Homophobia in Fiji's schools, and its impact on student wellbeing

by Priyam Singh-Maharaj

16 May 2026

Homophobia affects learning outcomes for boys
Photo Credit: Unsplash/Sam Balye

Despite decades of global evidence on how homophobia structures boys' behaviours and peer hierarchies, it remains one of the most overlooked forms of violence in Pacific schools. The consequences for student wellbeing and learning are significant. My fieldwork in Fiji showed how deeply these dynamics are embedded in everyday school life and how little they are acknowledged in education policy and practice.

As part of my PhD research, I spent extended periods in co-educational and all-boys schools across Fiji. I observed interactions, listened to students and spoke with 62 boys about their experiences. Effeminate boys were consistently the most vulnerable. Their stories revealed a pattern of exclusion, ridicule, violence and fear that was reinforced by what I witnessed in classrooms, corridors and school grounds. In one instance, I was running a session with prefects at an all-boys secondary school. We were working through a set of topics and the discussion was relaxed, with questions and answers flowing easily. When it was the boys' turn to ask me questions, one of them asked, "How do we change the feminine boys?" I paused. Through my work at their school I already knew that effeminate, or "feminine" boys, as they were sometimes described by themselves and their peers, faced discrimination, exclusion, homophobic slurs and bullying. I also knew these behaviours were often justified as attempts to "change" them because they were seen to reflect poorly on the school and on their heteronormative peers.

In that moment it was clear that how I responded mattered. If I reacted with criticism or shame, the boys would shut down and the space for honest conversation that I had worked hard to build would close immediately. So I moved carefully. Instead of answering directly, I asked them why they felt feminine boys needed to be changed. I asked them to think about the methods currently being used and to consider how these affected the boys in question and the wider image of the school. While I did not expect to shift every attitude in the room, I did notice that several boys who disagreed with the strong-arming tactics of their peers began to speak up and offer alternative views.

Sessions like this taught me that, in the eyes of many boys, homosexuality and gender expression are closely intertwined and both are treated as shameful. These attitudes do not emerge in isolation. They are shaped by peer dynamics, school culture, societal and cultural norms and attitudes. This is where gender-transformative programming becomes critical. Interventions that simply tell boys to "respect others" or "stop bullying" do not shift the underlying norms that drive these behaviours. Boys need structured opportunities to reflect on masculinity, power and peer pressure in ways that are culturally grounded and relevant to their lived realities.

One effeminate student, whom I call Onika, was the first to approach me. He had developed a flamboyant and confident persona to navigate school life, yet behind it was a history of bullying and a strained relationship with his father that included physical violence at home. His experiences were echoed by others who described similar treatment. They spoke about being ostracised by peers, targeted with slurs and punished for not conforming to dominant expectations of Fijian masculinity. Several said that simply having a space to speak openly felt like a relief. The hostility directed at effeminate boys was not subtle. It was visible, routine and widely accepted. In boys' schools, where collective reputation is highly valued, one boy's non-conformity was seen to reflect on everyone. Many boys did not identify as gay, yet they were automatically labelled as such because their mannerisms differed from what was expected of a typical Fijian boy. This presumption intensified the hostility, particularly in environments shaped by strong religious values.

Language played a central role in policing masculinity. The term *qauri*, a local term associated with effeminate males, was used frequently and in a clearly derogatory manner. It appeared alongside slurs such as faggot and poofter, signalling how deeply normalised homophobic language had become in everyday school interactions. The latter two terms were not only directed at effeminate boys. They were embedded in everyday banter among boys and signalled how normalised homophobia has become in school culture.

These dynamics matter for Fiji's development agenda. Homophobia contributes to unsafe learning environments, undermines student wellbeing and affects attendance, participation and academic performance. For some boys, school becomes a place of endurance rather than learning. When this became overwhelming, some began avoiding school through absenteeism or truancy, while others were pushed out altogether. Onika, for instance, was ultimately expelled over a minor incident that would typically have warranted only a warning or counselling.

Despite these harms, homophobia remains largely absent from education policy discussions. Fiji has child protection and anti-bullying frameworks, but they rarely

address homophobic behaviour directly. Teachers often overlook discriminatory language, either because they see it as harmless boys' talk or because they feel ill-equipped to intervene. Families sometimes reinforce these norms by sending effeminate boys to all-boys schools in the hope of correcting their behaviour.

Addressing homophobia and conversations about inclusivity and varied gender expressions in schools is not about promoting any particular view on sexuality. It is about ensuring that all students, regardless of how they express themselves, can learn in environments that are safe, respectful and free from violence. This requires clearer policy guidance, teacher training that includes gender and sexuality literacy, and school cultures that challenge rather than reinforce harmful norms.

Gender-transformative programming elsewhere shows that these dynamics can shift when boys are given structured, reflective spaces to examine masculinity and peer norms. For instance, Program H has helped boys interrogate gender norms, sexual and reproductive health, power and peer pressure, with campaigns in Brazil and India also addressing homophobic attitudes by promoting respect for sexual diversity. Uganda's Good School Toolkit demonstrates how whole-school approaches that challenge harmful norms and power hierarchies can reduce violence. Comparable lessons also come from the United Kingdom, where Scotland's Mentors in Violence Prevention and the Equally Safe at School initiative combine teacher training, student leadership and clear accountability to shift attitudes toward bullying and violence.

In Papua New Guinea, Equal Playing Field has delivered large-scale school programs that use sport, peer dialogue and structured reflection to help boys and girls challenge gender stereotypes and reduce violence. Young Pacific Wayfinders, developed by UN Women's Pacific Office, offers a culturally grounded model led by Pacific boys and young men, using *talanoa*, creative arts and storytelling to explore identity, leadership and gender norms. Together, these examples show that when schools and communities address gender norms directly, boys' attitudes and peer cultures can shift in meaningful and lasting ways.

Homophobia functions as a disciplinary tool that regulates all boys. It shapes how they speak, move, dress and relate to one another. There is significant scope for development in this area across the region, particularly in strengthening school policies and programming that address these dynamics directly. By naming the problem, investing in teacher training, strengthening counselling systems and supporting NGOs to work with boys, policymakers can create safer and more supportive school environments.

If Fiji and the wider Pacific region are serious about improving educational

outcomes and student wellbeing, homophobia can no longer remain an unspoken part of school life. Recognising it as a form of violence and responding accordingly is an essential step toward creating schools where all students can learn without fear.

Author/s:

Priyam Singh-Maharaj
Priyam Singh-Maharaj is a Pacific gender and masculinities researcher based in Auckland. Her work focuses on masculinity and gendered social norms in Fiji and the wider Pacific.

Link:
https://devpolicy.org/homophobia-in-fijis-schools-and-its-impact-on-student-wellbeing-20260516/