

Pathway to Establishing RMI's First Support Service for Survivors of VAW

Republic Of The Marshall Islands

SHARE

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As part of their project to establish the first ever support service for survivors of violence against women and girls in the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI), Women United Together Marshall Islands (WUTMI), in partnership with Pacific Women, has been busy implementing a comprehensive community engagement program on the design of the proposed service.

Early results show that women want the following support services: alternative, safe accommodation for women who are experiencing violence; a focus on prevention of violence against women through community education and awareness raising regarding women's rights as well as the laws surrounding violence against women; intervention programs with men who choose to commit violence against women; assistance in accessing justice, especially through the assistance of the police.

WUTMI has consulted more than 175 people from four atolls, including through discussions with over 150 local women in participatory community consultation workshops and case study interviews with women who have experienced intimate partner domestic violence. Ninety-five of the women who have participated in the workshops completed a questionnaire about their experience of violence, with 56 per cent self-identifying that they had experienced some form of domestic violence.

A number of issues have emerged, including observations from facilitators that before participating in these consultations, the majority of the women were unaware of what violence against women is, many being led to believe that it is normal or a natural way of life.

WUTMI's Domestic Violence Counselling Service Project Coordinator, Lilly Samson, shared her experience of seeing women realise for the first time that

they are survivors of violence: “So many of the ladies, they think this type of violence from their husbands is normal. I see in the workshop when they realise it is not. It can be hard for them to learn this but also makes them happy to know. And then they want to know more and how to stop it.”

Participants of the workshop included representatives from women’s groups who also identified the lack of awareness of domestic violence as a crime, as one of the main reasons why violence against women is an underreported experience and have questioned the reliability of the official statistics of the number of women and girls experiencing domestic violence in the RMI.

Women who were familiar with domestic violence, tended to only associate it with physical violence. A workshop participant shared: “He was once in jail for punching my daughter on the head with a rock. She called my brother and my brother called the police right away and they went and arrest him.” Said another: “...before we only think physical abuse is the only abuse but now we know that there are more than this.”

On the topic of unwanted sex, many women expressed shock and disbelief when learning that wives are not obliged to have sex with their husbands and that men who coerce or force their partners to have sex are perpetrating sexual violence. Shared a participant: “I didn’t know before that we have right to say no to our husband when we don’t have to have sex with them.” Said another participant: “I have so many friends do this but I did not know. I always thought because they’re partners or husband and wife, its ok.”

The consultations also revealed that some women regularly undergo physical inspections by their partners, to determine if she is having sex with someone else. It is only during these workshops, that women learnt for the first time that this is a tactic men use to police women’s choices and actions, conforming them to rigid gender roles that restrict their freedoms and blame them for intimate partner violence and sexual assault. Many women are unaware that these actions are a crime under the laws of the country.

These tactics of intimate partner domestic violence further reinforce other notions of gender norms that allow men to use violence with impunity, such as the belief that men cannot control their sexual desires and that women are to blame if their husbands cheat on them. Notions of femininity require women to prioritise family harmony and stability over their own rights and well-being.

* Quotes are verbatim.