

Miss Samoa as activism? Using unusual platforms to break cultural silences

by Eliorah Malifa and Sonia Palmieri

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Brianna Fruean briefs the press during the 2023 Climate Ambition Summit in New York.

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Nine in ten women in Samoa is said to experience violence. With a statistic like that, of my sisters here, only two of them are safe from violence ... And that's emotional and physical violence. These are things that we must uncover and it takes sometimes platforms like this to speak the unspoken. [Cautious applause]
— *Suluafi Brianna Fruean, Miss Samoa 2024 contestant*

Beauty pageants are quite prolific in the Pacific. In Samoa, Miss Samoa is crowned during the Teuila Festival and is inextricably linked to Samoa's outward facing profile; she appears in all tourism campaigns and during her reign represents the country at various diplomatic meetings.

It's an interesting time for the [tama'ita'i Samoa](#) who currently hold the Miss title. Reigning Miss Samoa, Litarā Ieremia-Allen, is working alongside Miss Samoa 2023, Moemoana Safa'atoa Schwenke, as Moemoana completes her additional reign as Miss Pacific Islands 2024. At the same time, Miss Samoa 2022, Haylanni Kuruppu, has been selected by the newly formed Miss Universe Samoa executive committee to represent Samoa at the [popular international pageant](#).

In the process of securing Kuruppu as Miss Universe Samoa, an all-male executive [encouraged women](#), in all their diversity, to participate: "single women, married women with children and even transgender women". The stated objective of the pageant was to find a Samoan representative for Miss Universe and "promote Samoa's beauty on an international scale".

At a global level, pageants have tried to become more modern in the wake of the #MeToo movement, with [fewer swimsuit](#) sections and more community engagement. They have also had a history of [raising issues of women's liberation](#), through young women participating in, or else rejecting, the show.

Well-known climate change activist Suluafi Brianna Fruean was one of this year's

contestants for Miss Samoa. Fruean has engaged national and international audiences on climate change since she was aged 11 – [famously appearing](#) at the opening ceremony of the World Leaders Summit at COP26 in Glasgow in November 2021. She is no stranger to public speaking. In contesting for [Miss Samoa on 5 September](#), Fruean chose to use this unusual platform to make a different kind of statement:

It takes a village to raise a child and by that same understanding it takes a village to fail a child. It takes a village to keep children safe and it takes a village to silence them when they are unsafe.

These were the most explicit references to child and sexual abuse in her five-minute speech. For the most part, the speech elicited images of smiling children and the collective responsibility of villages to protect them. It was during the question and answer section that customary silences were broken:

When the first judge noted that there was a lot “unspoken” in her speech, Fruean responded:

There's silence in this room right now but I know that all of us know what I'm talking about. And that silence is scary. I think that's why in my speech, there is a lot unspoken. But that silence is dangerous, so I will break the silence. There is a lot of violence against women; there's a lot of abuse of our children; and there's a lot of incest that happens in our villages.

It may be telling that Fruean did not become Miss Samoa 2024 or win the pre-pageant interview section. But these words have had an important impact. At the time of writing, pre-pageant interviews for Miss Samoa have been viewed almost 42,500 times by viewers in both Samoa and the international diaspora. Comments under the livestream suggested that “Contestant Number 9” should run for parliament. A [separate video of Fruean's appearance](#) elicited another 12,000 views.

There's something very powerful about speaking out in unusual spaces. Miss Samoa is not commonly known as a platform for airing taboo subjects. And yet, Fruean chose to disrupt the usual focus on positivity knowing she would reach a huge audience; and perhaps more importantly, knowing she would reach a predominantly female audience. The high rates of sexual and gender-based violence are in part protected by a culture of silence and fear; open discussions about sexual consent are seen to run contrary to social norms.

Raising an issue, however, is not enough; finding solutions is harder. Judge 3 encouraged further reflection from Fruean, asking how these incidents of violence and abuse could be mediated in the village and through the village council keeping

in mind the *va*, or the framework through which Samoan families and communities navigate their relationships and attribute ways of speaking and treatment.

How would you teach your sisters to, you know, approach [the *va*]? Because my concern is that we can't continue putting people in victim support refuge homes ... How do you use [the *va*] in the village because we can't continue to, to put this solution in place which is actually separating families more.

Almost as though she knew she would be asked this question, Fruean responded that she had been reading about the *va*. She acknowledged that cultural taboos required culturally appropriate solutions:

I would use the *va* to learn more about the knowledge we have around boundaries and the knowledge we also have around reconciliation and healing.

Rather than accepting the premise that crisis centres were not a viable solution, however, Fruean suggested a Samoan approach to rehabilitation; using the *va* to heal families, victims and perpetrators. She graciously concludes that she will “definitely continue to try and learn more”.

Fruean's courage in bringing activism into the Miss Samoa pageant to raise a taboo subject signals an interesting shift in approach to tackling an endemic problem. It will take Pacific islanders having difficult conversations to eliminate the high incidence of gender-based violence across this region.

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