

Reimagining PNG's education through culture

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The Equal Playing Field 4 Schools team holds a session at Kaugere Junior High School.

Photo Credit: Equal Playing Field

In Papua New Guinea, young people are coming of age amid rapid social change. Globalisation, digital media and shifting social norms are reshaping how youth understand relationships, gender roles, identity, communication and conflict. While these changes create opportunities, they also generate pressures, particularly as young people attempt to balance modern expectations with enduring obligations to family, clan and community.

Without guidance, contemporary influences can normalise harmful behaviours, including violence, disrespect and unequal relationships. In this context, the need for a youth-focused, culturally grounded curriculum is urgent. Young people require education that affirms their cultural identity while equipping them to navigate modern challenges. At a time of rapid transition, PNG faces a critical need to reconnect with its authentic identity — drawing on its cultural heritage to shape innovative, community-driven responses.

Rather than importing external frameworks wholesale, PNG's response must reflect its relational worldview — one grounded in shared responsibility, interdependence and communal wellbeing. In his reflections on [the Melanesian Way](#), Bernard Narokobi cautioned that turning away from ancestral traditions in favour of Western lifestyles risks obscuring the profound strengths inherent in PNG culture. It is at the intersection of tradition and innovation that meaningful direction for the next generation can emerge.

The [Equal Playing Field](#) (EPF) school curriculum addresses this need through *Hausman na Hausmeri Story: A Rite of Passage Curriculum for PNG High Schools*. Grounded in traditions of communal dialogue, the curriculum creates structured, gender-inclusive learning spaces that promote respect, equality and non-violence. For over a decade, EPF has delivered respectful relationships education through sport and classroom programs, engaging students in discussions about consent, empathy, teamwork and boundaries. [Evidence from participating schools](#) shows improved interactions between boys and girls, increased student wellbeing and reductions in bullying and inappropriate behaviour.

Many Pacific nations are experiencing a significant “youth bulge”, making the life trajectories of young people critical to future social stability. PNG youth are not passive recipients of change; they are active agents navigating new opportunities and risks.

Initiatives such as [military-style training programs](#) and PNG’s entry into the [Australian National Rugby League competition](#) offer pathways for skill development and employment. However, without strong governance and alignment with social development priorities, such programs may fail to deliver long-term benefits.

At the same time, much contemporary gender and violence-prevention programming in PNG is shaped by Western narratives that prioritise individual autonomy over collective responsibility. When applied uncritically, these approaches can clash with Pacific worldviews. Rapid urbanisation, technology access and global media exposure are already reshaping social norms, often without corresponding intergenerational dialogue. Many families still avoid conversations about consent, emotional boundaries, or gender expectations, leaving young people to rely on peers or online misinformation.

When rapid change intersects with [frameworks that do not resonate locally](#), confusion, resistance and unintended harm can follow. Risks include the normalisation of violence, rigid gender expectations, breakdowns in communication and confusion around power and respect. A culturally relevant, youth-centred curriculum is therefore not optional — it is essential.

PNG possesses deeply rooted traditions that teach respect, communal responsibility and conflict resolution. Historically, men’s houses (*hausman/hausboi*) and women’s houses (*hausmeri/hausgel*) were spaces where elders mentored youth and community issues were discussed. Research across the Pacific highlights the protective power of such relational systems, noting that [extended family responsibility and the brother-sister covenant](#) function as strong safeguards against sexual violence.

These communal structures contrast with Western models that frame violence primarily as an individual rights issue. Multigenerational households, strong church ties and kinship-based identities are not deficits — they are strengths. Revitalising culturally grounded spaces offers young people an anchor, reminding them that learning about relationships is part of their cultural inheritance.

Pacific youth have repeatedly demonstrated their capacity to lead transformative change, as seen in the successful [climate justice advocacy before the International Court of Justice](#). EPF builds on this potential by centring participation, safety and

cultural relevance.

In contrast to dominant gender narratives that frame “patriarchy” or “gender inequality” as the sole causes of violence, EPF adopts a **socio-ecological approach**. Zero-sum framings that position men as inherent perpetrators and women as perpetual victims risk alienating communities and undermining shared responsibility. Moreover, some empowerment narratives unintentionally devalue motherhood, caregiving and traditional feminine roles that hold deep respect in PNG society. Equality need not imply sameness, nor empowerment the abandonment of cultural identity.

In a country carrying deep trauma from violence, division should not be our default strategy. Men, women, boys and girls all want peaceful relationships. This is a shared vision.

The EPF curriculum is designed around several core principles. It is culturally rooted, reflecting PNG’s languages, traditions and communal learning practices through gender-specific and mixed dialogue spaces. It is youth-focused and experiential, using role-play, storytelling and group discussion to help students internalise respect and empathy as lived behaviours. It is responsive to modern challenges, with sessions addressing peer pressure, social media, consent and non-violent conflict resolution. And it is developmentally scaffolded, with age-appropriate sessions that support identity formation and healthy relationship norms.

A defining feature is its mixed-gender sessions, which foster shared understanding, while gender-specific *hausboi* and *hausgel* sessions provide safe spaces for deeper reflection. This mirrors **culturally grounded dialogue practices** from across the Pacific.

As PNG navigates ongoing change, young people need more than imported models — they need culturally resonant tools that honour identity while preparing them for modern life. EPF’s *Hausman na Hausmeri* story curriculum offers continuity rather than rupture, grounding education in lived experience and collective values.

By rejecting deficit-based and divisive frameworks, the curriculum demonstrates that gender education in PNG need not become a new form of cultural colonialism. Instead, it can be a space of renewal — where ancestral values, equality and peace exist in dialogue. The *Hausman na Hausmeri* story affirms that meaningful social transformation in PNG is strongest when it grows from within, carrying tradition forward into a hopeful future for the nation.

Disclosures:

Dr Mercy Masta supports Equal Playing Field in the development and delivery of the Hausman and Hausmeri Story Curriculum, which will be piloted in schools by 2026.

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Link: <https://devpolicy.org/reimagining-pngs-education-through-culture/>