

# Masculinity, Gender Identity, and Fiji's GLBT Community

by Luisa Tora  
*(with additional notes by Carlos Perera  
and Cresantia Frances Koya)*



*Couple Sangeeta Singh (r) and Luisa Tora (l) have been members of the Sexual Minorities Core group since its inception in 1998.*

**T**he bulk of this paper is based on the writers' personal views that have arisen from 10 years of working with marginalised and vulnerable groups, particularly the GLBT (gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgenders), MSM (men having sex with men), WSW (women having sex with women), and sex worker communities.

### **To be caught in mid-conversation: An introduction**

Carlos and I have volunteered with the AIDS Task Force of Fiji (ATFF) since its inception in 1994, and we started volunteering with the Sexual Minorities Project (SMP) when it was first established under the auspices of the non-government organisation Women's Action for Change in 1998. Carlos became the coordinator of SMP, soon to be called Equal Ground Pasifik, in 2002. I have served on the SMP Core Group since 1998, and I started working for the ATFF two years ago. SMP and ATFF currently share office space in downtown Suva, Fiji.

SMP is the only organisation in the Pacific region (excluding Australia and New Zealand) working in behalf, and defending the rights, of GLBT people. SMP's core work involves battling homophobia, advocating the rights of GLBT people, providing support for this community, and upgrading the skills of GLBT people, and enhancing their self-esteem. The ATFF also works with vulnerable groups including sex workers, MSMs, street children, and people living with HIV/AIDS (PLHA).

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Our stories are very different. It is our combined internal and external debate regarding our identities as sexual minorities and our principles as radical feminists that has prompted this dialogue. This and our work as reproductive health and sexual rights activists in the Pacific region. I "came out" 15 years ago but only started identifying as lesbian in the past nine years. Carlos, on the other hand, has identified as a transgender woman but has in recent years felt more "confused" about his/her identity.

While this dialogue may sound simplistic upon first reading, it must be understood that the bulk of the work done by the SMP and much of our contribution have been a result of learning on the job. In a region riddled with patriarchal structures that assume that you must be heterosexual, that you must "marry and reproduce," this is no easy task.

Despite this, SMP has managed to successfully lobby for the decriminalisation of sodomy (previously used by lawmakers to discriminate against gay men in Fiji), to protect the "sexual orientation" clause in Fiji's Bill of Rights; to "out" the homophobic face of Fiji at international fora; and to politicise a community previously unaware of its rights under the Constitution and various international conventions.

It is likely an occupational hazard for people working toward attaining social justice that sometimes attention to personal detail becomes the casualty in the battle for political and legislative gain. It is on the eve of SMP becoming an independent and registered NGO, that Carlos and I have finally had time to discuss how far we have

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come—and how the discourse within the GLBT community has not progressed much as far as identity politics are concerned.

We believe that this lack of progress is because of the negative impact of Fiji's masculine culture on gender identity amongst sexual minorities. This idea is discussed by Nicole George's paper "Contending Masculinities and the Limits of Tolerance: Sexual Minorities in Fiji." However, our dialogue discusses this theory from the personal viewpoint of a lesbian and a sometime transgender MTF (male-to-female) woman currently living with the confusion discussed in this paper. We have used the phrase "The personal is political" on several occasions and within various contexts but never has it taken on such a complex interpretation and required us to unpack and re-examine how we see ourselves and how other members of our GLBT community perceive themselves and why they relate to us the way that they do.

### **A brief his/herstory of the "sexual orientation" debate in Fiji**

In 1997, when Fiji included "sexual orientation" in its Bill of Rights, it joined a small group of countries (including South Africa and Switzerland) that recognise the rights of sexual minority citizens to protection from discrimination. The inclusion of this clause was immediately opposed by fundamentalist Christian groups that, led by a government backbencher and lay preacher, used the country's first Constitution Day to march against

same-sex marriages, despite the fact that Fiji's Constitution does not make provisions for same-sex marriage. Later, the Marriage Act was amended to read as "union of one woman and one man to the exclusion of all others" (Strubbe and Tora, 2002).

The SMP, which was established in response to the unfair dismissal of a lesbian woman who was fired after a colleague "outed" her at the theological college where she worked, was immediately thrown into its first gay rights lobby that has lasted almost 10 years. While the right-wing argument does not change much, the faces that spout homophobic statements have reflected a spectrum of political parties and its leaders, high-placed members of the civil service (including magistrates, a director of Public Prosecutions, a police commissioner, various prime ministers and attorney-generals), and faith-based organisations and their leaders.

Earlier this year, a magistrate charging an Australian man and his local partner with having sex and taking nude pictures of each other is on record on print media calling the men's acts "something so disgusting that it would make any decent person vomit." The magistrate was forced to release them from their two-year sentence because he had failed to allow them legal representation, and also due to pressure from national and international civil rights groups. This landmark case eventually led to a clarification being sought in the High Court, and resulted in the repealing of the archaic clauses in the Penal Code historically used to discriminate against Fiji's gay men. There are no such laws against lesbians.

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In the surge of anti-gay rhetoric that followed this judgement, members of the Methodist Church of Fiji soared to new homophobic heights. Its president claimed that homosexuals should be “put to death and destroyed.” Another member of the church made front page headlines saying that homosexuality in Fiji would cause God to unleash natural disasters and poverty upon the country. Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase lent his support to the fundamentalist Christian diatribe and was soon joined by heads of the Muslim community.

During the anti-same-sex marriage march that followed, an e-mail originating from the Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP) made it into the hands of the public and was eventually reported in the media. The e-mail called on fellow Christians to garner support against gay people in Fiji by supporting anti-same sex marriage marches in various national centres. The DPP claimed that the e-mail was from personal correspondence (although it was sent out on his official e-mail address) and that it would not unduly influence the work conducted by his office, as reported in Fiji One News. Two more applications to hold marches were denied after the Fiji Human Rights Commission warned that marchers would be in breach of hate speech laws, following complaints filed by the SMP with the Commission.

### **How macho is Fijian culture?**

As George discusses in her paper, the “majority of indigenous Fijians privilege the Church or *lotu*, alongside

the *vannua* or land (traditional Fijian community) and the state or *matanitu* as the three intersecting institutions which regulate the lives of Fiji’s peoples.”

In May 2000, several members of parliament were taken hostage at the Parliament House by self-proclaimed indigenous Fijian nationalists. In the following days, several traditional leaders and members of various Fijian provinces walked through the gates of the Parliament grounds to proclaim support for this illegal takeover. Some of them were also sworn in as “ministers” in the putsch leader George Speight’s “government.” Soon after the announcement of the takeover, hundreds of people struck Suva, looting the city’s businesses, and burning down several buildings.

As normality returned to Suva, and to Fiji as a whole, various supporters of the nationalist cause claimed that traditional leaders who openly supported the hostage-taking and the Speight government were merely fulfilling their traditional roles as indigenous Fijians. Therefore, they argued, they should not be taken to task under civilian law, and if they were taken to task, that they should be treated leniently.

In June 2001, Fiji Red Cross Society Director-General John Scott and his long-time partner, Gregory Scrivener, were murdered in their Tamavua home. It was first rumoured that their murders were related to Scott’s involvement during the humanitarian response for the hostages during the 2000 crisis. It was thought that he would turn state witness in the trial of the putsch perpetrators. However, soon after, police attention, led by



**Talanoa**  
Fijian word for  
conversation

then Commissioner Isikia Savua, turned to a more sinister slant focussing on Scott and Scrivener’s so-called predatory lifestyle.

As quoted by George, Savua stated:

People are focusing on the good side of Mr. Scott and his partner, Greg. But people tend to forget that he’s a practicing homosexual.... I don’t profess to understand everything about homosexuality; it’s just that they tend to be more vicious than the normal heterosexual relationship (cited in Strubbe and Tora 2002).

George argued:

It seems remarkable that the violent form of masculine behaviour evident during this period was rarely referred to in terms which focused upon the malevolent nature of the threat it posed to national or civilian security. The absence of this debate contrasts significantly with the manner in which homosexual forms of masculine behaviour have been described by

Fijian conservatives within the public domain. For as we have seen on this subject, Fijian conservatives do not hesitate to describe the threats of a political variety posed to Fijian institutions should homosexuality be condoned.

### How does this affect the gay and lesbian identity *talanoa*?

“...when you’re born and you know that you’re gay from childhood, the stereotype that comes with it is that you have to be feminine, and if you don’t fit in, you have to fit in somehow, so my growing up was really traumatic. But upon working with the Sexual Minorities Project (SMP), I found myself. But again the stereotypes just kept hitting me all the time and still I’m confused now because, one, you try to be yourself and be feminine and other stuff but working with government and working with NGOs, they force the stereotype back on you and it’s harder.”

~ Carlos, Personal Communication<sup>2</sup>

“...as soon as you come out, people assume that if you identify as lesbian, you must therefore want to be a man. And if you were to, in fact, move quite freely within the spectrum and wear combat boots, jeans, and an oversized shirt to work today, and come to work tomorrow with heels, a black skirt, and a top, you would get for the rest of the day comments like ‘You want to be a woman?’ or ‘Oh, you’re a

...if you were to...move quite freely within the spectrum and wear combat boots, jeans, and an oversized shirt to work today, and come to work tomorrow with heels, a black shirt, and a top, you would get for the rest of the day comments like.... ‘Oh, you’re a woman today?’”

woman today?’ when, in fact, you were a woman yesterday and the day before and tomorrow as well.”

~ Luisa, Personal Communication

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–*Carlos Perera*

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### How does this affect the feminist-sexual minorities’ *talanoa*?

“In 2005, I was admitted to a regional Pacific workshop on feminist advocacy. Sharing this information with a transgender sister of mine, I suggested that she apply to attend the workshop as well. The friend wasn’t sure how this request might be received, so I called one of the local workshop organisers with the request. She was certainly taken aback and her invitation for my transgender sister to apply to attend the workshop was definitely a wary one. She possibly thought that we were joking.

We realised that they weren’t ready for this level of discourse and didn’t push the idea. Although it would have been interesting to gauge the response

of young feminists from the Pacific region to a transgender woman representative. Perhaps my transgender sister can apply to attend the next workshop.”

~ Luisa, Personal Communication

“In 2004, I attended a women’s human rights defenders caucus, and I was the only biological male present. I was interrogated as to why I was there and told at great length why the caucus was so important. No one else present went through this lecture. As a feminist, I was rather disturbed and taken aback by this. Some of them couldn’t see the linkage of how I as a man thought that these issues were important. I stayed anyway and gave my two cents worth. Also that they quickly thought that I worked with the Fiji Women’s Crisis Centre (radical women’s non-government organisation).”

~ Carlos, Personal Communication

*Carlos “Carla” Perera, coordinator of the Sexual Minorities Project, at the Glitter and Glamour fundraiser show in 2005.*



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### How does this affect the bisexual *talanoa*?

"I asked a female bisexual friend why she hadn't visited the Sexual Minorities Project (SMP) office, and she said that she thought that SMP was not very welcoming to bisexual people."

~ Luisa, Personal Communication

"One of the things that we tend to forget is that they are as confused as we are because of how society has portrayed sexuality and gender, and how the patriarchal stuff kicks into play. The bisexuals have no place in society. They can identify as either male or female, but in itself it causes them, like me, more confusion. My personal view is that they don't have to choose a role but there's no place for them. Like the gay, lesbian, and transgender now, they know there's a place where they exist. But for the bisexual community, there's this whole silent gap."

~ Carlos, Personal Communication

### How does this have a negative impact on the reproductive health and sexual rights response?

"A good example is a transgendered person—because she identifies as a woman and will not accept that she has a penis and will not discuss it openly with her (sexual) partner. But if the partner wants to give the transgender person a blowjob and won't say it, this affects their negotiating skills because, one, the partner will be (embarrassed)

to say it, and the transgender is not thinking about the safety component because she is thinking about how her partner assumes her to be. The only thing that's going through her head is, 'How will he want me to act as a woman?'"

~ Carlos, Personal Communication

"There isn't very much gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender-focused counselling in Fiji; we still live in a heterocentric world, don't we? Thankfully there is a new group of registered psychiatrists that is banding together and perhaps we could sit down with it and go, 'This is a gap that we've identified, that we think we should work together on.'"

~ Luisa, Personal Communication

"In 2005, I broached the subject of WSWs with a (heterosexual) clinic nurse. As the MSM subject had been broached on several occasions, I suggested that the nurse consider this group of marginalised people. I was rather surprised when she told me that she didn't feel that they were important enough to discuss. I suggested that the nurse should reconsider this thinking as WSWs are being left out of mainstream reproductive health and sexual health discourse. She was so against the idea of WSWs that she said she would not treat them 'in her clinic.'"

~ Luisa, Personal Communication

"Seventy-one percent of men who participated in the MSM research reported having sex with 'straight men' (AIDS Task Force



*Challenging mainstream education: Cresantia Frances Koya is an assistant lecturer in Multicultural Education at the University of the South Pacific.*

of Fiji, 2004). And when the AIDS Task Force of Fiji did its research, people didn't acknowledge it then. But it's funny when you're sitting at meetings now, and the government is saying, 'MSM, there's plenty out there!' It's funny seeing them embracing it now."<sup>2</sup>

~ Carlos, Personal Communication

While the last case study implies the beginning of a positive relationship between Fiji's Ministry of Health and those NGOs working with the MSM and WSW community, a closer look at the Ministry of Education reveals that homophobia is alive and well within its corridors and curriculum.

### Education

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basis) is manifest in both the articulated and hidden curriculum in Fiji.

Koya-Vaka'uta highlights the under-representation of sexuality in curriculum, and discusses the

disparaging representation of homosexuality in the *Family Life Manual*. In this text, homosexuality is categorised with "Rape and Prostitution" under the theme of "Abnormal Behaviour," and there is one lesson devoted to the topic:

The objectives of this lesson on homosexuality include: *'to help students understand that homosexual behavior is abnormal and can be avoided; [and] to realise that homosexuality is sinful, immoral, and unhealthy.'*

Supportive Teaching notes provided include the lists below. Interestingly, the list for effeminate boys is considerably longer than that of girls who are considered 'tomboys' and so at risk of developing homosexual tendencies (Koya-Vaka'uta, 2004).

A number of relevant gender-identity issues are highlighted in Koya-Vaka'uta's discussion. These are:

1. The values and attitudes that underpin the current curriculum are gender stereotypical and outdated. Traditional conservative perceptions of women and girls are still found in texts and in identifying subject choices for students based on their gender.
2. The differentiated curriculum is apparent even at tertiary institutions. For example, the Fiji Institute of Technology, under direction from its current head, had imposed a very specific dress code for its students. Girls are expected to wear long skirts or traditional dress and not trousers or shorts.
3. There is continued debate on the appropriateness of the inclusion



of sex education from Classes 6 and 7 to senior secondary level. Moreover, many educators choose not to discuss sexuality as it is seen as contradictory to predominant cultural and religious beliefs and attitudes. These attitudes and beliefs continue to influence educational decisions, and it will be some time before a more inclusive curriculum is developed in Fiji.

It is hoped that some positive change will come through education reform. Such inclusive goals that we aspire for are found in the “Suva Declaration,” which was tabled at 2004’s first-ever “Education Summit” in Fiji. Entitled “Building a Strategic Direction for Education in Fiji 2006–2015,” the

If the shift in education is toward a rights-based education, then the idea of a gender-inclusive curriculum becomes an important part of this conversation. In view of this, it is hoped that the relevant stakeholders are consulted in the curriculum development process to ensure a holistic and truly inclusive education that does not continue to propagate the filters of the past.

## Conclusion

This paper concludes that this dialogue surrounding gender identity is an ongoing one. As active participants in Fiji’s sexual minority discourse for the past eight years, we have only been able to find time to eke out this paper. However, having said that, it is important to acknowledge that while we are not fully equipped to conclude the conversation, we are at least ready to begin tackling it.

The gender identity discussion amongst Fiji’s sexual minorities is not as clear-cut as many people would have us believe. While sexuality and gender identity make up the bulk of this discussion, it does not preclude the social, cultural, and economic concerns that affect how members of the GLBT and heterosexual community see themselves and interact with others.

Therefore, not only is the conversation important, it also requires a broad range of partners to participate in the dialogue. Just as reproductive health and sexual rights are not merely part of the health discussion, so, too, the gender identity exchange must include educators, reproductive health practitioners, social and cultural gatekeepers, and, most importantly,

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...the gender identity exchange must include educators, reproductive health practitioners, social and cultural gatekeepers, and, most importantly, must involve the GLBT community.

plan’s vision is: “Educating the child holistically for a peaceful and prosperous Fiji.” Recommendation 5.1.3 reads, “The education process at all levels aligns itself with the rights-based perspective of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which the Government of Fiji ratified in 1993. This is to be supported by an educational program on human rights at the primary and secondary levels” (Ministry of Education: 2005: 40).

the GLBT community. The key to building a healthy community (in mind, spirit, and body), therefore, is engaging in the gender-identity dialogue through a wide and inclusive community-based discussion. This means bringing the discussion to those who are most greatly affected, and giving voice to their stories.

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**Luisa Tora** works with the AIDS Task Force of Fiji as coordinator of the fledgling Pacific Council of AIDS Service Organisations. She serves on the Sexual Minorities Project (SMP) Management Collective, and is involved with the Fiji Women's Rights Movement. She and her partner of nine years, Sangeeta Singh, intend to marry this year.

**Carlos Perera** is the coordinator of Fiji's only lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) project, the Sexual Minorities Project (SMP), soon to be Equal Ground Pasifik. SMP is the only LGBT-registered human rights project in the South Pacific (excluding Australia and New Zealand), and has just won the 6th RRRT Human Rights Awards.

**Cresantia Frances Koya** is an assistant lecturer at the University of the South Pacific. Her specific areas of interest include: Multiculturalism in Education, Social Justice in Education, and Ethnicity and Identity. Also a painter and a published poet, Koya has twin daughters with Tongan artist Lingikoni Vaka'uta.

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*Fiji Times*  
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#### Endnotes

1 Carlos Perera and Luisa Tora: Recorded conversations, March 2006.

2 A World Health Organisation (WHO) Statistics Projections meeting in 2006 revealed that while future infection statistics were likely to arise from the men having sex with men (MSM) community, government agencies lacked statistics on MSMs.