

Introduction

Among the consequences of conflict over gender roles or norms, the most disempowering one is violence against women. As part of the World Bank's qualitative study informing the *World Development Report 2012: Gender Equality and Development* (WDR 2012) local researchers in Fiji and Papua New Guinea (PNG) organised focus groups to elicit information about the impact of gender norms on women and men and to learn about the changes in women's and men's lives as these gender norms changed or persisted. This *In Brief* presents men's and women's accounts of domestic violence when we asked focus groups to reflect on what typically happens in their communities when a wife is not a good wife or a husband is not a good husband. The focus groups' narratives consistently reported that men who are unable to fulfil their provider role often act out their frustrations with violence, and that it remains acceptable in many communities to sanction women harshly for minor infractions that are perceived as challenging male authority or norms of feminine conduct.

Existing studies suggest that men's lives in the Pacific are enmeshed in processes of transformation. In particular, Eves (2006) notes that masculine ideals of men are being actively challenged where changing socio-economic conditions make it difficult to realise dominant models of masculinity. This greatly complicates women's agency and their pursuit of goals requires either resistance to, or relaxation of, the gender norms that govern their roles and responsibilities. There is limited research being done exploring why gender norms around traditional roles of men and women often persist even when circumstances change.

Study Communities

The qualitative study comprised 132 focus group discussions in 16 communities in PNG and 6 in Fiji. In PNG the focus groups comprised 589 men and women from two age groups (young adults 18–24 years of age and adults 25–60 years of age) and in Fiji 306 men and women in three different age groups including adolescents from 12 to 17 years of age.

To capture the regional variation in each country respondents were selected from the following districts:

- PNG — Wewak, Vanimo Green, Sumkar, Huon, Hagen, Goroka, Sinasina Yonggomugl, North Bougainville, Manus, Kavieng, Talasea, Rigo, Sohe, Alotau, Middle Fly, National Capital
- Fiji — Tamavua, Sigatoka, Draiba, Lautoka, Baulevu, Naleba.

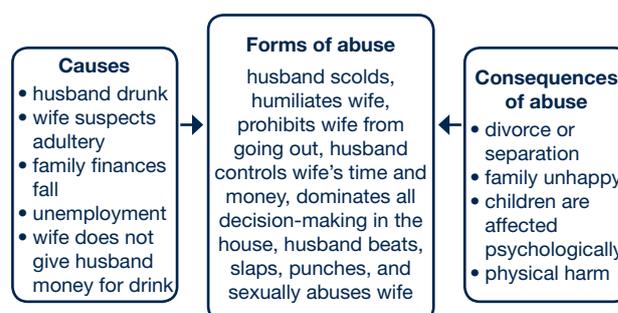
However, it is important to note that this was a qualitative exploration of gender norms and the samples are small and not statistically representative of each country or region. The consistency of the description of gender norms and associated behaviours and their relationship to norms and agency nonetheless shed light on similar gender inequalities in other parts of Melanesia.

Causes, Forms and Consequences of Domestic Violence

Given the sensitivity of the topic and that respondents may be reluctant to talk about domestic violence, the facilitators across 19 countries aided discussion by drawing a cause–impact diagram and jotting down the main comments from the group about the different causes, forms and impacts of abuse (Figure 1).

Both men and women in the study pointed out that subtle forms of agency by women could spark explosive reactions from men. Many focus groups indicated that a wife may be harshly scolded or even beaten, should she 'not be pleasant', talk about 'small matters', or serve a meal that is 'not warm or tasty'.

Figure 1: Causes and consequences of violence across focus groups in Fiji and PNG



Source: adapted from WDR 2012 methodology guide

Men in diverse communities mentioned chiding or sternly reprimanding women for triggering conflict with their 'useless talking and interference'. Rural men from Naleba, Fiji, noted 'Wives can be beaten by husbands for talking too much and complaining a lot'. Similarly, a Goroka, PNG, woman said, 'All men think they are the boss, so women don't have a lot to say. But now women are starting to think and talk too much.'

Economic factors such as poverty, joblessness, financial problems and mismanagement emerged most often as causes of domestic violence (Figure 1). The narratives revealed that 'men are affected more than women by unemployment, which leads to frustration, family problems and violence' (Tamavua men from Fiji). Men may become belligerent because they feel they need to reassert or maintain their dominance, because they have lost the provider status or ability that underpins their power in the home. In PNG, a woman from Rigo District noted, 'as time passes ... unemployment begins to undermine man's self-esteem'. Similarly, a man from Mt Hagen District said, 'he starts to see himself ... as having failed in his supreme duty as household head, driving him to violence'. A woman from Vanimo Green River remarked, 'if women want to dominate and tell their husband that he is lazy and not working then there will be a fight'.

Both women's and men's groups gave numerous accounts of men lashing out in violence while squandering scarce assets on drinking or other women. Rural women from Naleba, Fiji, noted: 'there is always tension about money and spending on alcohol and kava especially when husband is unemployed'. 'When I don't know what my children will eat, I get drunk ... punch her if she talks too much', said a man from Draiba, Fiji. Agarwal (1997) argues that 'persistent complaining' are means by which women are known to bargain with the husband. 'Now women are becoming more powerful than men and men get furious,' observed a woman from National Capital District, PNG. The men's group from Milne Bay Province, PNG, warned that what underpins ongoing conflict is: 'When husbands think they are the boss and that they must lead'.

Because the abusive tactics that characterise marital strife have strong roots in everyday practices that uphold and resist gender norms, violence against women is likely to have a dampening effect

on changes in gender norms. Empowering women and increasing their agency, as much as finding exit options for women who are in threatening situations, remain central challenges. It is clear from the research that initiatives to address the stressful and costly consequences of male gender attitudes requires a much stronger response from policymakers.

Women's agency cannot increase in isolation from the wider community and involving men, boys and community leaders as male champions in changing gender norms offers some promise. The need to engage men and boys in interventions promoting positive norms around gender equality has received attention in the Pacific in the recent past (Eves 2006). However, an example of Soul City in South Africa may offer innovative good practice for the Pacific region in engaging men and boys doing 'the right thing' with a message that promotes and reinforces positive gender norms (Usdin et al. 2005).

Author Notes

Priya Chatterier is a Pacific research fellow with SSGM and was a lead researcher for the World Bank study in Fiji. Almah Tararia is a PhD student with SSGM and was a lead researcher for the World Bank study in PNG.

Endnote

- 1 The WDR 2012 qualitative assessment included 19 countries with only Fiji and Papua New Guinea from the region informing this global study on gender equality.

References

- Agarwal, B. 1997. Bargaining and Gender Relations: Within and Beyond the Household. *Feminist Economics* 3(1):1–51.
- Eves, R. 2006. *Exploring the Role of Men and Masculinities in Papua New Guinea in the 21st Century: How to Address Violence in Ways That Generate Empowerment for Both Men and Women*. Sydney: Caritas Australia.
- Usdin, S., E. Scheepers, S. Goldstein and G. Japhet 2005. Achieving Social Change on Gender-Based Violence: A Report on the Impact Evaluation of Soul City's Fourth Series. *Social Science & Medicine* 61(11):2434–445.
- World Bank 2012. *World Development Report 2012: Gender Equality and Development*. Washington DC: World Bank.

