

Improving the security of women and children: A personal reflection

Lilly Be'Soer Kolts, Voice for Change, Papua New Guinea

Almost fifteen years ago, my family was internally displaced due to ongoing tribal fights spanning decades that destroyed both property and life in my husband's home in the Western Highlands Province. As a professional couple with children and a successful small business, we refused to contribute cash towards the purchase of guns to arm my husband's tribesmen so they could take revenge. Our stand against violence put us in harm's way. We were forced to leave my husband's village and resettle our family on my own tribe's land, in what is now Jiwaka province.

During my marriage, my husband and his community pressured me to give birth to a son, especially after I had given birth to five daughters. My sixth and last child was, finally, a son. Thirteen years ago, my husband deserted me and our six children, who I then raised as a single mother, working as an agricultural officer and teacher. Through my work I came to know there are too many women like me, who need information and guidance to ensure access to justice, to empower themselves to achieve financial independence and provide for their children. To begin to address women's needs and create a better society for them in 1996 I started a local women's rights NGO called Voice4Change (VfC).

I am the proud mother of five beautiful daughters who I have raised to be safe, strong and secure – to be who they want to be and to become financially independent. They have played an integral part of VfC's journey – its development and growth, challenges and achievements. My daughters have always helped since they were small, and are now part of our team and, with their peers, will shape the future of Jiwaka's women and girls'.

Lilly Be'Soer, personal account

Protecting women's rights

It has taken the government of PNG almost four decades to translate the basic rights of citizens into policies, laws and strategies. It was not until the 2000s that PNG pushed law reform efforts that promote gender equality through parliament. PNG has now updated and expanded the definition of rape; criminalised marital rape through amendments to the Criminal Code (2003); established the Family Protection Act of 2013 which improves access to justice and the protection and support for victims of domestic and family violence; and more recently, criminalised the act of alleging a person is practicing sorcery thereby exposing the 'accused' to extrajudicial judgement and cruel and inhuman treatment. Effective implementation of these laws is not yet guaranteed.

Family Support Centres in hospitals and Family and Sexual Violence Units in police stations that were initiated by NGOs in Morobe, Simbu and the National Capital District in the early 2000s, are now mandatory across PNG. The refinement of policies, protocols and procedures has been supported by multilateral and bilateral development partners, mainly the United Nations and the Government of Australia, but the quality of policies remains uneven across PNG's 22 provinces.

Accountability for women's and children's safety

PNG's ten year National Strategy to prevent and respond to Gender Based Violence (GBV) (2016–25) forces accountability on provincial governments to prioritise, plan and adequately budget for better coordinated multisector action towards ending violence against women. Halfway into the strategy's implementation timeframe, only the National Capital District has developed and funded its own strategy. The Governor of National Capital District, together with the UN in PNG, has launched a campaign to convince the

governors of all provinces that ending violence against women and girls must be a priority in provincial development planning and budgeting.

International NGOs have supported some local NGOs working to promote gender equality, but too often these partnerships are confined to channeling funds to a selective few partner agencies rather than working to grow a provincial or national movement. The few resources that trickle down to local GBV organisations and services are extremely limited.

In a number of PNG's provinces, the contribution of local civil society has been very important – particularly in adopting a rights-based and just gender approach to local level GBV prevention and response. NGOs in the Eastern Highlands, East New Britain and East Sepik provinces, for example, established initiatives and services to end violence against women well before PNG reformed its laws to address Violence Against Women (VAW). With very minimal resources, they have designed and delivered campaigns to shift community norms and have also trained traditional and elected community leaders as well as the police, village court personnel and key staff of the responsible government agencies.

The challenge to end violence in the Highlands region

PNG's limited, available data suggests that GBV is more common and severe across the Highlands region and worse where there is enduring tribal conflict. PNG's Highlands region was only opened up to colonial administration and the establishment of health and education services in the 1950s, just 25 years before PNG gained independence in 1975. Initially, PNG's slow shift towards norms and laws to promote gender equality and an end to violence against women and girls had less impact on the enduring patriarchal traditions of the Highlands region.

By the mid-1990s, Simbu and the Eastern Highlands provinces had established strong local women's rights organisations and links with Pacific regional and global feminist movements and networks. In the 'new' province of Jiwaka, the local NGO, VfC, has helped the local population catch up with rights-based initiatives to end VAW similar to Simbu and Eastern Highlands provinces. Together these three provinces have established a Highlands regional network of women human rights defenders – a groundbreaking and unique inter-provincial movement to protect women's rights. The network's impact on improving the security of women and girls is largely limited to three of a total seven provinces in the Highlands region that despite their wealth from extractive industries lag far behind in protecting women and girls from violence. Resource wealth has not translated into a better deal for women (Cox 2019).

The status and security of women in Jiwaka

In Jiwaka, as in all other Highlands provinces, women are expected to allocate their labour and earnings to the needs of their family and tribe. Most women feel compelled to work hard continuously contributing their time, food and money to meet the many cultural and social obligations in the expectation that this will guarantee their safety and security.

A woman perceived to be obedient and ready to support her male relatives in fulfilling their social and customary obligations is allocated land to cultivate crops. She can use this land freely while her biological father is still living. But if her father dies, in most cases she can lose the right to use the land as the land technically belongs to the men in her family.

Independent incomes and control over their own earnings are vital to women's choices, empowerment and security. Jiwakan women's incomes are earned mainly through the production and sale of fresh produce at the local markets. Fresh food trading at local markets makes up the bulk of the Highlands region's informal economic activity and income and most households depend heavily on incomes women earn through informal trade. Women who are denied access to land have to earn cash by buying from other women farmers/producers to resell in local markets. During the recent COVID-19 lockdown and the closure of markets, all women traders were severely impacted with resellers the hardest hit. Their livelihood was stopped and their children went hungry.

The most serious security issue faced by women and girls in Jiwaka is the violence that results from patriarchal norms that undervalue their labour and productivity and deny them full citizenship and fundamental human rights. Entrenched beliefs regarding women's inferiority normalise many different forms of violence against them. Women and girls' fear of violence is a pervasive, ongoing problem that undermines their daily security and wellbeing.

The most terrifying experience for women in Jiwaka is the violence that results from being labelled a practicing sorcerer. Sorcery Accusation Related Violence (SARV) frequently occurs in Jiwaka and other provinces of the

Highlands region. Sorcery allegations are most often intentionally fabricated by the accusers motivated by revenge or wanting to deflect blame from themselves or coveting a vulnerable woman's land or property. The consequences, in their mildest forms, of alleging that a woman, and less frequently a man, is practicing sorcery are stigma, exclusion and banishment. But these days, SARV more frequently leads to abduction, public mob trials, and torture that is barbaric, sexualised and often fatal. Conducted mostly with impunity, these violent actions send a chilling message to all women and girls about their ongoing vulnerability. PNG law now criminalises persons who accuse others of practicing sorcery, but law enforcement and justice are too often far away, under-resourced and ambivalent about any intervention to rescue innocent women and girls.

PNG has yet to develop accurate, updated national and provincial data and trends on VAW. In Jiwaka, leading advocates and practitioners believe that women are increasingly dying at the hands of their partner or the extrajudicial, mob actions of their communities.

When a woman is the victim of violence or threats, the solidarity and support of male members of her family can make a difference. If she has the strong and committed support of men in her immediate family, she is more likely to seek justice and successfully navigate each long and difficult step towards achieving a positive outcome. But the support of kin is not always guaranteed.

Jiwaka's home-grown organisation for change

VfC was established in 1996 to focus on Women's Economic Empowerment and to strengthen women's food crop production and 'own account' management. By 2004, the organisation's leaders realised that programs to end violence against women and address violent conflict between tribes must be implemented parallel to Women's Economic Empowerment programs.

In 2013, VfC applied and won a highly competitive, three-year UN Trust Fund grant to end VAW. VfC was one of just 11 successful organisations out of total of more than 2000 applications. The grant enabled community outreach to inform and educate people on the importance of working towards the achievement of equality and peace as integral parts of building a prosperous new province. In 2020, VfC has worked mainly across the North and the South Waghi Districts of Jiwaka Province, engaging with communities in 32 council ward areas through their respective elected councillors (ward members). VfC's Livelihoods Program has been directly working with women farmers to boost their agricultural production, to find markets and to gain control over their own incomes.

VfC has also developed a program for young women, so that they know their rights and can develop their social, economic and political potential. In 2016, VfC surveyed more than 1000 girls in Jiwaka who were not attending school. Eighty per cent of the 1300 girls surveyed lacked the financial support needed to pay their school fees as well as emotional support. When they don't make it to grade 11

they are labelled as failures, stigmatised and obliged to work hard to support their self-supporting mothers.

Some young women are forced to get married. Families assume that the young woman will ultimately 'belong to another man' through marriage and will move to the husband's place and work on his land. She will be told 'yu *blo narepela man*' (you belong to another man); as if to affirm that she has no long-term status or belonging in her birthplace.

Access to markets is an ongoing challenge for Jiwakan women – most of whom are farmers in rural communities. A lack of proper market infrastructure and reliable roads to remote, rural areas severely undermines women's opportunities to earn sufficient income to support their families. VfC's livelihoods program includes an informal savings and loans scheme that husbands and brothers cannot appropriate. With independent financial resources, women are more able to access justice including paying village court officials to hear their complaints about spousal violence, and – as is often demanded – for the woman to repay her 'brideprice' paid by the groom at their wedding in order to secure a divorce.

Gender-based violence response desks

VfC initially focused on the prevention of VAW, but when women and their families became aware of their human rights and the existence of state laws to protect them from violence, there was an overwhelming demand for hospital and police-based services for survivors, as well as complementary paralegal, crisis counselling and safehouse services.

VfC has established three GBV Response Desks, two in South Waghi District and one in North Waghi, to provide GBV survivors with paralegal services, referrals to the police and courts, emergency and long-term crisis-counselling and local safe house emergency accommodation. VfC has also piloted a safe house project in one community where women and girls seeking safety and security during periods of family or community conflict find solace and comfort, have access to an on-site counsellor, and health care is available through a partnership with a large and well-run mission hospital.

Women and girls who present at the GBV Response Desks are rapidly assessed to ensure their safety but the safety of survivors and staff navigating what can be a slow-moving referral pathway is an ongoing challenge that requires courage and resilience on behalf of clients and staff alike. Many women lack the familial support needed to see justice through to fruition and are often forced by their family to withdraw complaints against their perpetrators. VfC staff accompany survivors to the court, where they are often exposed to verbal abuse and threats from perpetrators and their supporters.

Community action

Leaders in three communities have translated national commitments to end GBV into community action. The Warawau, Jima and Dambex communities have adopted

bylaws that have proved effective in local VAW prevention and response and that align well with the relevant constitutional principles and state VAW laws of PNG.

Independent reviews and evaluations of VfC's programs have confirmed that people feel ownership of, and commitment to, their community VAW bylaws, which they have developed over a long period of inclusive community education and consultation with members. While many challenges remain, there is definitely great improvement in the attitudes and behaviour of many men and boys towards women and girls in their communities.

VfC has used its links with Pacific NGO networks to sponsor intensive training for Jiwaka's police and health workers to help them better understand gender equality and deepen their commitment in making safety nets effective for Jiwaka's for women and girls.

VfC draws most of its support from the local community, regional networks of women's rights organisations and a few international development organisations that have enabled institutional strengthening. The group has benefited from being part of a Pacific network of organisations working to end violence against women, coordinated by the Fiji Women's Crisis Centre.

VfC has also enjoyed many years of financial and technical support from international development agencies, including the International Women's Development Agency where we enjoyed a beneficial, six-year partnership. From its original small, thatched roundhouse office, VfC has grown into a campus for residential training on women's rights and ending VAW.

Conclusion

Many PNG women still lack information and support across all key sectors affecting their lives. They need more information on health, markets and business development. Too many women still lack access to justice. PNG laws to prevent violence against women and girls exist but ensuring police protection and access to justice are still extremely challenging for all and especially for remote, rural women.

PNG's National GBV strategy obligates the provincial government to develop its provincial plan and budget but in reality, VfC is the *de facto* lead implementer. VfC programs and services are doing much to prevent conflict and violence in contemporary Jiwaka province. They make a significant difference to gender equality, development and peace and also have much to give to other Highlands provinces such as Hela, where large scale oil and gas industries have exacerbated conflict and violence and neglected to support the formation of a home grown women's rights organisation (Cox 2019).

References

- Cox, E 2019, 'Ending violence against women in Papua New Guinea's Highlands Region: The role of the state, local civil society and extractive industries', in K Samuel, C Slatter and V Gunasekara (eds for DAWN), *The Political Economy of*

Conflict and Violence against Women. Cases from the South, ZED Books.

IWDA (International Women's development Agency) (eds) 2020, *Submission to the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women: COVID-19 and domestic violence against Women in Papua New Guinea*, <https://iwda.org.au/resource/covid-19-and-domestic-violence-against-women-in-papua-new-guinea/>, accessed 5 January 2021.

GoPNG (Papua New Guinea Government) 2012, *Papua New Guinea National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Gender Based Violence 2016–2025*, www.femilipng.org/wpcontent/uploads/2018/10/PNG-GBV_Strategy-2016-2025_150816.pdf

VfC (Voice for Change) 2013, 'Community survey on violence against women and girls in Jiwaka Province, Papua New Guinea', Survey Report, https://iwda.org.au/assets/files/20160203-Voice-for-Change-WEB_FinalSmall.pdf

VfC (Voice for Change) 2016, *Final Evaluation of UN Trust Fund Project: Towards equality, development and peace in Jiwaka Province*, Unpublished.

VfC (Voice for Change) 2019, *Voice for Change Strategic Plan 2019–2028*, www.voiceforchange.ngo/images/publications/StratPlanLowRes2018.pdf