

Security issues for women and children in Papua New Guinea

Philip Gibbs and Lorelle Yakam, Divine Word University, Papua New Guinea

Recently a woman at a protest caused a stir by carrying a placard reading ‘PNG is not safe to live as a female’. She was drawing attention to the fact that in Papua New Guinea, women and children endure shockingly high levels of family and sexual violence, with rates of abuse estimated to be among the highest in the world outside of a conflict zone. Between 2007 and 2016, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) treated 27,993 survivors of family and sexual violence in the country (Médecins Sans Frontières, 2016) and findings from the 2016–18 Papua New Guinea Demographic Health Survey (PNG DHS) reported that 63 per cent of married and divorced women interviewed have experienced physical, sexual, or emotional spousal violence, most commonly physical violence (54 per cent), followed by emotional violence (51 per cent). An estimated 66 per cent of women in PNG are survivors of domestic violence (Human Rights Watch, 2019), and at least 200 women die each year from violent assaults prompted by witchcraft accusations.

The vicious assault of athlete Debbie Kaore and the violent death of Jenelyn Kennedy, a 19-year-old mother of three in Port Moresby in June 2020, saw mass protests across the country calling for change. Factors leading to Jenelyn’s death included a system that allows underage marriage, gender norms that legitimise violence, and the failure of the country’s law, justice, and health sectors. According to the National Demographic Health Survey, 70 per cent of women and 72 per cent of men believe that a husband is justified in beating his wife if she neglects the children or goes out without telling him (50 per cent and 49 per cent). A cause for concern is the finding that women’s experience of spousal violence increases with improved education and household wealth. Fifty-five per cent of women with an elementary education reported experiencing spousal violence, compared with 76 per cent of women with a higher education.

Dulciana Somare-Brash, daughter of former Prime Minister Sir Michael Somare, says that for many reasons she feels unsafe in her own country.

No man (or woman) should tell me I’m safe here in PNG when I have so little control over everything that happens around me and to me, in my world that simply means I’m unsafe as a female in PNG (Dulciana Somare-Brash 2020).

Children are also at risk. MSF has found that more than half of all MSF consultations for survivors of sexual violence were with children, with around one in six with children younger than five years. Children also made up one in three of all family violence consultations in Port Moresby. One in ten adult women reported that the latest incident of sexual violence was part of a repeated or ongoing pattern. For children, this risk was heightened, with almost two in five children experiencing repeated or ongoing sexual violence.

According to the 2015 Lukautim Pikinini Child Welfare Policy, around 75 per cent of children experience physical abuse at home. The Office of Public Prosecutor estimates that 55 per cent of all sexual violence cases dealt with the abuse of children under 16 years old.

Although the country passed a law in 2015 to strengthen child protection efforts in compliance with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, implementing regulations were incomplete. Customary and traditional practices allow marriage of children as young as 12, and early marriage is common in many traditional, isolated, rural communities. Child brides are taken as additional wives or given as brides to pay family debts and used as domestic servants. Child brides are particularly vulnerable to domestic abuse.

Security and victims’ services support

There are family and sexual violence units in police stations across the country, designed to provide victims with protection, assistance through the judicial process, and medical care. Police intervention has led to improved services for victims of gender-based violence in some provinces, but comprehensive services for victims of domestic and sexual violence are lacking in much of the country. This lack of services, along with societal and family pressure, has often forced women back into violent and abusive homes. Independent observers have noted that approximately 90 per cent of women in prison were convicted for attacking or killing their husband or another woman.

For many women, the only safe place to go is to their own family, particularly if their parents are still alive or if they have a sympathetic sibling. That is not always possible, so another possibility in larger towns is a ‘safe house’. Human Rights Watch reports that there are five shelters for abused women in Port Moresby, which are often so full they cannot always accept women in need of counselling and shelter. The City Mission administers Haus Ruth in Port Moresby and Haus Clare in Lae. City Mission has teamed up with World Vision, Childfund, and the PNG government to open the first government-certified Children’s Crisis Centre in the country so that Haus Ruth serves as the combined GBV Women’s Centre and Children’s Crisis Centre providing shelter, medical attention, counselling, and social services for women and their children. The Crisis Centre in Port Moresby also provides short-term residential care for orphans, abused children, and those whose parents have been impacted by HIV/AIDS.

NGOs and faith based organisations (FBOs) provide safe house facilities in other parts of the country. Oxfam in Goroka has taken the lead in providing support for those suffering from sorcery accusations, and an Oxfam supported

Case Management Centre in Lae provides women affected by sexual and family violence with the counselling, support and intervention they need to obtain protection and justice. Femili PNG runs Case Management Centres in Port Moresby and Lae to assist survivors of family and sexual violence.

Other support centres include: Links of Hope in Port Moresby and Mount Hagen which provide support for children affected by HIV and AIDS; Human Rights Defenders in Simbu Province; Voice for Change assists with education and help for victims in Jiwaka Province; and Mercy Works provide support services in Mount Hagen, Goroka, Simbu, Kiunga, Wewak, and Port Moresby. Allied organisations include Cheshire disability services, the WeCare Foundation, and the Hohola Youth Development Centre in Port Moresby. The Catholic Church has a network of small agencies that have been providing temporary shelter for battered women, children and victims of family and sexual violence in Wewak, Kokopo, Madang, Bougainville and Port Moresby.

Maternal and child mortality rates

Childbearing in Papua New Guinea is a risky business. The Maternal Mortality Rate (MMR) in PNG is considered the highest in the Pacific region, with between 215 to over 900 deaths per 100,000 live births. These figures indicate a serious safety situation for mothers in PNG and an urgent need to improve maternal health outcomes. Only 56 per cent of women in PNG give birth in a health facility, but that does not mean the birth is supervised by a skilled birth attendant, or that the facility has the necessary skills to support a safe birth. Papua New Guinea has the lowest rates of skilled birth attendants in the Western Pacific, with an estimated 6000 more skilled birth attendants needed to meet the global safety standard (WHO 2019).

The health of some mothers has already been compromised by infections such as HIV or syphilis. Among the concerns of pregnant women infected with HIV is whether they will survive to carry their pregnancy to term and if their child will be born with HIV. In the Papua New Guinea Highlands, health services have sought ways to ensure that infected mothers remain healthy, have a supervised delivery, and that their child will not be infected with HIV or syphilis.

In many cases, facilities lack basics such as running water and electricity needed to ensure a safe and sanitary environment for giving birth. Many facilities do not have refrigerators for vaccines or adequate stock of essential drugs or supplies to treat common conditions. In PNG, one in every 50 children dies within the first month of life and one of every 20 children dies before reaching their fifth birthday (PNG DHS 2016–18, 8.1). A survey found that only 18 per cent of children aged 6–23 months that live with their mothers were fed a minimum acceptable diet in the 24 hours preceding the interview while 32 per cent of children had an adequately diverse diet in which they had been given foods from at least five food groups. Only 44 per cent had been fed the minimum number of times a day appropriate for their age (PNG DHS 2016–18, 11.1.5).

The survival of infants and children depends in part on the demographic and biological characteristics of their mothers. The probability of dying in infancy is much greater among children born to mothers who are under age 18 or over age 34, children born after a short birth interval (less than 24 months after the preceding birth), and children born to mothers of high parity (more than three children). The risk is elevated when a child is born to a mother who has a combination of these risk characteristics, which is too often the case in Papua New Guinea.

Safety on public transport

Women are majority users of public transport and depend heavily on these systems for mobility as they often do not own or have access to private vehicles. However, there is a growing body of evidence that many women simply do not feel safe or secure while using public transport. For women and girls, sexual harassment and other gender-related security issues are important concerns. Harassment covers a wide range of behaviours of a threatening or offensive nature, from unwanted attention to physical or sexual assault.

A scoping study conducted by UN Women in 2014 in Port Moresby found that more than 90 per cent of women and girls experienced some form of violence when accessing public transport, including on buses, waiting at bus stops, walking to and from bus stops, or in taxis. This includes verbal sexual remarks, inappropriate touching, and indecent exposure in terms of sexual violence. They are also victims of extortion, robbery, threats, or intimidation (UN Women 2014). In response, special buses have been started in Port Moresby and recently in Lae, as part of the Safe Cities Initiative. The women-only transportation program began exclusively as a free-to-ride service called Meri Seif (Safe Woman). A young, female university student comments:

I feel so safe when I get on the Meri Seif bus, I can easily pull out my phone and listen to music and actually make a phone call. On the public motor vehicles (PMVs), the thieves just walk on, and when they see ladies holding their bags, they just grab them or threaten [the women] (Women's UN Report Network 2019).

From 2014 to mid-2019, the number of Meri Seif buses rose from one to 11, the number of routes from one to six, and the number of riders from 21,000 to more than 600,000. The pilot was so successful that the Ginigoada Foundation has started the M-Bus, a pay-to-ride program, to move the model toward financial sustainability.

The program faces hostility from some men, who have thrown marbles through bus windows, threatened women drivers at knifepoint, and tried to force themselves aboard the buses. While no serious injuries have occurred – each bus has two male security guards – safe travel around Port Moresby remains elusive. In 2018 UN Women trained more than 100 PMV drivers, crew members, and operators in the importance of safe transport for women. The overall message to the drivers was clear: If you had kept women safe on your buses in the first place, the city would not need women-only transportation.

Market place security

Urban markets are not secure for female traders especially in larger towns such as Port Moresby or Mount Hagen. Eighty per cent of market vendors are women and over half of women market vendors in PNG have to bring their children to the market as many of the younger children do not attend school. Women and girls are bullied by market security, intimidated by police and sexually harassed throughout the day. People try to rob vendors on their way to the bus stop and they have to contend with unreliable public transport as they try to get home. Women even refrain from using toilets or other spaces in the markets, because they fear being attacked by ‘rascals’ or intoxicated men and boys who roam the markets.

Female market vendors suffer from extortion on a regular basis. In the absence of police or security guards that will protect women and girls, and with high levels of unruly and provocative behaviour, women are under pressure to pay public nuisances and potential perpetrators of violence with their produce or cash for ‘protection’ to avoid confrontation or violent incidents. Women vendors who have not been able to find space inside the market premises or feel safer sitting in the periphery of the markets are sometimes forced to pay double fees otherwise they face constant harassment and incur other safety and health issues by sitting on the side of the road.

A UN study of markets in Port Moresby, found that 55 per cent of the women and girls who participated, reported that they have experienced some form of violence in the markets surveyed (UN Women 2012). Twenty-two per cent of female respondents report having experienced more than one incidence of sexual violence while in the markets in the last 12 months, and 64 per cent of both male and female respondents reported witnessing some form of sexual violence against women and girls in the markets and vicinity. At least 78 per cent of the perpetrators of all forms of violence are men, and the large majority are adolescent boys or young men. Other common perpetrators of violence identified included the police and other market vendors who fight for spaces in the market.

The UN Women Safe City project in Port Moresby,¹ has led to the redesign of the main markets and market stalls to make them more open and safer; increased access to clean drinking water, and improved sanitation and safety of toilet blocks. Such improvements in the capital city remain only a dream for vendors in provincial towns such as Goroka, Kundiawa, Wabag and Mendi. Despite markets becoming safer and the widespread campaign against violence, the lack of safety of women and girls outside markets is still a major issue.

Safety when trekking to school

Security issues also affect many children as they head to school. Some children travel by boat or canoe which can be treacherous in bad weather. Others need to cross fast-flowing rivers each day. Bridges in the area are made of narrow tree logs, and rainfall makes them slippery. At times, the log bridges are completely washed away, or the

road is badly damaged, making it difficult for children to attend school safely.

When children at Ambullua in the Jiwaka Province were asked for ideas to make the bridge they had to cross safer, they suggested the construction of an iron foot bridge, but recognised that the limited road network servicing Ambullua would make it impossible to transport iron into the community. As an alternative, they suggested strengthening the bridges with additional logs, ropes, and bamboo, and to ensure that bridges are replaced as they start to deteriorate or when safety issues are reported (McKenna et al, 2020).

The long trek to school is illustrated well in a film by Raphael Lauer, ‘Most Dangerous Ways to School’ (Lauer 2015). The children in the film walk seven days across the Papuan Plateau from Mount Busavi to attend school in Moro in the Southern Highlands Province.

Safety issues also surround children living in urban areas, who walk to school every day in some very dangerous suburbs. For instance a four year old girl living in East Taraka, one of the most dangerous suburbs in Lae, Morobe Province, walks for 45 minutes to school every day (Gabana, n.d.). Some children walk long distances to catch one or more buses or public motor vehicles (PMVs) every day (World Vision Australia, n.d.). Concerns around children’s safety on the road and catching PMVs have increased in the urban centres especially since road deaths, accidents, and crime rates have increased (World Bank 2014; Road Traffic Authority 2019).

Women’s security, land and logging

Land gives local people a sense of security, identity and belonging. Spiritually they identify with the land as part of their history; their ancestors who are buried on their land provided villagers with their songs, masks, dances, magical spells, clans, and certain species of taro, bananas, and pigs. Matthias Lopa from Pomio summarises:

if we give our land away, or if someone has taken it through commercial means, then we come to realise that our life is taken away and our sense of connectedness is disturbed because land is our life. The graves of our ancestors give us a sense of belonging. If that land is taken away for 99 years, then we become nobody (Gibbs and Lopa 2019).

While it is often thought that 97 per cent of PNG’s total land area remains under the customary ownership of the local indigenous people. This is no longer true. The PNG Land Act (1996) contains provisions that enable the state to lease land from customary landowners and then lease it back to other persons or organisations. In the eight years from 2003 to 2010, almost ten per cent of PNG’s total land area was alienated from its customary owners and transferred to private companies through this lease-leaseback scheme. The leases came to be known as Special Agricultural Business Leases (SABL) and more than five million hectares of customary land have been alienated in over 70 leases to landowner companies associated with some rather dubious ‘development partners’, most of whom appear to be logging or oil palm companies.

This alienation of customary land is having a very negative impact on women, most particularly in the New Guinea Islands region. Women report increasing domestic violence, teenage pregnancy and drug abuse in their communities as logging and oil palm plantations have moved in (Cannon 2020). Traditionally, women, particularly in matrilineal societies, have been the stewards of the land and passed it down to their children, but are now sidelined in discussions about land ‘development’. In their Country Gender assessment of agriculture in the rural sector of PNG, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), reported:

While women typically have user rights to cultivate land, gather forest products and fish or collect marine resources, they rarely hold ownership rights or have associated control over productive resources. This tends to be the case regardless of whether an inheritance system is patrilineal or matrilineal (FAO 2019:17).

Security and elections

Papua New Guinea is one of four countries in the world without any elected female representatives currently in Parliament. In the last election no women were elected to the 111-seat Parliament, and only five per cent of candidates were female (167 of 3332). This is indicative of the barriers and security issues women face in participating fully in the political process. There are threats of violence throughout the country with regional variation but most often throughout the Highlands region, where elections are notably more violent and entrenched cultural norms are reinforced by the highly patriarchal society. In the last election 40 people were killed, including four police officers. Election related violence occurs in both the public and private spheres with female voters facing direct threats of violence not only at the polls, but also threats of divorce and abandonment at home. When women have access to the polls the men in their families instruct them on who to vote for (Haley, N and K Zubrinich 2018).

Women, reportedly ranging in age from 13 to 29, in some places called ‘coffee ladies’ will moonlight as sex workers in political campaign houses (sometimes referred to as ‘animal houses’) during the electoral period in exchange for money or food and in some cases, families will encourage young girls to provide sexual services in exchange for votes (Gibbs 2009). The use of voting as a marker for family loyalty is prevalent and can cause conflict in a woman’s life if a member of her and her husband’s family is contesting. If she votes against her relative, she may be disowned by her own family. Interviewees also report that those who vote against their family face gossip and shaming on social media from other members of the community. Voice for Change, an NGO focusing on combating violence against women in the Highlands, has reported that supporters of female candidates face threats, physical violence, and property damage from supporters of rival candidates. To increase the security of female voters, there have been recommendations that the Papua New Guinea Electoral Commission (PNGEC) ensure that there are separate polling compartments as well as lines for men and women with some distance between them to ensure that

women have secrecy of the ballot and are not influenced at the polling stations.

Conclusion

Women and children in Papua New Guinea face a range of institutional and domestic security issues. Government departments such as the Department of Justice and Attorney General, non-government organisations and faith-based bodies seek to aid those affected and to bring about change. However, throughout the nation, security concerns such as domestic violence, sorcery accusations, maternal and child mortality, intimidation in elections and disempowerment of women at logging sites remain major issues. Perpetrators continue with few repercussions. Papua New Guinea remains a very dangerous place for women and children.

Notes

- 1 Develops, implements, and evaluates tools, policies and comprehensive approaches on the prevention of and response to sexual harassment and other forms of sexual violence against women and girls across different settings.

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