



**OXFAM**

# **COMMUNITY HEALING & REBUILDING PROGRAM**

**Oxfam's Strategy for the Prevention  
of Family and Community Violence in  
Papua New Guinea**

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This strategy is part of the Papua New Guinea-Australia Partnership.

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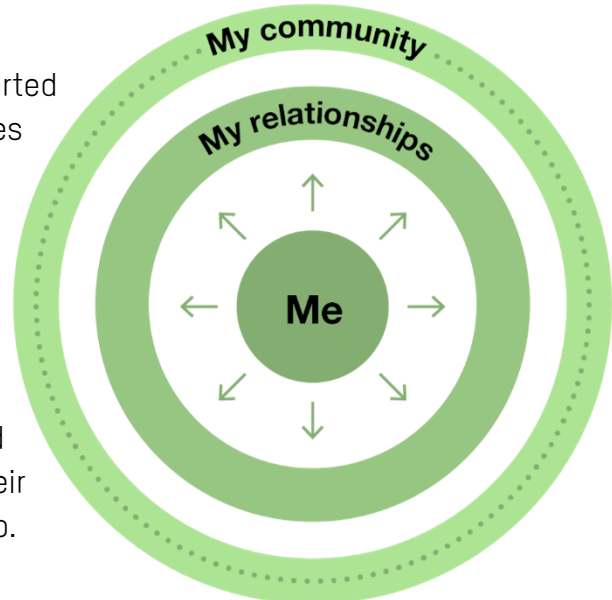
## What is the Community Healing and Rebuilding Program?

The Community Healing and Rebuilding Program is a three-year violence prevention program. It draws on the combined strengths of group therapy, community healing, and community development approaches, with the aim of addressing the risk factors of violence and strengthening the protective factors against it. The program is being trialled in three communities: the Eastern Highlands Province, the Chimbu Province, and the East Sepik Province. In line with Oxfam's partnership approach, this program will be implemented by local partner organisations operating in the three trial communities: Kafe Urban Settlers Women's Association (KUSWA) in the Eastern Highlands, Kup Women for Peace (KWP) in Chimbu, and Family for Change (FFC) in East Sepik.

The program will be delivered through four Peer Support Circles in each community: 1) Women's Peer Support Circle, 2) Young Women's Peer Support Circle, 3) Men's Peer Support Circle, and 4) Young Men's Peer Support Circle. Peer Support Circles will create a safe space for members to heal from their pasts, learn and practice new skills, and create new pathways for their futures. They will be segregated by age and gender to increase the likelihood that members will feel comfortable, enabling them to share and reflect on life experiences together. The program will be delivered in three phases: **Me, My relationships**, and **My community**, with each phase taking roughly one year to complete.

### Phase One: Me

In Phase One, Circle Members will be supported through a program of therapeutic activities designed to heal their personal trauma, encourage self-exploration and self-reflection, and empower them to take positive action to improve their lives. This first phase has been designed for Circle Members to spend some time looking inward and healing themselves, before they are asked to examine the impact of their behaviour on their relationships and the community in Phase Two.



### Phase Two: My relationships

In Phase Two, Circles will be supported through a program of activities that will equip them with the tools to develop healthy and respectful relationships. Circle Members will participate in activities designed to create a deeper appreciation of the rights of others and the impact of their behaviour on others, promote personal responsibility and empathy, and equip them with the interpersonal skills required to communicate effectively. Addressing imbalances in power between women and men will be a core focus

of this phase. Drama will be used as a key tool to help Circle Members understand and improve relations between both women and men, and girls and boys. This phase will also focus on the role of Circle Members in protecting children, and will work with Circles to develop positive parenting skills.

### **Phase Three: My community**

In the final phase, communities will work together to identify and address community issues. Unlike the first two phases, which are facilitated by partner organisations, Phase Three will be driven by communities. During this phase, Circles will utilise participatory tools to identify factors in the community that contribute to violence and community dysfunction, and to develop strategies for addressing these issues and enhancing protective factors. Circles will be empowered to implement their locally-developed solutions. Oxfam may consider providing small amounts of seed funding for these projects.

### **How will the program prevent community and family violence?**

This program will use a number of strategies over three years to simultaneously address the risk factors of violence and strengthen the protective factors. These strategies are explained in detail below.

#### ***1. Breaking the cycle of violence by supporting communities to heal from past trauma***

This program seeks to prevent community and family violence by addressing the trauma that fuels the cycle of violence in these communities. This program uses a trauma-informed approach, meaning that it will work with communities to help them heal in an environment that addresses the needs they have now as a result of their trauma. First and foremost, this approach recognises that when people are marginalised, victimised, or suffer from unresolved trauma, they are less likely to be able to have empathy for others and to take responsibility for their own behaviour. Only when people have had a chance to heal from the past can they engage in a process of rebuilding their futures. It is critical that a safe space is created for all members of the community to work through their experiences of violence and trauma before they are asked take responsibility for their behaviour and change it.

#### What is trauma and how does it fuel violence?

Trauma happens when a person experiences a severe threat to their safety that their brain is unable to process and move past. When a person experiences trauma, their brain may have trouble moving on from the incident. They may feel stressed or fearful a lot of the time, and this may cause them to become angry very quickly, or to shut down and

become withdrawn and avoid certain situations. When people spend all of their time feeling stressed and fearful, it is much more difficult for them to use their brains in other ways, such as learning new things. Over time, this constant stress and fear will impact a person's physical and mental health.

If a person's trauma is left unaddressed, it may cause them to carry around a lot of negative emotions. They may feel sad or depressed; rage, anger, or betrayal; they might blame themselves for the trauma they have experienced, which can make them feel ashamed; they might feel powerless and hopeless about their future; and they might not feel like they have a lot of value as a person. Different people will respond to these feelings in different ways, and while not all of them are negative, research shows that people who experience trauma are more likely to:

- use alcohol and other drugs (this is commonly used to block feelings, but in reality, alcohol can make it harder for a person to control their feelings, which can result in violent outbursts);
- participate in other risk-taking behaviours, such as sexual promiscuity, cigarette smoking, and community violence;
- have trouble trusting others, which might make it difficult for them to build close, healthy relationships with other people; and
- commit suicide.

### Intergenerational cycle of violence

When children experience trauma as a result of experiencing or witnessing violence, there is an increased risk that they will become perpetrators of violence. This means that there is a potential for communities to get trapped in a cycle of violence; as more people are exposed to violence, the risk factors for violence increase. This does not mean that every person that experiences violence will become a perpetrator, nor does it excuse violence when it occurs, but it does help to explain the flow of violence across generations.



## Community trauma

There is a growing consensus that in communities where trauma is common, behaviours used to cope with trauma – such as drinking and violence – become normalized, and communities get stuck in a cycle of trauma. In these communities, violence becomes more common and severe as each generation is exposed to the trauma behaviours of the previous generation. This means that as violence increases, the impact on people in the community increases, which increases the risk that people will perpetrate violence and participate in destructive behaviours, such as community violence, high-risk sex, alcohol and drug taking etc., which also increase the risk of violence.



## How does this program support communities to heal from past trauma?

The program will support Circle Members to heal from their past trauma in the following ways:

1. Peer Support Circles provide an opportunity for Circle Members to build a peer support network and a sense of solidarity with their peers. This is particularly important for women, who may have less access to peer support due to restrictions on their movements.
2. Sessions draw on a combination of Eastern and Western therapeutic activities, including the use of “story” and art to support Circle Members in exploring and expressing their experiences and feelings. These activities will be used to facilitate critical reflection, meaning-making, and healing. Art has been shown to build trust and community spirit, as well as aid in the processing of traumatic experiences in a range of ways, including by providing a new medium to communicate suppressed feelings and thoughts. These activities will therefore assist Circle Members to process past trauma and become more future oriented.
3. Each session includes a calming exercise that will help participants to stay centred and focussed. When people feel strong emotions, their brains can struggle to learn new things or think clearly. The calming exercises used in this

program draw on a strong evidence base: relaxing the body calms the brain down. These exercises reduce stress hormones, calm the heart rate, slow down breathing, and trigger the release of feel-good hormones. These simple exercises can be used by Circle Members in their everyday lives as a way of calming themselves down so they can make good decisions.

## ***2. Fostering understanding and empathy between community members***

At the end of each module, Facilitators will bring the four Peer Support Circles together in a Community Forum. Each Circle will prepare a presentation for the other Circles, in order to share what they have learned during the module and their reflections of the process. Circles will be encouraged to use creative and interactive methods of storytelling (storyboards, art, dance, song etc.) as a medium to share their collective stories with other members of the community. Community Forums have been designed to deepen understanding and empathy among different groups in the community. This is key to strengthening community cohesion – an important protective factor against violence.

When appropriate, Facilitators are encouraged to invite the wider community to participate in these forums. This will have the added benefit of exposing community members outside of the program to its key messages.

## ***3. Equipping Circle Members with the knowledge and skills required to examine the impact of their behaviour on their relationships and community***

Behavioural change requires an individual to have the necessary knowledge and skills to examine and change their actions. This might sound simple, but too often, foundational knowledge and skills are assumed and not taught. In Phase One, Me, Circle Members will examine the connection between their thoughts, feelings, and behaviour, and will learn to take responsibility for their own behaviour. They will then learn strategies for controlling their behaviour, such as calming themselves down before acting. In Phase Two, My relationships, Circle Members will participate in activities designed to create a deeper appreciation of the rights of others and the impact of their behaviour on others.

The phased approach is key to this strategy. It is anticipated that once Circle Members have completed Phase One, they will feel their experiences and emotions have been acknowledged and validated, and they will be more receptive to examining their behaviour and its impact on others.



#### ***4. Challenging harmful gender norms and redressing power disparities between women and men***

In Phase Two, My relationships, Circle Members will examine their behaviour in the context of others. This means looking closely at their relationships with their peers, families, and the community. Circle Members will learn to examine the impact of power disparities and gender inequality on relationships and community cohesion. Some sessions will be gender specific, meaning that the men's Circles will explore different topics to the women's Circles. For example, the program will work with men to explore rigid and harmful ideas of masculinity and the effect they have on men, women, and communities. The program will simultaneously work with women to examine the sources of power that oppress them, and identify strategies for them to reclaim their power.

#### ***5. Equipping parents and care-givers with the knowledge and skills required to create safe, nurturing environments for children***

The program will work to create safe communities for children as a means of preventing violence against children and the continuation of the trauma cycle. Children that grow up in safe, nurturing environments are less likely to perpetrate violence as adults.

At the end of Phase One, Me, Circle Members will start to examine their roles in providing safe, nurturing environments for children. This will prepare them for a deeper focus on parenting in Phase Two, My relationships. In Phase Two, Circle Members will participate in Family Circles, during which Facilitators will coach parents and other caregivers to interact with their children in positive ways. An example of an activity that may be used in these circles is the use of dialogic reading techniques to engage with children using wordless picture books. Adults will be taught didactic reading techniques, which involve prompting a child to label or notice objects or actions illustrated in the book, and will reflect on these with the children. This is a simple activity, yet it acts on multiple aspects of child wellbeing, such as increasing positive caregiver interactions, language development, and encouraging imagination. Wordless books also encourage greater engagement, as parents interpret and explain the books to their children. Ultimately, this strengthens the parent-child bond and stimulates brain development, improving outcomes for children as they develop. Training parents to interact with their children while reading picture books has been proven to be highly effective in improving parent-child interactions, resulting in improved child cognition (including language development, attention, literacy, and school readiness) and socioemotional development.

This approach aims to reduce the use of physical discipline and to equip parents to build healthy, caring relationships with their children.

## ***6. Empowering communities to identify and address the issues that foster violence in their communities***

In Phase Three, My community, communities will work together to identify and address community issues. Unlike the first two phases, which will be facilitated by partner organisations, Phase Three will be driven by communities. During this phase, Circles will be supported to work through a toolkit of participatory tools to identify factors in the community that contribute to violence and community dysfunction, and to develop strategies for addressing these issues. Circles will be empowered to implement their locally-developed solutions. This strategy will be developed further in year two of the program.

## ***7. Engaging leaders and synchronising messaging***

Partner organisations will work with influential community members and institutions (such as community leaders and churches), to ensure that their communication and behaviour reinforces the program.