

# Voices from Tonga



***“It’s a change to my life - it renewed me in many ways. I learned how to plan my family. I got to raise my family so that they wouldn’t go through what I have been through.”***  
**Sex worker**

## Tonga Family Health Association: The Condom Campaign

***This case study is one of a series of qualitative reviews called “IPPF Changing lives” which capture the stories of IPPF’s beneficiaries and clients from around the world. A rapid PEER (participatory ethnographic evaluation and research) approach was used to train project beneficiaries to interview people in their social network. These voices provide us with powerful testimonies on lives changed - in some cases, lives saved - and illustrate how IPPF is making a difference.***

The Tonga Family Health Association (TFHA) is successfully promoting condoms in Tonga, working in partnership with the Tonga Leitis Association. Leitis is the generic term used by the Tonga Leitis Association to refer to transgender (male to female) people. Prior to this partnership, TFHA had been struggling to promote condoms effectively within certain groups including Leitis, commercial sex workers, and men who have sex with men. Leitis are well placed to understand the need for safe sex and condom promotion across society, because they interact socially with people from diverse groups.

TFHA’s and the Tonga Leitis Association’s most recent venture together has been the Condom Campaign, which focuses on HIV and AIDS and STI awareness and prevention; creating a condom use culture among lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual and questioning (LGBTQ) and youth communities; and creating a culture that will empower LGBTQ and youth groups to make healthy choices. TFHA has provided funds, supplies of condoms, and other support and advice, and the Tonga Leitis Association has implemented activities.

TFHA’s work with the Tonga Leitis Association is also benefiting the Leitis themselves. Leitis in Tonga face stigma at school and from neighbours, and often feel different or left out. Many struggle to be respected within the community, and feel compelled to prove themselves as worthy individuals. Boys who become Leitis independently of family approval and support often suffer paternal rejection and violence. Young Leitis risk marginalization if they join street gangs after being ostracized by their families, which can involve petty crime, violence and alcohol abuse. Many are also affected by stigma regarding their sexual behaviour.

<sup>1</sup> [www.options.co.uk/peer](http://www.options.co.uk/peer)



***“I gain confidence from the discussions, like an empowerment for me to prioritize my uniqueness. I was getting nervous about discussing the topic of condoms. Now I have done it and I have become empowered.”***  
***Project beneficiary***

## Achievements

For many project beneficiaries, condom distribution by the Tonga Leitis Association was the first time they had come across condoms or considered practising safer sex. The project has also given Leitis new confidence, a sense of self empowerment and new, useful skills that they can use to generate income.

The Tonga Leitis Association has opened doors for many people not just to obtain condoms, but to become better informed about safer sex. They have been able to distribute condoms and spread their influence on safer sex practices with people that TFHA had struggled to reach before. One TFHA staff member said, “[Leitis] know condom protection inside and out. They have spread the message inside and outside the Tonga Leitis Association. They have passed on the message more effectively than others. They have a network. They have done a good job.”

Leitis appreciate the numerous issues that they have learned about, and the fact that they can pass this information on to others through their peer networks rather than through formal schooling. The group feel that their work in campaigning for better awareness and safer behaviour has contributed towards the lack of HIV cases among Leitis since 1987. A Leiti said, “From what I’ve seen, the Tonga Leitis Association have the ability to grab people’s attention, to educate them about safer sex, to learn in a way we will remember.”

The Tonga Leitis Association has challenged social norms about silencing discussion on issues such as sexuality and condoms. At pageants and cultural and sporting events, Leitis have created safe and socially stimulating spaces in which traditional taboos regarding sexual life can be re-interpreted. There is some evidence that public attitudes have softened towards talking about condoms. A TFHA staff member explained:

“Here in Tonga – [there’s an instruction] not to mention the word ‘condom’ ever on the radio. [But the Leitis do say it] and from the public there’s been no

reaction so far. The message is more accepted, coming from them.”

Another major achievement has been the new confidence that many Leitis have gained. Acquiring knowledge and being more socially valued through the Tonga Leitis Association have given them new confidence to manage their lives and relationships. For many Leitis, the Tonga Leitis Association represents an option for life, safety and companionship within a minority community. Training in personal empowerment has helped Tonga Leitis Association members to negotiate safer sex and condom use, thus reducing their vulnerability to STIs and HIV.

Other skills acquired through the Tonga Leitis Association are in traditionally feminine domestic or service areas such as cooking or hairdressing. These have been used as paths to qualifications and social status. They have also given Leitis new forms of income generation as an alternative to criminal activity that some had become involved in when they were destitute or separated from their families. This independence has given Leitis new and improved status with family and friends, and has made them far less vulnerable to exploitation, including the sexual health risks associated with sex work.

The project has also resulted in changed attitudes towards Leitis among the wider Tongan population. The varied backgrounds of the Tonga Leitis Association supporters and the different levels of involvement which people can choose to have with the group make it accessible to many who had formerly been distanced from Leitis, or who had even shown homophobic attitudes. These included, for example, men who self-identified as heterosexual but who had occasional sexual encounters with Leitis. These men’s interactions with Tonga Leitis Association members sometimes changed from being exploitative relationships with Leitis to them having increased respect for them. One new member said, “I’ve learned how to be more open with Leitis, to spread what information they give to help others, and to be more aware of safer sex.”

## Challenges

Many of the challenges faced by the Tonga Leitis Association and its members relate to the general experience of being a Leiti in a small, conservative island setting, where family life is often problematic for Leitis. 'Not answering back to parents' is said to be an entrenched value that has made it hard for youth to assert their identities and rights. Some Leitis have experienced physical abuse from their fathers. These problems become compounded when Leitis are pressured at school to comply with traditional gender norms.

In spite of TFHA's progress in dialogues with church authorities in recent years, there is still church opposition to condom use and sexual diversity, and sexuality continues to be associated with shame and sinfulness. One Leiti said, "It's a bad thing to be a Leiti... People don't want to talk to us." TFHA have also faced opposition to some of their work in the form of complaints from the public.

A challenge faced by TFHA in relation to the condom campaign in particular has been ensuring a continuous and uninterrupted supply of quality condoms. The remote, island setting makes this particularly problematic. TFHA and the Ministry of Health share responsibility for ensuring accurate calculation and continuity of condom supply in TFHA's clinics, but miscalculation sometimes leads to shortage of supply.

## Lessons

Both TFHA and the Tonga Leitis Association tread a fine line between maintaining respectful relationships with authorities and allies, and promoting greater openness regarding sexual health and condom use. Leiti leaders have the combined benefits of being able to attract public attention in a constructive and entertaining way (through events such as pageants), having access to diverse groups of the population who are potentially at risk of STIs and HIV, and being motivated to help the community and promote a positive image of their cause. It is their strength as advocates that make them effective TFHA partners. The Leitis say things in public that other groups will not say. They can access and take messages to diverse social sectors that other organizations cannot reach.

Partnering with the Leitis has been a bold strategy by TFHA in Tonga's conservative, heavily church-influenced context. The Leitis have been working to challenge social norms about silencing issues such as sexuality and condoms and they talk openly about them, and this has contributed towards a more positive public image of their group as community supporters and health promoters.

The Condom Campaign provides an example to other Pacific Islands and Member Associations worldwide about addressing stigma and promoting sexual health in a small, enclosed society. The project's strategy has been bold in the way that it engages with stigmatized groups and discusses taboo subjects. At the same time, it is sensitive to the possibilities for advocacy in a Polynesian context and has positively changed the lives of many sexually diverse people in Tonga.

***"We identified this group because of the conservatism in Tonga. It's a religious country. We saw the group as a door to our activities, to push our agenda. We work with them as advocates to assist us."***

***TFHA staff member***



***"It's the only programme ever here in Tonga that's free to express the benefits of the condom."***

***TFHA staff member***



***“Now he has a happier life, joining with the Tonga Leitis Association. He learned how to be strong; how to stand up for his own rights; how to work together.”***

***Tonga Leitis Association member, describing a Leiti***

***“The condom campaign is working!”***  
***Friend of Leitis***



Tonga	
<b>Country context<sup>1</sup></b>	
Population (millions), 2007	0.1
Adult illiteracy rate (% aged 15 and above), 1999-2007	0.8
Female life expectancy at birth (years), 2007	74.6
Male life expectancy at birth (years), 2007	69.0
<b>Context for HIV and AIDS<sup>2</sup></b>	
Number of people known to be living with HIV and AIDS in Tonga, 2006	1
Estimated number of HIV tests carried out annually in Tonga	2,500-3,000

<sup>1</sup> UNDP, 'Human Development Report 2009', (Website, accessed on 14-05-10).

<sup>2</sup> World Health Organization (2010), 'Health situation and trend: Tonga', (Website, accessed on 17-05-10).



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The International Planned Parenthood Federation is global service provider and a leading advocate of sexual and reproductive health and rights for all. We are a worldwide movement of national organizations working with and for communities and individuals.

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