

Thematic Brief | Ending violence against women in the Pacific

This Thematic Brief provides a broad summary of information and analysis about violence against women and girls in the Pacific Islands region. The summary includes references to associated research and information.

This is one in a series of Thematic Briefs released by the Pacific Women Lead (PWL) at the Pacific Community (SPC) programme, termed PWL at SPC. The briefs have been updated to include COVID-19 considerations and recent programme information, based on the original briefs developed by the former programme, Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development (Pacific Women).

The PWL at SPC programme has more than AUD55 million dedicated to its work under the Australian Government's AUD170 million Pacific Women Lead portfolio. This partnership with the Australian Government commits SPC to deliver the PWL at SPC programme as the cornerstone for the portfolio.

One of the largest global commitments to gender equality, Pacific Women Lead aims to promote women's leadership, realise women's rights, and increase the effectiveness of regional gender equality efforts. Among Pacific Women Lead's four delivery partners, SPC is the key implementing partner. Other central partners include the AIR (Amplify – Invest – Reach) partnership of women's funds, civil society organisations and coalitions. There is also PWL Enabling Services (PWLES) delivering monitoring, evaluation and other services, along with the Australian Government's direct relationships with development partners for regional programmes, such as the United Nations (UN) and International Planned Parenthood Foundation (IPPF).

Seven key messages

The seven key messages about violence against women and girls in the Pacific region, and the work supported by Pacific Women Lead at SPC, are outlined below. These messages also apply during the COVID-19 response period. During a crisis, women and girls are at increased risk of men's physical and sexual violence as result of existing gender inequalities being magnified, with women having considerably less autonomy and mobility leading to increases in men's violence against women.¹

1. Pacific women face some of the highest levels of violence in the world. An estimated 60 per cent of women and girls have experienced violence by an intimate partner or family member.
2. Women and girls are at increased risk of men's physical and sexual violence during a crisis, such as natural disasters and the COVID-19 pandemic.
3. Violence takes many forms and women often experience multiple types of violence.
4. Violence affects women first and foremost but also affects children, families and communities.
5. Physical and sexual violence limits women's economic empowerment and has high economic costs for societies, including lost wages and productivity, health care and the criminal justice costs of apprehending, prosecuting and imprisoning perpetrators.
6. The Pacific is developing a stronger legislative framework to protect women, but action is needed to implement these laws.
7. Violence against women is reinforced by community acceptance and impunity for perpetrators.

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Message 1 Women in the Pacific face some of the highest levels of violence in the world. An estimated 60 per cent of women and girls have experienced violence by an intimate partner or family member.²

Why?

Unequal gender relations and the exercise of male power and control over women's lives are both the cause and consequence of violence against women. However, a number of factors elevate the risk and incidence of such violence. These factors most commonly include discriminatory social norms, a history of violence in the family, and financial strains, which include a lack of food in the home and alcohol abuse.

The evidence

Globally, 35 per cent of women have experienced some form of physical and/or sexual violence in their lifetime.³ Of the 11 Pacific Island countries that have used the same methodology in national research on intimate partner violence, the highest rates of intimate partner physical and/or sexual violence against women have been recorded in Kiribati (68 per cent), Fiji (64 per cent), Solomon Islands (64 per cent), Vanuatu (60 per cent) and the Republic of the Marshall Islands (51 per cent). Palau has recorded the lowest rate in the region at 25 per cent.⁴

Violence against women is also a significant cause of preventable mental health trauma, physical injury and disability and harm to children.

- In Fiji, an estimated 43 women are injured every day as a result of domestic violence. Of these women, one will be permanently disabled, 10 will lose consciousness due to the severity of the physical violence and 16 will need health care for their injuries, which include broken or fractured bones, internal injuries or damage to eardrums or eyes.⁵
- In Papua New Guinea, domestic violence injuries comprise 80–90 per cent of injuries presented by women at health facilities.⁶ The Family Support Centre in Lae (Papua New Guinea's second largest city) supported 935 survivors of family and sexual violence over an estimated two-year period. Of these, 768 were adults and 167 were children under the age of 18 years. Of the adult clients, 93 per cent reported experiencing intimate partner violence.⁷
- In Vanuatu, 30 per cent of women reported being sexually abused before the age of 15 years.⁸
- In Solomon Islands, of women who have ever been pregnant, 11 per cent reported being beaten during pregnancy. Among these women, 18 per cent had been punched or kicked in the abdomen when pregnant.⁹

Surveys of women who have experienced abuse by an intimate partner highlight alcohol abuse as a primary trigger of domestic violence. In Tuvalu, 72 per cent of women who report that their husbands get drunk very often have experienced emotional, physical or sexual violence, compared with 46 per cent whose husbands drink sometimes and 27 per cent whose husbands do not drink.¹⁰

'The second time [that he almost killed me] was when I was pregnant. He pulled out a 4x4 piece of timber from the fence and he came up and hit me hard on my back. He hit me again and I fell. The pain was agonising. I lost my baby as a result of this.'

National Study on Domestic Violence Against Women in Tonga¹¹

Women and girls with disabilities experience much higher rates of violence. Women with intellectual disability and psychosocial impairment are particularly vulnerable to physical and sexual violence. Pacific research highlights that women and girls with disabilities are two to three times more likely to be victims of physical and sexual abuse.¹² Children with disabilities are up to four times more vulnerable to physical and sexual violence.¹³

Message 2 Women and girls are at increased risk of men’s physical and sexual violence during a crisis, such as natural disasters and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Why?

Physical and sexual violence against women and girls, including family violence, increases during and after crises and in times of stress and hardship.

During a crisis, existing gender inequalities are magnified, with women having considerably less autonomy and mobility leading to increases in family violence. Other contributing factors include financial insecurity, job loss, crowded living conditions and longer periods of time inside together due to quarantine and social isolation. The general acceptance of physical violence in many Pacific Island countries can lead to violence and abuse in times of crisis being accepted and excused due to ‘stress’.

The evidence

Research from previous crises, such as cyclones and civil unrest, indicates a dramatic increase in the rates of family violence.¹⁴ Since the outbreak of COVID-19, civil society groups across the Pacific have highlighted the exponential increase in men’s physical and sexual violence against women and girls, including family violence, and a rise in requests for support services.^{15 16 17}

The Pacific already has some of the highest rates of violence against women and girls in the world. In Vanuatu 60 per cent of women are reported to have experienced physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner; in Solomon Islands and Fiji, the rate is 64 per cent and, in Kiribati, 68 per cent.¹⁸

During national lockdowns, evacuations, states of emergency and other response to a crisis, the incidence of men’s violence against women intensifies rapidly versus a reduction in women’s ability and opportunity to seek help, medical care, temporary shelter or flee abusive and violent partners.¹⁹ For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, for women already living in abusive and violent relationships, enforced social isolation and quarantine have put women at increased risk of violence because they are confined with their abusers.

During a crisis, often service providers and shelters have had to scale down services and sometimes close, leaving a shortage of shelter options for women and children escaping family violence. Abusive male partners can also use compulsory home isolation and the threat of infection to control and silence their wives, partners and families.²⁰

While lockdowns exacerbate violence against women in the home, higher rates are unlikely to drop with the lifting of lockdown measures. Ongoing stress in the household relating to economic insecurity and reduced mobility intensifies tension and increases men’s violence against women.



Preventative measures taken to reduce the spread of COVID-19 can increase the vulnerability of adolescent girls and children to sexual abuse and violence. The closure of schools and quarantine at home leaves girls and children in closer physical proximity to abusive male family members. In past emergencies, family violence support services in the Pacific have reported massive increases in new family violence cases.²¹

Rates of teenage pregnancy can also increase. During the Ebola epidemic in Sierra Leone a study by the United Nations Development Programme found teenage pregnancy increased by 65 per cent, with long-term implications for young women's health and education and that of their children.²²

Message 3 Violence takes many forms and women often experience multiple types of violence.

Why?

Intimate partner violence takes many forms. Patriarchal, cultural and social norms, lack of knowledge of the law, limited access to justice, and stigma within small communities all contribute to social acceptance of men controlling women's participation in social, political and economic life.

Women with disabilities experience additional forms of violence. These include acts, such as the withholding of medication and assistance, denial of food or water, and forced sterilisation and medical treatment.²³

The evidence

Research on violence against women in 11 Pacific Island countries show that there are many different types of violence experienced by women. The most common forms are listed below:²⁴

- Physical violence: slapping, kicking, hitting or use of weapons.
- Emotional abuse: insults and threats, systematic humiliation, controlling behaviour and degrading treatment.
- Sexual violence: coerced sex or being forced into sexual activities considered degrading or humiliating.
- Economic abuse: restricting access to resources with the purpose of controlling or subjugating a person.

In the Federated States of Micronesia, 25 per cent of ever-partnered women reported experiencing physical abuse by a partner (e.g. being slapped or having something thrown at them), 18 per cent reported experiencing sexual abuse, 33 per cent reported emotional abuse, and almost 15 per cent had experienced economic abuse.²⁵

There tends to be a significant overlap between emotional, physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence. For example, in Kiribati, more than two in every three ever-partnered women reported experiencing physical or sexual violence, or both, by an intimate partner and almost half of ever-partnered women reported experiencing emotional abuse by an intimate partner.²⁶



Message 4 Violence affects women first and foremost but also affects their children, families and communities.

Why?

Violence against women limits their participation in social, political and economic life. As a result, it also affects their families and communities. The children of women who have experienced violence have increased levels of child mortality, emotional and behavioural problems and are more likely to become perpetrators of violence if they are boys, or victims of violence if they are girls.

The evidence

In Vanuatu, children whose mothers were victims of domestic violence were almost twice as likely to intermittently stop school or drop out completely than children whose mothers did not experience violence (22 per cent compared with eight per cent).²⁷

In Tonga, more than half of the women who experienced physical intimate partner violence reported that their children had witnessed the violence at least once. Women who experience intimate partner violence are more likely to have a partner whose mother had been beaten by her own partner or who himself was beaten as a child.²⁸

In Kiribati, 32 per cent of women who had experienced intimate partner violence reported that the same partner had emotionally, physically or sexually abused their child or children.²⁹ Sexual abuse in childhood and adolescence is also associated with early sexual activity, substance abuse and having multiple sexual partners.

‘We must be firm in our stance that violence against women and girls will not be tolerated in any form, in any context and in any circumstance.’

Honourable Johnson Koli, Solomon Islands Family Health and Safety Study³⁰

Message 5 Physical and sexual violence limits women’s economic empowerment and has high economic costs for societies, including lost wages and productivity, health care and the criminal justice costs of apprehending, prosecuting and imprisoning perpetrators.

Why?

When women are physically or emotionally injured by physical and sexual violence, it can impact their ability to work and engage in economic activities. It can also affect the power dynamics in their families regarding decisions about financial matters. There is also a cost to the economy due to the loss of productivity, along with additional health care and justice services costs required to respond to cases of gender-based violence.

The evidence

Violence against women is detrimental to a woman’s ability to earn an income and can be associated with high injury and hospitalisation costs and ongoing mental health issues. In Fiji, the costs of violence (expenditure on policing, counselling, medical and legal services) have been estimated at around USD 135.8 million or around seven per cent of gross domestic product annually.³¹



Many women survivors of violence are forced to take time off work due to emotional or physical injuries. This results in high levels of absenteeism and lost earnings. Research with a sample group of employers in Papua New Guinea estimated that the equivalent of 10 per cent of the payrolls of companies are lost due to family and sexual violence.³²

A study in Fiji found that 'high rates of domestic and sexual violence translate into lost staff time and reduced productivity that is equivalent to almost 10 days of lost work per employee each year'.³³ It found that one in three employees had experienced domestic or sexual violence in their lifetime, including 44 per cent of women and 22 per cent of men. Furthermore, 63 per cent of employees had friends or family affected by violence.³⁴

In Vanuatu, 30 per cent of women who experience physical and/or sexual abuse by their intimate partner have had their work disrupted. For 94 per cent of these women, an intimate partner directly interrupted their work.³⁵

Research in the Pacific has demonstrated the impacts of violence against women on Pacific businesses and there are programmes designed to improve the way businesses can respond to violence against employees. This includes measures, such as workplace policies and programmes that guide responses to violence and establish support teams to assist employees. Workplace responses to violence against women support women experiencing violence, help them achieve their full potential and independence and reduce turnover costs and productivity losses for the employer.

Message 6 The Pacific is developing a stronger legislative framework to protect women, but action is needed to implement these laws.

Why?

Despite progressive legislation in place in many Pacific Island countries, implementation is subject to a range of challenges and resource limitations, particularly in relation to women's ability to access justice.

The evidence

In the past two decades, advocacy based on evidence of the social and economic costs of violence against women has led to legislative change across the region. The following Pacific Island countries and territories (PICTs) have developed or revised laws to protect women and criminalise domestic violence:

- Vanuatu: *Family Protection Act 2008*
- Fiji: *Domestic Violence Act 2009*
- Republic of the Marshall Islands: *Domestic Violence Prevention and Protection Act 2011*
- Palau: *Family Protection Act 2012*
- Papua New Guinea: *Family Protection Act 2013*
- Samoa: *Family Safety Act 2013*
- Tonga: *Family Protection Act 2013*



- Federated States of Micronesia: *Kosrae State Family Protection Act 2014*
- Solomon Islands: *Family Protection Act 2014*
- Kiribati: *Te Rau N Te Mwenga (Family Peace) Act 2014*
- Tuvalu: *Family Protection and Domestic Violence Act 2014*, complemented by Tuvalu's *Police Powers and Duties Act 2009* (which governs the powers of police to respond and act in cases of domestic violence).
- Nauru: *Domestic Violence and Family Protection Act 2017* complemented by the *Crimes Act 2016*
- Cook Islands: *Family Protection and Support Act 2017* (including provisions on domestic violence)
- Federated States of Micronesia: *Pohnpei State Domestic Violence Act 2017*.

Niue has initiated a review of the 2007 *Family Law Code's* conformity with the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and drafted the *Family Protection Bill* (February 2016).

The establishment of legal frameworks is a critical first step, but the implementation of laws is where success is measured. To date, the Pacific region has not performed well in this area. Key constraints include:

- pervasive and entrenched social norms about the acceptability of violence against women that are held by women and men at all levels of society;
- a lack of enforcement of existing laws and inconsistent judicial rulings;
- women's limited awareness about their rights;
- financial and geographic limits on women's access to justice; and
- inadequate funding to address the scale of the problem.

A 2006 study in Fiji found that 90 per cent of sexual assault cases were reversed on appeal, compared to 20–40 per cent of cases for other crimes.³⁶ Similarly, a study comparing the number of women presenting as survivors of sexual violence to the Lae Family Support Centre in Papua New Guinea with the number of sexual violence trials and convictions in Lae found that, of 338 sexual violence incidences, only one made it to trial.³⁷ In Niue, the one case (spanning over a decade) where the victim's family decided to pursue a charge of sexual violation, the victim's family were so badly ostracised that they left the country.³⁸

Message 7 Violence against women is reinforced by community acceptance and impunity for perpetrators.

Why?

Entrenched discriminatory social norms, attitudes, and unequal sexist standards have been shown to normalise and perpetuate violence against women. Discrimination exists at multiple levels, in communities and among key groups, including police forces and faith organisations. It reinforces social stigmas that make it difficult for women to protect themselves by reporting or acting to end the violence.



‘The complex web of control, intimidation, humiliation and multiple forms of violence needs to be recognised by all service providers who aim to prevent violence and assist women living with violence. Coercive control by husbands and partners prevents women and girls from finding out about their legal and human rights available to help them. It prevents them from reporting the violence to authorities and getting the help they need from health services and other agencies for their injuries and trauma. It also prevents women from telling their family and friends about the violence.’

Fiji Women’s Crisis Centre’s National Research: Somebody’s Life, Everybody’s Business³⁹

The evidence

Unequal social norms and attitudes about the acceptability of violence against women are deeply entrenched.

- In Tonga, 83 per cent of women agree that a good wife obeys her husband, even if she disagrees with him.⁴⁰
- In Fiji, 33 per cent of women believe a wife is obliged to have sex with her husband, even if she does not feel like it.⁴¹
- In Solomon Islands, 73.2 per cent of ever-partnered women believe that a husband is justified in beating his wife if she does not conform to her usual roles, for example not completing housework to her partner’s satisfaction or disobeying him.⁴²

Almost the entire population (98.4 per cent) in the Western Highlands of Papua New Guinea believe that a woman must seek permission from her husband before visiting friends or relatives, with 62.9 per cent believing women also have to seek permission to access health services.⁴³

Entrenched community attitudes are a serious disincentive to women disclosing violence and taking steps to deal with it. In Fiji, only half of women living with violence have ever told anyone about it; when they do tell someone, they usually turn to family members.⁴⁴ Only 24 per cent of survivors of violence in Fiji have ever sought help from an agency or formal authority.⁴⁵

What can be done?

To address violence against women, it is necessary to ensure all interventions are grounded in human rights and gender-transformative approaches. ‘The centrality of gender inequality and discrimination, as both a root cause and a consequence of violence against women and girls, requires that services ensure gender sensitive and responsive policies and practices are in place.’⁴⁶

Prevention of violence requires coordinated efforts at multiple levels. This includes strengthening human rights, legal and policy frameworks, while also increasing women’s status in society and changing social norms which serve to normalise violence against women and impunity for perpetrators. Laws and comprehensive measures to deliver services must be implemented effectively in urban and rural areas, considering the needs of poor and marginalised women, including women with disabilities.

The Pacific Leaders’ Gender Equality Declaration recommends that, to support survivors of violence, it is essential to implement a progressive package of essential services including protection, health, counselling and legal support for women and girls who are survivors of violence. Enacting and implementing legislation regarding sexual and gender-based violence to protect women from

violence and impose appropriate penalties for perpetrators of violence is also key. Ongoing efforts to strengthen, monitor and evaluate the evidence base on violence against women need promotion.

It is important to address gender inequality through changing discriminatory social norms by working with young people, male decision-makers, churches, police and frontline service providers. Coordination of efforts is essential to harmonise development interventions, to avoid duplication and maximise impact. In order to be effective, these and other approaches need to: ⁴⁷

- be survivor-centred;
- be rights-based;
- advance gender equality and women’s empowerment;
- be age-appropriate and culturally sensitive;
- prioritise safety; and
- ensure perpetrator accountability.

Women and women’s rights organisations are already leading efforts in the Pacific region to end violence. Pacific Women Lead at SPC is supporting long-term partnerships to end violence against women, including both the prevention of violence and provision of services to survivors. These partnerships include initiatives in the North Pacific, where Pacific Women Lead at SPC resources local partners to operate their country’s first-ever crisis support services for women survivors of violence in the Republic of the Marshall Islands, Kiribati and the Federated States of Micronesia. These civil society organisations, which work closely with their government counterparts, are also sharing learning about how best to support survivors in small island states.

SPC is also involved in prevention work, such as through its Social Citizenship Education (SCE) programme as part of the Pacific Partnership to End Violence Against Women, implemented by UN Women, the Pacific Community (SPC) and the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (PIFS).

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- ³¹ Moriarty, A 2012. The Pacific Islands Cannot Afford the Human and Economic Cost of Violence Against Women. World Bank. Available at: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/opinion/2012/11/25/the-human-and-economic-cost-the-pacific-cannot-afford> The study referenced in the article was undertaken by Professor Biman Prasad of the University of the South Pacific in 2011 and reinforced 2002 research findings cited by the Fiji Reserve Bank. See further details in Asian Development Bank 2015. Fiji Country Gender Assessment, p. 75. Available at: <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/institutional-document/210826/fiji-cga-2015.pdf>.
- ³² Business Coalition for Women (undated). Family and Sexual Violence Solutions (brochure).
- ³³ International Finance Corporation 2019. The Business Case for Workplace Responses to Domestic and Sexual Violence in Fiji, p. 8. Available at: https://www.ifc.org/wps/wcm/connect/region_ext_content/ifc_external_corporate_site/east+asia+and+the+pacific/resources/fiji-domestic+and+sexual+violence+report.
- ³⁴ International Finance Corporation 2019. See: note 33, p. 8.
- ³⁵ Vanuatu Women's Centre 2011. See: note 2, p. 139.
- ³⁶ Ellsberg, M. and others 2012. Violence Against Women in Melanesia and Timor-Leste: Progress made since the 2008 Office of Development Effectiveness report. International Center for Research on Women, p. 31. Available at: <https://www.icrw.org/publications/violence-against-women-in-melanesia-and-timor-leste>.
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- ³⁹ Fiji Women's Crisis Centre 2013. See: note 2.



⁴⁰ Ma`a Fafine mo e Famili Inc. 2009. See: note 2, p.10.

⁴¹ Fiji Women’s Crisis Centre 2013. See: note 2.

⁴² Solomon Islands Ministry of Women, Youth, Children and Family Affairs 2009. See: note 2, p. 73.

⁴³ FHI 360 2014. *Komuniti Lukautim Ol Meri* Survey on Family Wellbeing in Western Highlands and Sanduan (West Sepik) Provinces Papua New Guinea (PNG). Available at: <https://www.fhi360.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/resource-klom-survey-wellbeing.pdf>.

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⁴⁵ Fiji Women’s Crisis Centre 2013. See: note 2.

⁴⁶ UN Women, et al 2015. Module 1: Overview and Introduction - Essential Services Package for Women and Girls Subject to Violence: Core Elements and Quality Guidelines. Available at: <https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/Essential-Services-Package-en.pdf>.

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