Priyam Maharaj| PHD | ŌTĀKOU WHAKAIHU WAKA|UNIVERSITY OF OTAGO

Being Boys: Social Constructions of Boyhood in Fiji

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| * Fijian boys' lifeworlds and experiences provide insight into the cultural and gender landscape. * This research explores how boys construct and express their identities, examining the impact of social factors, institutions, and cultural conditions. * Programs can be implemented to enhance boys' emotional literacy, well-being, and mental health. This includes expanding their vocabulary for expressing emotions and empowering them to confidently embrace non-hegemonic masculinities. |

# Overview

Formulating an understanding of gender and its significance in society occurs initially in childhood (Paechter, 2007). Children draw on their social world to understand their role, position and gender appropriate behavior (Paechter, 2007; Reigeluth & Addis, 2016; Mac an Ghaill, 1994). This learning continues and evolves through to adolescence. Young people construct their identities through their understanding of accepted standards of masculinity, interactions with their peers, and their individual agency. Negotiation and renegotiation of gender norms are evident in their gender performances.

Boys are implicated in a multitude of social problems in Fiji. These include but are not limited to substance abuse and drug peddling, bullying, school drop outs, truancy, violence and suicide. Suicide statistics and trends for instance, indicate higher rates of suicides amongst men compared to women and suicide rates for males between 16-25 are higher than older groups (Korobiau, 2024).

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| According to data from Lifeline Fiji, 24 men and 4 women committed suicide between January to April 2024. Incidents of bullying in school are also on the rise with 8000 reported cases between 2021 and 2023. While gender segregated data on the issue are unavailable, there have been circulation of videos and media reports of violent bullying incidents in boys schools (Chanel, 2020; Necei, 2019).  The Substance Abuse Advisory Council, reported cases of drug use by school students have been steadily increasing. In 2021 there were 2200 recorded cases compared to 3500 in 2023 (Kumar, 2024). In regard to education school enrollment statistics from 2015 - 2017 show that more males than females were enrolled in primary school but the latter were more likely to complete secondary schooling (Fiji Bureau of Statistics, 2017). Tables 1 and 2 below display the gender comparison of secondary school completion rates and higher education enrollment rates in Fiji for 2022.  Table 1: High School Completion Rates 2022   |  |  | | --- | --- | | **Category** | **Completion Rate (%)** | | Female | 97 | | Male | 79 |  Table 2 : Higher Education Enrollment 2022  |  |  | | --- | --- | | **Gender** | **Enrollment Percentage (%)** | | Female | 60-65 | | Male | 35-40 |  Source: Adapted from Naikaso, F. (2023). *Huge number of boys dropping out of school*. FBC News.<https://www.fbcnews.com.fj/news/education/huge-number-of-boys-dropping-out-of-school/> While statistics highlight a number of social issues concerning boys, there has been little research to capture the challenges and intricacies of their lives and provide targeted solutions. Consequently boys are not specifically included in policy implementations and programs to address their issues. The Study This study adopted a child centered approach in order to prioritize children and young people’s perspectives through a combination of in-depth interviews, focus groups and observations. Participants included 3 teachers and 62 boys between the ages of 10 and 18 years from four schools. The research was conducted in Suva and Korovou on Fiji’s largest island of Viti Levu as highlighted in Figure 1.      **Figure 1 : Map of Viti Levu indicating the field work sites**  Source: Britannica, T. (2023), Editors of Encyclopaedia, *Viti Levu*. Encyclopedia Britannica. https://www.britannica.com/place/Viti-Levu  Indigenous Fijian and Fiji-Indian boys were the primary participants of this research. The following research questions were used to guide the research and explore boys' lives and experiences and how ideals of masculinity are learnt, developed, constructed and embodied:   1. What is it like growing up as a boy in Fiji? 2. What do participants think are some positive and negative aspects of being a boy? 3. What are the social factors that influence or impact boys' understanding of boyhood?   **Key Findings**  The findings from the study indicate that cultural, societal and religious influences have a strong effect on boys' behaviors, attitudes and an understanding of their gender roles and identities. These ideals often promote physical strength, emotional stoicism, and disassociation from femininity.  “Boys need to be strong. They need to run fast, to be good at rugby and farming. They shouldn't wear girls' clothes and makeup. They should marry a girl”  Indigenous Fijian participant, 10 years   |  | | --- | | The findings can be divided into three broad categories:   * The cultural conceptions, attitudes and expectations of masculinity on boys from society i.e how social institutions play a role in defining the boundaries, expectations and standards of appropriate male behavior. * Ways in which boys interpret, negotiate and enact the meaning of being male in their daily lives * Experience of non-heteronromative males |   Many boys' testimonies highlighted the significance of social relationships in their lives while also revealing the challenges they face in navigating and sustaining healthy friendships and peer relations. Boys often found it challenging to verbally communicate their emotions particularly because it wasn’t viewed as socially acceptable. Their primary ways of handling conflict included physical altercations or ending friendships.  “But boys, we don't like to voice our emotions or cry, because that's seen as feminine. And so we just bottle it up. But then comes a time where we can't hold it in anymore and it comes out.”  Indo-Fijian Participant, 16 years  Participants admitted facing disengagement from school owing to curriculum and teaching methods that did not promote creativity**.** This impacted school attendance and engagement as well as their assessment of their own abilities.  “So, boys, they're only truant because classes are boring, and they feel like the classroom is like a cage. So, engaging the teachers on how they can take these classes outside, where they feel comfortable, more interested in the class and stuff like that.  Indigenous Fijian Participant, 18 years  Many boys, facing underachievement in school, saw higher education as less viable, opting instead for aspirations in successful athletic careers or the military. The role models they identified were usually local rugby players, international athletes or celebrities who personified ideals of strength, aggression and success.  Patterns of behavior that subordinated, discriminated against or ostracized boys were identified in this study. Verbal and physical abuse are ways in which boys face subordination by peers. A thriving roasting culture is present in schools that employ racial and homophobic slurs amongst other personal insults in game or play framework. Often these behaviors transcend the boundary of joking or play and take the form of targeted harassment and bullying. Boys identifying as gay or those with discernible feminine traits are commonly subjects of bullying and harassment by peers and wider society.  “ If you are feminine you are treated like a parasite. We get so much hate. They swear at us, call us names, swear at our parents and sometimes they punch us”  Indigenous Fijian Participant, 16 years  **Recommendations**  The findings suggest that there are considerable opportunities for parents, schools, and development partners to collaborate with boys to promote emotional literacy, support non-heteronormative identities, and engage boys in discussions about gender, sexualities and various forms of masculinities.  Collaboration by CSO’s and development agencies with schools can address both verbal and physical bullying, promote healthy communication among boys, and create non-competitive spaces for them to learn new skills, bond, and build positive male relationships. Facilitating the teaching of communication skills like compromise, negotiation, and discussion can help boys navigate their relationships while equipping them with non-violent conflict management techniques. This training can be particularly valuable for their interactions with women and girls.  Conversations about boys' mental health can be fostered by providing safe environments where they can express concerns, gain confidence, and develop empathy. Implementing school-based mental health programs that focus on early intervention, stigma reduction, and access to resources for boys can improve overall well-being. Offering resources and workshops for parents on understanding boys’ emotional and behavioral development can strengthen support systems. There is also a need for teaching strategies that recognize diverse learning styles which can enhance engagement and academic success for boys, including hands-on activities and collaborative projects.  Boys can benefit by guidance from male role models who embody positive, healthy and attainable standards of masculinity. Establishing mentorship initiatives can help guide them through challenges and promote healthy identity formation. While all schools have anti-bullying policies, programs and training can be provided to educators to address and identify specific challenges boys face to create inclusive and safer school environments.  **Limitations and Further Research**  Working with children can provide opportunities to explore perspectives and experiences previously overlooked as children and adults interpret and experience the world in different ways. However, access to young people is typically mediated by adults. In this study, multiple layers of permission and approval were required before recruitment could occur, particularly for Indo-Fijian boys, where the process was more stringent. Additional research involving Fiji-Indian boys, as well as those from other ethnic groups and rural or outer island communities can enhance our understanding of how specific contexts shape their life experiences. |
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