



JOINT PRESS RELEASE

A Corrected Version of the Earlier Press Release which was released yesterday the 30th October.

This version is now released on the 31st October 2018 with apologies to the Hon. Prime Minister of Tonga for releasing his words as those taken from the launch when they were taken from his Foreword in the Report.

This edition has been amended and contain words from the actual launch which took place on the evening of the 29th of October, 2018.

The Children of Tonga have spoken

Tonga, 29 October 2018 – The Ma'a Fafine mo e Famili Inc. MFF, (For Women and Families Inc.) in partnership with the Naunau 'o 'Alamaite Tonga Inc. (NATA) together with Loughborough University in the United Kingdom has launched the first ever study on "the experiences and needs of children including children with disabilities in Tonga". This initiative has been made possible with funding from the European Union (EU).

The Prime Minister of Tonga, Hon. Samuela 'Akilisi Pohiva in his Foreword for the report said, "This study is unique because it is the first study in Tonga and the Pacific which addresses violence against children and more so, children with disabilities. Discipline is important for our children and it is our responsibility as parents and as leaders to discipline but the main thing to notice or to consider is that physical violence, vulgar language, intimidation or other forms of negative discipline should not be used."

During the launch, the Prime Minister further congratulated the MFF and NATA for this study because it is the first of its kind in Tonga and the Pacific. He went on further to say that the "findings from the Report do not reflect very well on us and the way we raise our children, including our children with disabilities". The Prime Minister also said that he has a difficult task ahead of him trying to convince the Members of Parliament and the Cabinet to stop beating their children and he knows that this report will assist him. He mentioned here how the MPs and the Cabinet want to continue the physical punishment of children and that they wanted to repeal the Family Protection Act of 2013.

The good news that the Prime Minister announced was that the Ministry of Internal Affairs together with UN-ESCP are working to ratify the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), with reservations in the very near future.

During the launch, the members of the *Children's Task Force* and parents presented the results and the recommendations of the study. The results show that children in Tonga experience physical violence and other forms of violence in school such as being bullied and at home including verbal abuse and being told to go without food.

The Head of Cooperation at the Delegation of the European Union for the Pacific Mr Christoph Wagner said, "Violence against children may make the headlines from time to time and this draws our attention. Physical violence needs to be addressed. But children also suffer from more subtle and disguised form of violence, with repeated small acts of abuse that hurt them. This is more insidious, less mediatised and even more difficult to address. Children and Children with Disabilities have a special place in the EU policies and actions, because of their vulnerability. The EU has supported countless initiatives in Europe as well as in our partner countries over the last years to help improve conditions for children. Fiji, Solomon's and Vanuatu for instance received support from the EU in the recent past. Samoa has been assisted as well and we are glad now to extend our support to Tonga".

The report lists a range of recommendations ranging from development of risks and protective factors framework to assessing the long and short term effects of violence on the children; having national policies and laws to address violence against children; strengthening rights of children in decision making processes; surveys for awareness and understanding of issue of violence against children in schools; Government of Tonga ratifying the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and making changes to the current domestic policies and practices which address child abuse at all levels and so forth.

Gabriella Blake-'Ilolahia from the Ma'a Fafine mo e Famili (MFF) who also coordinated the National Study on Domestic Violence against Women in 2012 expressed her sincere appreciation towards the European Union for funding the study. She added that " without the European Union's support, we would not have been able to complete such a historic study to give voice to our children and to help all children of Tonga progress towards a society free from violence. It is the hope of this report that the Government of Tonga would formulate child protection and safeguarding policies and laws which would address the abuse of children".

Professor Jo Aldridge of Loughborough University and an expert on children's rights and research methods who led the research commented: "This research is very important. Currently, too many children in Tonga, including children with disabilities, suffer violence and abuse both in the home and at school. The messages from this research should be used to help transform children's lives. Hopefully new policies and practices can be introduced that protect children from harm and help them to live safe and happy lives".

Background

The overall objective of the project is to document a detailed understanding of violence against children and children with disabilities in Tonga. The final document / reports forms as an action-oriented study for government, civil society and the community to develop and implement immediate and long-term protection and prevention measures against violence on children. The project implementation duration is 44 months which concludes on 1 November 2018. The total allocation for the project is €119,000.00.

MFF is a not for profit, non-governmental organization, mandated to foster and promote a just and peaceful society through the empowerment of women and children. In 2012, MFF completed its first National Study on domestic violence against women in Tonga. This study forms as the baseline from which the government, civil society and the community is actively addressing violence against women. On July 2014, the Family Protection Act 2013 became

law, which became the ground breaking moment, being the first legislation to specifically address domestic violence in Tonga. Thus MFF proposed to build on its experience in researching violence to create similar opportunities for children, where by the children live a life that is free from all forms of violence against children in Tonga. The co-applicant to the programme is NATA (NATA (Naunau 'o e 'Alamaite Tonga Association Incorporated).

Tonga became the 188th member of the United Nations on the 14th November 1999. It has also become party to two Conventions: The International Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) which Tonga ratified on the 17th March 1972; and The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) which Tonga ratified on the 6th December 1995. Since these ratifications, the government of Tonga has submitted some national reports on ICERD and only one on CRC. Tonga has also signed but not yet ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).

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