familial rejection, and conditional acceptance shape participants' experiences and aspirations.

Participants show that, although they are integral to fishing and vending, they are largely absent from formal opportunities such as fisheries training sessions, credit schemes, and development outreach. Government led or donor funded programs were commonly described as focusing on men and women, implicitly excluding SOGIE identities. As one *fa'afafine* participant observed:

When the village *fono* [*village council*] decides who goes to a workshop or training, they usually pick the *matai* [chief] or the main male fisher; they would rarely pick me, a *fa'afafine* (*Fa'afafine* FGD participant).

For *fa'atama*, lesbian and bisexual people exclusion appears more pronounced due to much lower cultural visibility than *Fa'afafine* people, and very limited acceptance within their families. Focus group discussions indicated that masculine presenting individuals assigned female at birth were required to navigate moving between men's and women's spaces, roles and tasks. Some *fa'atama* participants reported they were able to more successfully navigate these complex social and cultural spaces, but acceptance was predicated on demonstrating they 'respect their culture' and not behaving in ways that 'will hurt [their] family, like living with their partner:

In my trans man experience, I know that I was born a woman; I know that. But I really want to be a man, and in my mind, I am man and I feel like a man. In my family we are all different and they understand that I am both man and women. One thing about me, I am very respectful and I do not demand my rights and insist that I am a man. I know I am a sister to my brothers, and if I have to go to church and sing in the choir, I will wear a *puletasi* (women's attire) and I will also wear a hat. I am also a titled person in my family; I have a *matai* title, and even though my family know I am like this, they are okay because they know I do not disrespect our culture. (*Fa'atama* FGD participant).

Fa'atama were often denied both women's and men's spaces, compounding difficulties in building skills or accessing capital for small-scale fisheries businesses. As one *fa'atama* participant explained:

I do not own my own fishing business, but I wish we had the chance to participate in the sector. It is fast

money and good money, and because I love fishing, I could do it. (*Fa'atama* FGD participant).

Despite these constraints, our results suggest entrepreneurial aspirations. Participants expressed enthusiasm for starting or expanding fisheries related enterprises, as captured by a lesbian participant:

If we had a project for our Rogers group, boy we would make a killing because we could run a small business and we are really industrious and hardworking. (Lesbian/bisexual FGD participant).

Yet, participants also highlighted limited access to credit, limited familiarity with formal finance, and concerns about negative assumptions from local leadership. Loan processes that require co-signers or specific identity documents were described as particularly challenging when official ID or recognized gender status did not align with local expectations. Accounts also show intersecting forms of marginalization tied to gender expression, sexual orientation, and economic status. In tight knit communities, being openly lesbian or *fa'atama* could provoke hostility or social isolation, frequently escalating to habitual verbal and physical violence. One participant recalled:

I got a really good hiding from my mum. She said I would be better off dead. People make biblical comments and say that what I am doing is disgusting. I was really suicidal at one stage. (Lesbian/bisexual FGD participant).

Finally, several *fa'afafine* illuminate the conditional nature of acceptance within families and community institutions. Acceptance was often contingent on economic or caregiving contributions:

They know I am *fa'afafine*, but as long as I am paying my nieces' school fees no one complains much. I help with the church donations, so the pastor does not question me either. My talents now support our family financially. I support three of my sister's children; I pay for their school fees because I do not have children of my own. I feel that my contributions to my family have been accepted. (*Fa'afafine* FGD participant).

While such arrangements could secure a measure of belonging, participants described reliance on "being useful" as precarious, curtailing autonomy and setting limits on how openly they could express their identities. Overall, these findings show that formal exclusion, constrained access to finance, experiences of stigma and violence, and

transactional acceptance operate together to shape uneven opportunities and participation for SOGIE individuals within Samoa's fisheries sector.

Discussion: SOGIE labour in Samoan fisheries: visibility, autonomy, and access

The Samoans of diverse SOGIE people are embedded across the fisheries value chains, yet their labour remains largely informal, low visibility, and selectively sanctioned through gendered expectations and kinship arrangements. This pattern shows at everyday gleaning, nearshore harvesting, postharvest processing, and small-scale retail are routine and economically meaningful, while access to higher return, masculinised nodes (offshore fishing, boat ownership, capital intensive equipment) remain circumscribed. These findings are in line with work in Pacific and agrifood contexts that documents how narrow gender binaries and heteronormative framings shape who is seen, counted, and resourced in fisheries and agriculture (Erwin et al. 2021; Koralagama et al. 2017; Mangubhai et al. 2022). More specifically, these results corroborate the ideas of Mangubhai and Lawless (2021), who demonstrated that mainstream "gender" initiatives in fisheries primarily cater to cisgender women, leaving SOGIE groups unaccounted for. This pattern parallels findings from Wypler (2019), where lesbian and queer farmers describe marginalization within gender focused initiatives and develop peer networks in response. The invisibility and conditional acceptance reported here also resonate with calls in queer agrifood scholarship to document non-heteronormative rural labour that is consequential yet routinely overlooked (Hoffelmeyer 2021).

With respect to engagement and roles, the study shows that early socialisation within *āiga* shapes gendered skill pathways: *fa'afafine* are channelled into gleaning, processing, and market sales, while *fa'atama* more often learn and practise masculinised fishing methods such as lama and spear fishing; lesbian and bisexual women typically sustain nearshore gleaning and sales around household needs. These results are consistent with regional analyses of gendered labour in coastal systems and with accounts of how gender expression mediates access to skills, gear, and spaces of practice (Erwin et al. 2021; Koralagama et al. 2017; Mangubhai and Lawless 2021). At the same time, an important finding is that acceptance is frequently contingent: *fa'afafine* describe recognition when performing feminised work but encounter barriers at more lucrative, man coded nodes; *fa'atama* navigate visibility and risk across village and church contexts; lesbian and bisexual women remain economically present yet institutionally unseen. These findings support the broader observation that heteropatriarchal

norms organise labour and reward structures in agrifood systems in ways that reproduce binary privilege (Hoffelmeyer 2021; Mangubhai et al. 2022; Pfammatter and Jongerden 2023).

A possible explanation for the stratification observed here is the coupling of gender performativity and local value chain hierarchies: tasks read as "women's work" are rendered culturally appropriate but economically marginal, whereas "men's work" is rendered both legitimate and capital intensive. This interpretation is consistent with theoretical arguments on gender performativity and constraint (Butler, 2004) and helps explain why offshore nodes remain off limits in practice despite the absence of formal prohibitions in participants' accounts (Mangubhai and Lawless 2021). An implication of this finding is the possibility that programme logics which equate "gender" with cisgender women, and "productive roles" with masculinised fishing, continue to reinscribe binary advantage even when they purport to be inclusive (Mangubhai et al. 2022).

Additionally, the results further show that livelihood strategies are anchored in kinship economies: roadside stalls and markets are primary income sites; family networks supply fish, transport, licences, and stalls; and revenue sharing arrangements often limit sellers' control over earnings. These findings are in agreement with descriptions of *āiga* as a collective safety net that can both enable access and consolidate hierarchical decision making (Erwin et al. 2021; Persson et al. 2022). Income diversification, combining fish sales with sewing, flowers, or microcredit, emerges as a routine hedge against volatility. We interpret this pattern through a relational agriculture lens, understood following Leslie (2019a) as an ecofeminist and queer analytic that draws attention to sexual and gender relations in agrifood systems and to the need to re orient heteropatriarchal relations.

In our study population, what we describe as queer livelihood multiplexity captures how marginalised producers stitch together multiple revenue streams to sustain households and kin (Leslie et al., 2019b). At the same time, expansion is constrained by limited access to training, loans, and market infrastructure. These constraints align with evidence that heteropatriarchal finance and infrastructure regimes privilege family capitalised units, thereby excluding LGBTQ (Leslie et al. 2024; Wypler 2019). Kinship thus operates as an informal infrastructure of both inclusion and gatekeeping, lowering entry barriers while capping autonomy and scale (Leslie et al. 2024).

Comparatively, literature on queer farmers underscores similar dynamics: fear of economic loss from being visibly queer in direct sales (Hoffelmeyer 2021), reliance on community supported arrangements that feel safer but do not fully shield against structural discrimination (Keller 2020),

and use of queer friendly spaces to build skills and markets (Raj 2024). While the specific institutional architectures differ, the direction of effect, visibility risk in public markets and the double-edged nature of community networks, appears consistent across settings (Hoffelmeyer 2021; Keller 2020; Raj 2024). Moreover, the analysis also shows that formal opportunities are scarce: village selection for workshops prioritises matai and cis men fishers; donor and government schemes are framed around “men and women,” implicitly excluding SOGIE identities; and mismatches between identity documents and local expectations complicate access to credit. These results are consistent with accounts of binary driven programme designs in fisheries and agriculture that erase gender diverse populations from eligibility and outreach (Mangubhai and Lawless 2021; Mangubhai et al. 2022).

Taken together, these patterns advance a dual critique: of binary coded institutions that render SOGIE labour invisible and of policy models that overlook the kinship and village relations through which access to skills, capital, and markets is actually organised, so a meaningful inclusion must engage both (Mangubhai and Lawless 2021; Persson et al. 2022; Leslie 2019a, 2019b).

Experiences of stigma, violence, and church mediated discipline reported by participants illuminate how religiosity and local governance can interact to police gender expression and constrain mobility. These findings are consistent with prior work on queer bodies and social policing (Browne and Nash 2010), the use of biblical rhetoric to legitimise homophobia in rural spaces (Jolly 2011), and regionally specific accounts of Christian cisheteropatriarchy intensifying stigma (Idris 2021). Notably, several *fa'afafine* describe “transactional” acceptance conditional on financial and caregiving contributions. This observation is in line with analyses showing that inclusion can be contingent on performing economically “useful” roles, rather than on rights or recognition (Hoffelmeyer 2021). Comparative agrarian scholarship likewise documents how nonconforming women and queer people who control land or visible resources are policed through reputational and moral sanctioning, signalling the fragility of conditional legitimacy (Jacobs 2014). A further implication is that visibility strategies may have ambivalent effects. Scholarship cautions that moments of heightened queer visibility can catalyse reactionary policy and cultural backlash, particularly where conservative social movements are ascendant (Gagliano and Liebman 2024). This helps explain why participants weigh being “out” in market spaces against risks to income and safety, and why diversification within kin managed enterprises feels safer even as it limits autonomy (Hoffelmeyer et al. 2023; Keller 2020).

Contributions and implications for inclusive fisheries

The findings suggest that kinship operates as an informal infrastructure that both enables participation and constrains autonomy, thereby organising who can access high return nodes in the value chain and formal opportunities. This observation may support the hypothesis that binary policy lenses and heteropatriarchal gatekeeping reproduce value chain stratification even in the absence of explicit prohibitions (Mangubhai et al. 2022). By bringing SOGIE labour into view within Samoan fisheries, the analysis broadens gender and development frameworks to include conditional acceptance, strategic visibility, and the uneven translation of social recognition into economic mobility (Pfammatter and Jongerden 2023; Schmidt 2016, 2017; Treagus and Enari 2024).

Moreover, this study's use of *talanoa* illuminates how culturally grounded, relational inquiry surfaces sensitive material that structured interviews often miss, especially accounts of conditional acceptance, intra church discipline, and identity management across settings. This is consistent with arguments that *talanoa* fosters trust, reciprocity, and ethical reflexivity in Pacific research contexts, thereby enabling participants to narrate complex, situated experiences (Farrelly and Nabobo Baba 2014; Halapua 2008; Prescott 2008; Vaioleti 2006). The alignment of *talanoa* with interactive grounded theory provided an analytic bridge from narrative depth to patterned explanation, allowing the team to connect everyday practices (e.g., revenue sharing, workshop gatekeeping) to system level mechanisms (e.g., binary policy design, kinship as infrastructure) without imposing ex ante hypotheses (Otsuka 2005; Wilson 2008). These data therefore need to be interpreted with caution as community situated accounts rather than population estimates, but the approach offers credible, situated evidence about how SOGIE fishers navigate constraint and opportunity across the value chain (Simonds and Christopher 2013).

Another implication of this study is the need to re-engineer inclusion “where access actually happens.” Programme design that explicitly recognises SOGIE identities and decouples eligibility from binary categories is warranted if the aim is to move from participation to *in fact* inclusion (Mangubhai and Lawless 2021; Mangubhai et al. 2022). Given the salience of queer-to-queer mentorship and peer networks in other agrifood settings, investment in SOGIE specific training cohorts and vendor networks may help reduce anticipated discrimination and skill bottlenecks (Hoffelmeyer et al. 2023; Wypler 2019). Finally, the absence of administrative data on SOGIE in fisheries echoes calls to add sexuality and gender identity to agricultural censuses, small survey design changes that enable

visibility without forcing outing and that support targeted support where needed (Dentzman et al. 2021). Translating participation into equitable livelihoods will likely require reframing gender in policy, resourcing kin proximate but autonomy enhancing market infrastructure, and embedding intersectional safeguards in programme delivery (Bergenfield and Miller 2014; Crenshaw and Vistnes 1989; Klapeer 2017; Roy et al. 2021).

Conclusions

This study set out to examine how people of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities participate in Samoa's fisheries value chains, challenging the prevailing assumption that "gender" in fisheries refers only to men and women. Drawing on a culturally grounded *talanoa* methodology and interactive grounded theory, we documented the informal yet essential contributions of *fa'afafine*, *fa'atama*, and lesbian/bisexual women across reef gleaning, nearshore fishing, post-harvest processing, and fish vending. At the same time, we traced how socio-cultural norms, village governance structures, and economic marginalization render these contributions largely invisible to formal fisheries programs and multilateral agencies.

Our findings reveal that childhood immersion in fishing, whether gleaning invertebrates, spear-fishing at night, or retail sales small catches, shapes lifelong engagement in fisheries for SOGIE individuals. *Fa'afafine* often inherit roles framed as "feminine," such as cooking and market sales, yet remain barred from deep-sea fishing; *fa'atama* adopt "masculine" fishing methods but lack recognition in village or policy circles; and lesbian and bisexual women sustain gleaning and retail niches that are indispensable to household food security yet unacknowledged in development agendas. Across these groups, "everyday" fishing practices coexist with pervasive stigma toward roadside vending, toward non-heteronormative identities, and toward those who transgress established gender scripts. Many participants cobble together livelihoods through multiple activities, drawing on family networks for capital and equipment, yet remain excluded from training, credit schemes, and policymaking processes that continue to operate through a narrow binary lens.

By centering SOGIE perspectives within a Pacific research paradigm, this work extends the scope of gender analysis in fisheries beyond cisgender women to include those whose identities have been systematically overlooked. Theoretically, it underscores how heteronormative framing in fisheries policy perpetuates economic inequities and masks the full breadth of community-based knowledge. Methodologically, it demonstrates the power of *talanoa* and interactive

grounded theory to surface sensitive, context-driven narratives that structured interviews would likely miss, highlighting the importance of relational trust, flexibility, and local validation in research with marginalised groups.

Practically, our study points to several avenues for more inclusive fisheries development. First, policymakers and multilateral agencies must expand their notion of "gender" to embrace diverse sexual orientations and gender identities, ensuring that training programs, microfinance initiatives, and market supports explicitly welcome *fa'afafine*, *fa'atama*, and lesbian and bisexual women. Second, village-level governance bodies should be encouraged, and resourced, to adopt more flexible selection criteria for fisheries workshops and credit schemes, so that non-binary individuals can participate on equal footing with matai and recognized fishers. Third, fisheries extension services and community consultations must partner with local SOGIE organizations, not merely as token stakeholders but as co-designers of interventions that reflect their distinct skills, pathways, and safety concerns (for example, through attire-inclusive training sites or peer-led catch-weighting programs).

Looking ahead, further research is needed to track how inclusive policies reshape livelihood outcomes for SOGIE fishers over time, and to compare experiences across Pacific contexts with differing cultural and regulatory landscapes. Studies could assess whether targeted microfinance or tailored training actually unlocks new opportunities, while comparative work in multicultural settings (such as Fiji and Tonga) could reveal how intersecting axes of marginalization, such as ethnicity, disability, or religiosity, interact with SOGIE status in fisheries. Moreover, integrating nutrition and ecological monitoring into such research would illuminate whether subsistence gleaning by diverse SOGIE groups contributes to household food security and reef health in distinct ways.

Ultimately, this pilot study demonstrates that ethical, culturally situated methodologies can render visible the hidden labor of SOGIE communities in small-scale fisheries and open pathways for genuine inclusion. By moving beyond a binary understanding of gender, future fisheries policies and programs can more effectively harness the full range of local capacities, strengthen food systems, and uphold the principles of *va tupuia* and *va fealoaloa'i* that underpin Samoan social and environmental well-being. In doing so, Samoa, and other Pacific nations, can lead a more inclusive, equitable model of fisheries development that embraces diversity as a source of resilience rather than a subject of marginalization.

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Data availability The datasets generated and analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Declarations

Conflicts of interest The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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