



SHIMMERING

LIGHTS IN SHADOWS

QUEER ACTIVISTS IN
NON-QUEER SPACES



~ FIJI REPORT ~

Project by



Supported by



FIJI'S QUEER ACTIVISTS IN SEARCH OF TRUE ALLIES

JASBANT KAUR

Published by INNOVATION FOR CHANGE – EAST ASIA



2025

Acknowledgement

This project is a product of Innovation for Change – East Asia's collaboration with the I4C-EA community through the years. The I4C-EA team acknowledges the community's contributions and commitment to build a more democratic and inclusive civil society that recognises, protects, and promotes the rights of all, especially the marginalised, minoritised, silenced, and disenfranchised. The team extends its gratitude to the LGBTQIAN+ communities in Southeast Asia and the Pacific that have bravely come together to share their stories and experiences with the hope that these inspire conversations, action, and truly meaningful collaboration. The support of the I4C-EA governance, Hub team, network partners, and donors is, likewise, greatly appreciated.

Disclaimer

This publication has been funded by the Australian Government through the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. The views expressed in this publication are the author's alone and are not necessarily the views of the Australian Government.

Rights and Permissions

This work is available under the Creative Commons Attribution – ShareAlike 4.0 International license (CC BY-SA 4.0). By using the content of this publication, you agree to be bound by the terms of this license. This CC license does not apply to non-Innovation for Change – East Asia copyright materials in this publication. If the material is attributed to another source, please contact the copyright owner or publisher of that source for permission to reproduce it. Innovation for Change – East Asia cannot be held liable for any claims that arise as a result of your use of the material.



FIJI'S QUEER ACTIVISTS IN SEARCH OF TRUE ALLIES

Jasbant Kaur

Edited by Innovation for Change – East Asia

Introduction

○ Country Contexts

Fiji Islands in the South Pacific has been the hub for Pacific trade for many decades. Fijians take pride in its multicultural society made up of Indigenous Fijians (also known as I-Taukei), Indo-Fijians (Fijians of South Asian descent), and Chinese people, among other ethnic minorities. Fiji gained independence in 1970, but it is known for its coup culture that characterises its young, unsettled democracy. It is a country mired in a deep racial divide, especially around the election period, with the two main ethnicities, I-Taukei and Indo-Fijian, contending for political gain. The view that I-Taukei holds dominance with Indigenous Fijian interests continues to disrupt democracy and, by extension, Fijian societies ([Kant, 2017](#)). This political instability plays an important role in how civil society organisations (CSOs) situate themselves and operate within this distinctive Fijian socio-political context.

Fiji is one of the first countries in the Pacific to grant protection against discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, gender, gender identities and expressions (SOGIESC) through the 2013 constitution ([Calabrò et al., 2022](#)). Further protection is provided by the [Employment Relations Act 2007](#), which protects Fijians from discrimination in employment, and the [Crimes Act 2009](#), which decriminalised homosexuality.

Despite the legal protections in place, discriminatory, oppressive, and violent acts have been inflicted on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, and more (LGBTQIA+)

communities in Fiji. While hate crimes seldom make national news headlines, some cases of assault and those that have claimed the lives of LGBTQIA+ people have been reported ([Movono, 2017](#)). Gay bashing and publicly outing queer people are common in social media posts. This type of behaviour became more rampant after Former Prime Minister Commodore Frank Bainimarama publicly told gay couples to move to Iceland and after referring to marriage equality as rubbish ([D'Angelo, 2016](#)). It has been reported that queer people were beaten up by family members to “make them straight”. This is commonly referred to as ‘Pacific Conversion Therapy’, in other words, the Pacific method to “make gay people straight” ([Maykin et al., 2022](#)).

○ Methodology

Timote Vaoleti warned about the dangers posed in assuming that Western and Pacific knowledge originate from the same place; which then necessitates techniques in collecting and analysing data to generate new knowledge ([Vaoleti, 2016](#)). It was, therefore, essential to find a method that was best suited for Fiji. Some key aspects often missed by foreign research methodology are loyalty in kinship, the influence of religion and culture on individuals and groups of people, and the deep cultural concepts surrounding the Pacific people.

The Fijian way of living is one that is strongly intertwined with cultural obligations. One’s culture takes priority in everything one does. Manasa says, *“One of the things we can talk about moving forward is how culture influences our identity. In the Pacific, culture comes first; then the identity.”* Most people in the Pacific have a communal living structure rather than a nuclear family-oriented one, and they often participate in many communal activities. Paying attention to these nuances, a Talanoa Framework was adopted to conduct this inquiry into LGBTQIA+ peoples’ experiences engaging in civil society work in Fiji. This method is unique in its approach because Fijians, like many Pacific islanders, love to tell stories about their issues, their lived realities, and their aspirations, which to them comprise authentic information.

Purposive sampling was used to identify the project participants, with particular attention given to selecting based on gender identities, sexual orientation, and the criterion of working in civil society, but not in LGBTQIA-focused work. Given these parameters, the Report Writer needed to exercise judgment to select available and willing participants. Some of the parameters for selection were age-based, where younger and middle-aged participants were targeted. It was also a conscious decision to include people living with disability (PWD), especially the deaf. Some participants were selected primarily because they had a full-time paid position in CSOs, while others were included as volunteers who rarely received remuneration. Some people were also targeted based on the information that their current engagement within CSOs is their first employment experience. To have a diverse group representation, 12 participants were hand-picked from an initial list of 21 identified potential contributors.

○ Overview of the Report's Participants

The 12 Fijian contributors' ages range from 23 to late 40s. Nine were interviewed by the Report Writer — three in person, five online, and one through an email exchange — while three agreed to participate in a focus group discussion (FGD). All 12 contributors are either working or volunteering in CSOs focused on women's rights, climate change, democracy-related issues, economic empowerment of marginalised communities, and social justice issues around disabilities and sex work, or within networks operating in rural settings. One works for a donor agency, and another for an international CSO. Of the 12, seven are I-Taukei persons, three are Indo-Fijian Hindu, and two are bi-racial. Within the gender identity spectrum, three identify as non-binary, one as a trans man, one as a trans woman, while the rest are cisgender persons. In terms of sexual orientation, two are gay women, three are gay men, and two identify as pansexual.

Fiji has a relatively small CSO sector, so safeguarding the participants is essential. All 12 were duly informed about the study and the intended project outputs where their input and reflections will be featured. All 12 gave their consent to be interviewed electronically and verbally. Some participants initially consented to be photographed and to have their real names revealed. However, the Report Writer suggested to exercise caution and use pseudonyms when referring to them in this report in the interest of further securing their identities, and they agreed.

Framing the Narrative

Suva is home to most CSOs and regional and international civil society networks. Since there are only two officially registered LGBTQIA+ organisations in Fiji, queer activists of this report have opted to join non-LGBTQIA+ CSOs to drive change. Apart from these CSOs' primary thematic advocacies, incorporating an intersectional approach enables them to include multisectoral and diverse lenses into their programme work.

The Pacific Sexual & Gender Diversity Network (PSGDN) is a regional LGBTQIA+ organisation that operates in Suva. The two registered, well-known national LGBTQIA+ organisations are [Rainbow Pride Foundation](#), located on the outskirts of Suva city, and [Diverse Voices and Action for Equality](#) (DIVA for Equality) in the western part of Viti Levu in Nadi.

While there are many CSOs that cover LGBTQIA-related issues within their mandates, only Rainbow Pride Foundation and DIVA for Equality are fully funded organisations. This means that other networks rely on fiscal partnerships with different NGOs and manage the work through the commitment of volunteers. These organisations do not have core funding and are not able to offer financial remuneration to people who put in long hours into projects. As a result, many of these community-based organisations become dormant over time. Nevertheless, it is important to highlight that some of these CSOs are queer-led.

Motivations for Joining CSOs

The participants had different motivations for joining non-queer CSOs, but the most mentioned reason was choice. Being a part of civil society was a conscious choice for many queer activists due to their innate sense of wanting to give back and build communities. In the past decade, young people have played a pivotal role in active citizenry paired with decolonisation efforts. Amy, a young woman, joined an elite organisation because she felt secure being part of a CSO that has been in operation for years. With the job market still recovering from the economic slump brought on by COVID-19, younger activists tend to seek job opportunities that offer financial stability or to be employed in an organisation with an established reputation. As LGBTQIA+ organisations started establishing themselves more recently compared to others, there may be a sense of financial insecurity associated with infant CSOs.

Some participants cited that being part of civil society felt empowering for them and that it could pave the way for them to also empower other queer people. According to Max, *“I amplify the voices of queer people where I am. I wanted to amplify my own queer experiences and to help others amplify their queer voices, narratives, and stories. Even if they are outside of the comfort zone of the public.”*

This is also true for Zane who works in disability rights and feels well supported enough by his organisation to be able to support queer disabled persons: *“The association inspires me to educate myself and be an advocate on SOGIESC issues within disability – as a proud deaf person and a voice within minority groups, I’m very thankful with the support provided by the association to strive for excellence.”* Communicating through sign language is not commonly practised in Fiji and there are not enough sign language interpreters who could help. This poses another tough challenge for queer activists who also identify as deaf given the limited employment opportunities. But Zane added that, *“I’m choosing this field of work because it touches so many lives of LGBTQIA+ people who face struggles in life, and I want to make sure that they are included.”*

The feminist movement that has existed for over 30 years is seen as a pillar of strength within the CSO sector and an environment where a sense of sisterhood exists. Tamara added, *“The thing about active mentorship within the feminist network is that you've got people who look out for you. They're conscious about each other's struggles.”* Tamara volunteers her time for any organisation that needs assistance. *“As an adult woman, my passion lies in women's and girls' rights with the proper development of national structures and policies that cater to the livelihoods of girls and women. And if that can translate to the lives of women and girls in minority groups, specifically LGBTQI groups, then even better.”*

People felt that they were able to find their voice by being part of civil society. For Amy, *“I feel like joining the women's movement is very much queer-adjacent.”* Roselyn says, *“As a trans woman, it made me brave, which is something I wasn't growing up. It brought me out of my comfort zone.”*

Volunteering for civil society was especially important for Roselyn because she did not have the opportunity to complete her high school education. While volunteering, she was able to learn how to write proposals and reports, as well as get involved with project management work. Sailosi adds, *“Being in [this organisation] has helped me grow my confidence; how to speak, how to approach things, and it has given me that level of confidence that I needed to improve myself and given me space to be myself.”* For Sailosi who started as a volunteer until eventually landing his first permanent job within the same organisation, the supportive environment is comforting.

There are several people like Tamara who identify as LGBTQIA+ and work within CSO spaces, and additionally volunteer their time towards social justice causes in other CSOs. These queer activists have secure jobs and well-established careers, and they still volunteer their time and skills because they believe in making the world a better place.



○ Self-Censorship and the Need to Stay Away from the Heat

One of the reasons some of them stay away from LGBTQIA- or equality-related advocacy work is to prevent unwanted exposure, especially for those who are not yet out about their sexuality. Some felt strongly about maintaining family honour. Manasa recounts this instance, *“When I heard about*

Rainbow Pride and another queer movement, a part of myself wanted to join. But then my conservative side said, 'No. Step back. Don't do anything. You may end up hurting your family.'"

But even when they are not in LGBTQIA+ organisations, they still have to be vigilant. This was more difficult for people who were not out about their sexuality or were dealing with [internalised homophobia](#). Whilst some people found empowerment in CSOs, others were disempowered and had anxiety over being assumed to be part of the LGBTQIA+ community.

As many CSOs use social media to promote their work, the employees were also conscious of how their pictures would end up on these platforms. Amy says, *"I come from a conservative family that keeps track of every single thing I do. If my picture shows up online, they will find out where I'm going or what I'm doing."* Similarly, Rani, who is closeted, says, *"Sometimes, I am so fearful about people finding out I am queer that I get anxious when I have to stand with other queer people in group photos. I worry people will know I am one."*

Sometimes, queer people are outed in public spaces by colleagues who are aware of their sexual orientation. Chat Fiji on Facebook is an online platform that has been widely misused to out and malign LGBTQIA+ people, with posts that feature racist, homophobic, and stereotypical content. *"If that ever happens [being outed],"* Rani says, *"then, for sure I will resign. I know people will be nice to me in front of my face, but they may make fun of me behind my back, like what they do to others around me."* She adds, *"even members of LGBT community make fun of each other."* Having witnessed such treatment of queer people by her colleagues reinforces Rani's belief that her organisation may not be safe for her to be out, despite the fact that there are other queer people there.

Even for someone who is not completely in the closet, there is still a lot of navigation to do. Tony says, *"Being part of a regional organisation that deals with governments from the region means that I have to navigate the political landscape. It's not that I hide who I am, but I don't make it obvious either. As such, I self-censor who I am more than others censor me."*

When Tony shares about having to navigate in the workplace and choosing not to openly discuss his sexual orientation, he also reflected that this may be his way of wanting to protect his own reputation as well as that of the organisation's. The burden of always being mindful of his personal and organisational safety seems to be a conscious effort to maintain job security. This strategic decision is necessary, at least in Tony's estimation, since the Pacific Island governments are not LGBTQIA+ allies and government officials working closely with the CSO are often elderly men influenced by Fijian culture and customs of patriarchy.



Being part of a regional organisation that deals with governments from the region means that I have to navigate the political landscape.

IT'S NOT THAT I HIDE WHO I AM, BUT I DON'T MAKE IT OBVIOUS EITHER.

As such, I self-censor who I am more than others censor me.

TONY



Queer Contributions in Civil Society

Despite some challenges posed by prevalent discriminatory practices in the workplace, queer activists still commit their time, skills, and passion to various social justice issues. They choose to contribute what they can because they know they make a difference.

CSOs with gender diverse staff contribute to the aim of mainstreaming diversity goals both within the organisation and externally through the application of the intersectional gender lens to programmatic work with partners. But queer activists also believe that they offer more than just their queer identities. Manasa says, *“I think my gender identity allows me to explore ideas that others don't really look into.”* Tamara added, *“I'm happy to say that I was the only queer-representing person from the Pacific on the team at that time, so they relied on my perspectives for a lot of discussions around grants in the Pacific.”*

Sometimes, these unique skills and experiences of queer activists have opened employment or consultancy opportunities within CSOs that value these assets as advantageous to the work and the communities served. Tamara said, *“Even after I resigned, I was still contracted to do the LGBTQ queer networking events to mobilise queer communities and networks [for the organisation].”* Their lived realities and personal experiences enable queer activists to make a meaningful impact on programmes that, perhaps eventually, may be further explored to ensure gender equality and social inclusion are reflected in policies and practices.

Max says, *“I think one of the ways that I've been contributing is continuously reminding and educating colleagues about what the queer experience is like, and how best to communicate LGBT issues. What are the proper Indigenous terms, what are the proper non-Indigenous terms, things like that.”* On a macro level, Sailosi feels he is fulfilling his employer's goals towards building a vibrant and harmonious nation of happy, healthy, and free people by bringing gender sensitivity to the traditional human rights approach. Since Sailosi's organisation works in the rural parts of Fiji, he ensures there is a gender lens in collecting and analysing data. Asking the right questions is critical and ensuring that the perspectives and voices of the LGBTQIA+ individuals are included and reflected is a step in improving data collection. For example, when a community reports zero people who identify as LGBTQIA+, Sailosi asks if the subject was broached using the gender-sensitive lens or if it was an assumption based on visible characteristics or gender expressions.

Similarly, another participant recalled travelling to the rural community where one of his senior colleagues told that community what to do and believe in. While he didn't address this on the spot, he was later able to discuss with them that the organization's approach was immature — urban people were more privileged and sometimes approached rural people with preconceived ideas of

how they should change. This illustrates the ability of queer people to see beyond the heteronormative normalisation and ensure meaningful engagement by CSOs in other communities.

Not All Rainbows and Sunshine in Civil Society

The development agenda is mostly donor-driven, and funding is highly competitive. Many aid agencies require CSOs to be registered entities in order to access these funding opportunities. Previously, LGBTQIA+ organisations had difficulty registering under the Fiji First government, which is why only two such organisations have officially registered and have its work fully funded. Community-based organisations have no other recourse but to reroute funds through fiscal partnerships, which sometimes prove challenging to navigate due to the power dynamics.

With most of the CSOs being in Suva, people outside the city centre must compete for limited jobs within a few CSOs operating in the outskirts. Max recalls, *“Well, the job market was very slim when I came in. It happened to be the only other organisation that worked around women’s rights in the town that I lived in.”* Tamara shares, *“There are so many different organisations competing for the same pool of limited funds. Due to that, some animosity creeps in and further divides us owing to competing organisational goals and priorities.”* Roselyn, who volunteers with LGBTQIA+ organisations but has a more involved role with another NGO, noted that some LGBTQIA+ organisations were not involved in advocacy for other intersecting identities that queer people have.

The experience working in civil society also reflects competition — not just for funds or on the urgency of sectoral or thematic advocacies — but also between those engaged in the work. Regularly employed and paid staff are pitted against unremunerated volunteers, for example. Roselyn reflects, *“We felt that there were biases within the hierarchies in the LGBTIQ organisation,”* and while these have been noticed in CSOs, in general, through the years, it has likewise been felt within LGBTQIA+ groups. Nepotism, favouritism, or expressions of preference for or discrimination against a person based on a non-job-related characteristic has been known to fast-track some people’s careers while impeding others.

“I feel there are certain organisations that are always gatekeeping access to other queer people,” says a participant. Cronyism, or the conscious choice to favour your colleagues and friends for certain positions, is a key determining factor present within these organisations. Gatekeeping, both in queer spaces as well as in broader civil society, is common. Another participant said, *“I could feel the hostility from older feminists, but I could never understand why. I feel like I’m bridging that gap as I’m getting older, communicating with these older women a lot more freely. In some way, I have earned my stripes by sitting at these tables.”* Meanwhile, another participant felt that feminist collaboration and solidarity is not what it used to be. She recalls how in the past mobilising was so easy and they did not need to deal with red tape.

While working for CSOs was a gratifying experience for everyone who participated in this study, there was also a shared experience about work fatigue and burnout. Amy said, *“Sometimes I feel like I’m burned out because of the work that my NGO does. It’s very revolutionary and I like being there, but sometimes, the work also gets to me.”* Manasa added, *“Your energy just gets depleted, event after event, and it gets to a point where you’re smiling, but you don’t feel anything inside.”*

○ Policies without Implementation

“We do have gender policy at work, but I guess nobody follows it and nobody even bothers to read the policy” – Rani

It is not all grim. When Prem entered a new organization, he brought in some old assumptions: *“I had this assumption that because the organisation I joined is faith-based, it would not be pro-LGBT. Then I learned that it actually has a gender policy specifically for LGBT employees. It feels very affirming.”*



With gender policies in place in Fiji and in most CSOs, one would think that the workplace should be an enabling environment for queer people to freely and safely express themselves. However, this is not the case for many queer activists. Participants shared experiences of constant negotiation with their colleagues in the workplace. As Rani mentioned previously, her colleagues sometimes make fun of queer people when they are not in the room. While Sailosi finds comfort

and safety within the organisation now, he recalls instances in the beginning of being bullied, called names due to his queer identity, and being a victim of sexual harassment while travelling for work.

Clearly, the reality on the ground is that policies may be in place, but they are not reflected in what the organisation does and not evident in the established work culture. Max said, *“There's an expectation that when you're in the feminist movement, you understand feminist principles, but I always find them missing from spaces like this [CSO].”*

For example, Max is concerned about the emergence of [Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminists](#) (TERF) in Fiji, people who are promoting the rights of “biological women” while excluding transgender people. Max says, *“I think there is a lot of TERF within the movement. We need queer training for feminists within the movement, particularly for those in leadership and management positions, so they can understand queer people.”* For Max, it is important to incorporate a gender lens into organisations’ programme work and ensure gender sensitivity training in the workplace.

But one participant highlighted that change in management affected the gender programme within the organisation they work in. The previous management was heavily invested in integrating LGBTQIA+ people into the gender programmes; however, with changed leadership, the emphasis faded too.

Even with internal gender policies in place and gender training as one of the core programs, there are still instances where there are unconscious biases presented from within CSOs in Fiji.

Manasa shared that CSO colleagues tend to compartmentalise based on what they see, for example, assigning pronouns based on a person’s mannerism and physical appearances. A young single mother who identifies as a pansexual was instinctively assumed to identify as she/her because of their gender role and the way they look. There were also other participants who shared their frustration about being misgendered. A non-binary participant claimed, *“I have female colleagues calling me daddy although I don't feel comfortable being labelled that way.”*

Some people in civil society still stereotype LGBTQIA+ communities or may have prejudices that generate harm for queer people trying to live their authentic lives. One of the participants worked with children and he recalled how he was once advised to exercise caution about his sexual orientation and how this may affect his credibility. He said, *“There was this constant fear that if the families that we were working with knew I was queer, they wouldn't feel as safe about their children attending my training or workshops. We were very mindful of how the communities we were working with would perceive it.”* This perception stems from stereotypes that children are unsafe around gay men.

Sam adds, *“It's one thing to be preaching and advocating. It's another thing to be practising whatever you're preaching because putting good intentions into practice is a totally different thing.”* This presents an opportunity for collaboration between LGBTQIA+ organisations and other CSOs to

promote gender training and *talanoa* sessions in the workplace. Including people from the community to sit down with heterosexuals and have an open dialogue about the lived realities of queer people could counter some of these negative stereotyping and produce allies who are knowledgeable about the challenges faced by queer people. There was also the recognition that in spaces where there is some openness to queer cultures, they may be based on preconceived ideas of what people think queer experiences look like. Amy said, *“We need to take a more intersectional approach to recognise that everyone expresses and experiences things differently.”*

Gender sensitivity needs to be incorporated in the work culture and operationalised, especially in a changing world that aspires to create more safe spaces that recognise and promote equality and inclusion.

○ Navigating Dual Identities

A common experience for the queer activist in the Fijian civil society workplace that adds pressure is the expectation to self-identify as queer to promote the CSO’s gender diversity programme, for example. Amy shares, *“If I show that I’m uncomfortable, it would be very hard for everyone else to be comfortable in that space.”* There is also the sense of feeling like a hypocrite, especially for people whose work is primarily around gender, to have to hide their own identities while promoting others’. Amy adds, *“I find myself encouraging others to find their identity. ‘Queer is just who you are, you don’t need to go and hide it.’ Meanwhile, here I am still hiding mine.”*

Amy also reflected on how her identity is received differently in various spaces. She feels more at ease expressing her pansexual identity within her young women’s group, where others are also comfortable being themselves. However, she finds it harder to be fully authentic within feminist groups, where she senses greater challenges in expressing her identity. This compartmentalisation shows how queer individuals often adjust their self-expression based on the perceived safety and inclusivity of different environments.

Navigating dual identities goes beyond the workplace. Sailosi shared that in his grassroots work in rural communities, he found that people were more accepting of his identity as a gender non-binary person, but only because he was not related to them. This shows how deep cultural and family expectations influence attitudes toward queerness in Fiji, adding extra pressure on LGBTQIA+ individuals to balance being true to themselves with meeting societal expectations.

Apart from navigating queer identities, participants also had to be conscious of racial profiling. In some workplaces, people felt being queer was not the dominant issue as much as racial biases. Organisations that have a particular predominant language within the workplace makes staff or volunteers who do not speak the language feel left out. Manasa claims, *“As soon as they start speaking Hindi, I just go sit down.”*



It's one thing to be preaching
and advocating. It's another
thing to be practising
whatever you're preaching

***BECAUSE PUTTING GOOD
INTENTIONS INTO
PRACTICE IS A TOTALLY
DIFFERENT THING.***



SAM

Aspirational Goals

One participant expressed an aspiration to see more queer people leading LGBTQIA+ organisations as she feels the needs of the community will be better met by people who understand and experience the lived realities of queer people. Another participant agreed and said, *“It’s a big plus if you have someone from the LGBTQIA+ community being part of management.”*

There was a consensus among participants on the need for queer people to dialogue, both among themselves and with others in society. *“I wish we had more conversations to talk about ways for the community to be safe, especially within queer spaces.”* Protecting each other and respecting people’s security risks and boundaries are important. In the workplace, those in management also need to be part of the conversations because they are in a better position to set the tone and effect change.

Making conversations about SOGIESC more common is an important step towards building acceptance in Fijian society. One participant shared an example where a colleague chose to explain their gender based on their sex at birth when children asked about it, hoping to avoid confusion. While this approach was well-meaning, the participant felt it missed an opportunity to use the organisation’s gender policies to start an age-appropriate discussion about diversity. Having these conversations could help break stereotypes early and create a more inclusive society for LGBTQIA+ communities in Fiji.

A queer volunteer in a few CSOs hopes for the promotion of a truly inclusive workplace. She expresses a desire to have skills and effort recognised and valued, and to have volunteers appreciated for their contributions the same way staff are respected for theirs.

Some participants strongly feel that labour laws should be more stringent in protecting queer employees not just within CSOs, but also in government and the private sector. Provisions for healthcare and wellness are needed and there was also an expressed appeal from the contributors to have medical insurance cover specific needs of LGBTQIA+ people. For example, pre-exposure prophylaxis is currently not covered, which means that some community members are not able to protect themselves from human immunodeficiency virus (HIV). This could be an excellent preventative measure to curb the rise of new cases.

Conclusion

LGBTQIA+ people continue to contribute to civil society despite the many challenges they face as queer people navigating their identities while being part of the larger movement driving social change. When opportunities present themselves, queer people create spaces for the community within their workplaces. For example, the Veilomani Home is an outcome of a partnership project of the Rainbow Pride Foundation and Pacific Rainbow Advocacy Network, which serves LGBTQIA+ people.

Enforcing constitutional protections and organisational policies will create a more enabling environment for queer people. To have a thriving CSO sector, leadership must create space for others to take on a more substantive role while those in leadership slowly transition out. This may also curb the issue of gatekeeping present within the space. Capacity building and mentoring programs for young people would be a welcomed leadership approach.

Since CSOs are already incorporating gender mainstreaming and diversity into their work plans, hiring LGBTQIA+ people to fill these programmatic roles will be an added advantage. Their lived realities and gender lens will naturally inform and improve their work, with the marginalised and vulnerable communities included and represented.

Prioritising needs and demands may also be essential to move things forward. Simple things like providing non-gendered toilets in the workplace can help members of the LGBTQIA+ people feel more comfortable and may be easy to implement. Other issues that may be more complicated to discuss and resolve, such as same-sex marriage, may require more time and sustained dialogue among community members and policymakers. There is a need to have conversations about more pressing issues like socio-economic challenges, non-discriminatory policies, and gender-sensitive healthcare.

Intentional intersectionality is necessary in the quest for equality. CSOs may have forgotten about ensuring inclusion and equality for disabled people's organisations, more specifically for Deaf people with LGBTQIA+ identities, for example. While CSOs actively involve Deaf participants in their programmes, accelerated action is needed to ensure Deaf people are meaningfully represented in all aspects of life. Disability organisations need to have an intersectional approach in their advocacy and ensure queer people with disabilities are fairly represented in decision-making spaces.

While there is constitutional protection for queer people and many different internal policies adopted by CSOs, social stigma and discrimination of LGBTQIA+ people still exist in the Fijian culture. Many CSOs identify as equal opportunity employers, and they may have policies on non-discrimination, sexual harassment, and gender. If civil societies implement the policies that

are already in place, it would create a more enabling environment for queer people to work. They can, then, provide critical inputs about the lived realities of queer people to enhance policies and practices.

Many people may claim to be allies, but they also, sometimes, utter homophobic remarks. Perhaps, they genuinely believe in equal opportunity for LGBTQIA+ people, and the intention is not to discriminate. But a lack of sensitivity and deep appreciation for genuine equality leave them prone to making harmful speech. Dialogue seems necessary in building and nurturing allyship, so that awareness transforms into conscious effort to not just 'do no harm,' but to truly accept and support.



References

Calabrò, Domenica Gisella *et al.*, '[Behind the Mask: Intersectional \(In\)Visibility of Indo-Fijian Queer Experiences](#)' in *Gender Visibility and Erasure*, Pages 33–50, June 2022.

D'Angelo, Chris, '[Fiji Prime Minister Tells Gay Couples to Move to Iceland](#),' Huffpost, 6 January 2016, (Accessed 28 February 2024).

['Employment Relations Act 2007'](#) in *The Laws of Fiji*, (Accessed 25 September 2024).

Kant, Romitesh, [Constitutional Redesign for Democratic Stability in a Divided Society: A Fiji Case Study](#), University of the South Pacific, 2017.

Maykin, Melissa *et al.* for Sistas, Let's Talk, "[Meet the LGBTQI Pacific Islanders overcoming a 'colonial mindset' and 'narrative of shame' to embrace their true selves](#)", ABC News, 30 May 2022 (Accessed 25 September 2024).

Movono, Lice, '[Victims of attacks won't report](#),' The Fiji Times, 12 March 2021 (Accessed 25 September 2024).

Vaioleti, Timote M., '[Talanoa Research Methodology: A Developing Position on Pacific Research](#)', *Waikato Journal of Education* Volume 12, 22 September 2016.

About the Fiji Report Writer

JASBANT KAUR is an early career researcher with a focus on mental health, queer cultures, Indo-Fijian experiences, gender, disability, and social inclusion. Committed to social justice and decolonisation and the politics of othering versus belonging, her work aims to highlight and address intersectional invisibilities and the complexities of marginalised identities. A notable achievement in her career is the publication of the paper titled, "Behind the Mask: Intersectional (In)Visibility of Indo-Fijian Queer Experiences," featured in *Advances in Gender Research* alongside other colleagues.