

Using Participatory Methods for Researching Violence against Women: An Experience from Melanesia and East Timor

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Gender equality is an idea that has to be nurtured because it causes sensitivities. Merely talking about gender equality is a direct challenge to male dominance. (Secretary of the Ministry for Women, Youth and Children, Solomon Islands).

We must look at both sides of the coin. Nowadays we are pitching equality, but look at women, they are wearing short skirt; that is taboo, and that is how rape happens. (Male magistrate, Solomon Islands)

Once a woman is married, the elders say she must obey her husband because of the cows [paid as bride-price]. All decisions are made by men. They don't listen to women, and the woman is always blamed. (Women's FGD, East Timor)

The ladies have rights, but in PNG they can't get the help they need. They have to live through the trauma. (Police officer, Papua New Guinea)

Executive Summary

In the last decade, enormous strides have been made in terms of documenting the extent and characteristics of different forms of violence against women (VAW), particularly domestic violence and sexual assault. There is now population-based data from over 70 countries that reveal a high prevalence of physical and sexual violence against women globally. Although these studies provide compelling evidence of the need for national strategies and programs to end violence against women, they are less useful for understanding *how* to best address a complex problem rooted in structural and social inequities, nor how to assess program effectiveness. Participatory research methods are an effective way to engage community members and local authorities in a critical analysis of the root causes of VAW, to provide a snapshot of the strengths and limitations of ongoing efforts to combat VAW and to develop innovative approaches to reduce violence that are appropriate to the special conditions and resources of the community. This paper describes a participatory assessment of promising practices to address VAW in 5 countries: Vanuatu, Fiji, Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea and East Timor. In each country a local advisory group was created to support the study, which was conducted by a team of international and national researchers. Individual interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) were carried out with a diverse group of stakeholders, including police, community men and women, church leaders, judges, and women's rights activists. Over 700 individuals participated in the study across the

5 countries. Participatory methods used during the FGDs included Venn diagrams, incomplete stories, free listing and ranking, mapping and timelines. The results of each assessment were discussed with local leaders and together the findings from the 5 assessments served as the basis for a regional strategy for addressing VAW. The study's participatory methodology was effective in increasing the active involvement of a broad cross-section of society, and ensuring that results were accepted and used to gain support for new programs to end VAW.

Background

During the last decade, violence against women and girls—also referred to as “violence against women” (VAW) and “gender-based violence” —has gained international recognition as a grave social and human rights concern affecting virtually all societies. Epidemiological research has demonstrated that VAW is a major cause of ill health among women and girls. The impact of VAW can be seen directly, through death and disability due to injuries, and indirectly, through increased vulnerability to a host of physical and mental health problems. Violence and the fear of violence severely limit women's contributions to social and economic development, thereby hindering the achievement of important national and international development goals, such as the Millennium Development Goals of eradicating extreme poverty and hunger and improving maternal and child health (United Nations, 2006; Ellsberg, 2006).

In 2007, the Australian Agency for International Development's (AusAID) Office of Development Effectiveness (ODE) recognized VAW as a major barrier to development in Melanesia and East Timor, with serious effects on the health and welfare of the women experiencing violence, as well as their families, communities, and countries (AusAID Office of Development Effectiveness 2007). In order to strengthen ongoing efforts to address VAW in the region, the ODE commissioned a study to assess the effectiveness of current approaches to addressing violence against girls and women in five countries: East Timor, Fiji, Papua New Guinea (PNG), Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu. An international evaluation team was tasked with carrying out the study. One member (CB) is an anthropologist with many years of experience working on VAW in the region. The other member of the team (ME) is an epidemiologist, with experience in international research and policy on VAW, as well as participatory research methods.

The research team designed a study based on the principles of participatory action research (PAR), also known as community-based participatory research (CBPR). PAR is defined as, “a systematic inquiry, with the participation of those affected by the issue being studied, for the purposes of education and taking action or affecting social change” (Green & Mercer, 2001). Participatory research methods are increasingly

recognized as a promising approach for program assessments, evaluations and for advocacy purposes. Participatory research is not limited to a specific method and it can be carried out using qualitative or quantitative methods (Minkler, 2005). What links these methods is adherence to a core set of principles. According to Israel and colleagues, the fundamental characteristics of CBPR are that: 1) it is participatory; 2) it is co-operative, engaging community members and researchers in a joint process to which each contribute equally; 3) it is a co-learning process; 4) it involved systems development and local capacity building; 5) it is an empowering process through which participants can increase control over their lives, and 6) it achieves a balance between research and action (Israel et al. 2001.)

Research aims and methods

The goal of the study is to contribute to the evidence base for effective VAW interventions through an assessment of what has been achieved to date in the region. Specifically, the study aimed to answer the following questions:

- What interventions to reduce VAW have been carried out that might be considered promising practices, whether by government, aid donors, or community members?
- What factors have contributed to the success of these interventions? What challenges have these interventions faced, and how have these been addressed?
- What gaps still exist at the community and national level that could improve women's safety?
- Who is currently involved in violence prevention work? Who else should be engaged in this work? How can coordination be improved among different sectors (government and NGOs, traditional leaders and formal justice operators, etc.)?
- What else can be done to strengthen violence prevention work and scale up promising practices?
- What lessons have been learned in one setting that could be applied to other settings in the region?

The study focused as much as possible on women's own experience of violence, and what interventions do or do not help them in terms of protection and prevention. To categorize and analyse these different interventions, the research team used a framework developed by the World Bank that identifies three main strategies used throughout the world to reduce VAW (Bott et al, 2004, Morrison et al, 2007):

1. **Increasing women's access to justice** through passing and implementing laws and policies that discourage violence by imposing consequences on offenders; providing women with the means to protect themselves and children from violence through access to restraining orders, divorce, and child maintenance; and ensuring humane and fair treatment by justice operators, judges, police, and

forensic doctors. In Melanesia and East Timor, where parallel systems of justice operate, women need to have their rights upheld through both formal and traditional systems, and to have the necessary information to be able to exercise their rights effectively.

2. **Increasing women's access to support services** such as psychological, medical, and legal support, as well as safe haven. Support for survivors can and does come from government institutions, nongovernmental organisations (NGOs, women's rights groups, faith-based organisations, and community-based organisations.
3. **Prevention of violence** through coordinated efforts to raise awareness; change community attitudes about violence; and increase women's status in society through political, social, and economic empowerment. Preventing VAW involves dialogue with all sectors of society at national, regional, and community levels. Prevention activities include awareness campaigns and advocacy, as well as ongoing community-level activities.

The team designed a multi-stage methodology to answer the research questions, including the identification of promising interventions that could be scaled up, or applied in other countries in the region. To begin with, the team carried out a review of over one hundred policy briefs, reports, and studies on VAW in the region, which provided a preliminary analysis of current work and international and regional lessons learned.

To guide the field work, a local advisory group comprised of 5-10 knowledgeable, highly respected, and well-placed women and men was set up in each country. Advisory group members included representatives of government agencies with a role in addressing VAW (ministries of justice, women's affairs, etc.), civil society leaders and opinion makers (for example, the editor of a local newspaper, well known academics, and public health experts), as well as representatives of organizations advocating for women's rights or violence prevention.) The role of the advisory group was to review preliminary findings, formulate recommendations together with the international team, and identify possible next steps to follow up on the final report.

Site visits of four to nine days were carried out by the international evaluation team to each of the five countries during September and October 2007. Selection of the specific programs to visit was made in collaboration with AusAID's sectoral program leaders, local activists, country advisory groups, and local researchers. During these visits, the team carried out, with the help of local researchers:

- Semi-structured interviews with key individuals, including policymakers, civil society leaders, women's groups, government officials, service providers, researchers, and survivors who have used services, which provided valuable insight into how violence against woman is addressed.
- Focus group discussions (FGDs) with a diversity of social actors (police officers, church members, community men and women, magistrates, etc.). The team

used participatory methods to explore community attitudes toward VAW and the availability and effectiveness of options for responding to violence , both at the community level and more broadly.

The international team trained the local researchers in the use of participatory interviewing techniques, and subsequently carried out additional interviews and FGDs in rural areas. In each interview and FGD, conducted by either international or local researchers, there was at least one dedicated note taker in addition to the interviewer or facilitator. Notes and reports from each interview and FGD were compiled, with care taken to collect verbatim quotes as much as possible. Local researchers continued the field work for up to a month after the international team's initial visit. In all, more than 700 individuals participated in the review, either through individual interviews, FGDs, or as members of the local advisory groups.

After data collection was completed, the international team prepared preliminary findings based on the reports from the site visits and local researchers. The findings were presented during a workshop in Port Moresby in March 2008, which involved the local researchers, AusAID representatives, and advisory group representatives from all the countries. The major lessons learned and recommendations for future development assistance in the field were developed by the advisory group members through a participatory, consensus-building process led by the international team during the workshop in Port Moresby. The final documents were reviewed by advisory group members in each country, to ensure that the recommendations were faithful to what was agreed upon by the group.

The result of this lengthy and complex process is a package of reports grounded in the perspectives and hopes of a broad spectrum of Melanesian and East Timorese society. The package consists of an overall report that outlines a framework for guiding cooperative action to address VAW in Melanesia and East Timor, and five country-specific reports. The country reports include concrete, actionable proposals based on the framework that are tailored to each country context, permitting a more nuanced approach to proposed solutions. .

Use of Participatory Methods:

A variety of participatory tools were adapted to elicit views around different areas of interest.¹ Although some of the techniques were adapted to the specific characteristics of the group, the majority were used with a broad spectrum of stakeholders.

Free listing and ranking

¹ These techniques are described at length in Ellsberg and Heise, 2005, available online at www.path.org/publications/details.php?i=1524.

Participants were asked to list different types of violence against women in their community and then to rank them according to how common they are as well as their severity.

Open ended stories and Venn diagrams

Facilitators read a story about a woman named Laila (or other local name) who suffered domestic violence, or a girl who was raped by a school mate, and participants were asked to describe where she might go for help, and what kind of help she would receive. The answers were placed on a board in the form of a Venn Diagram, where proximity to the woman denoted accessibility of the resource (i.e. the resources closest to X were the most accessible), and the size of the circle indicated whether the help she received was useful or not (i.e. the larger the circle the more helpful the resource (Figure 1).

Timelines

Timelines were developed with groups that had some joint history of working together to combat VAW (e.g. staff and volunteers from a women's shelter, women activists, and members of the police who work with a police program for survivors of violence) to document the chronology of events in the history of their work up to the present. This exercise, called "The Road Travelled," indicated positive events (flowers in the road), as well as negative events (stones and rivers) (Figure 2).

Stakeholder mapping:

This was done with groups whose members represented more than one sector (e.g. multi-sectoral commissions on violence prevention.) The participants mapped out all the stakeholders who were involved in some way with violence prevention. Different colours were used to indicate whether the groups were governmental agencies, NGOs, CSOs or international agencies. The size of the circle that included the name of the group varied based on the importance of their participation (i.e. the bigger the circle, the more important the group). Then, participants were asked to name groups or individuals who were not involved in violence prevention, but should be. These stakeholders were encircled with dotted lines (Figure 3).

Strengths and Challenges in Participatory Research

The participatory process used in this study proved to be effective, not only for gaining understanding of ongoing efforts to address VAW in the region, but also to stimulate dialogue and critical reflection among diverse sectors of the population. Some of the benefits of this approach were the following:

- *Diversity.* Using participatory methods we were able to collect comparable views from diverse stakeholders: from Supreme Court Justices and Ministers of Women's Affairs to women's rights activists and local NGOs, community men and women, and traditional leaders. The use of similar methods across the groups enabled us to identify points of commonality as well as divergent views.
- *Triangulation.* The use of a variety of data collection methods (document review, individual interviews and FGDs), informants (diversity of ethnicity, education, profession, gender, etc.) and researchers allowed for triangulation of the data to corroborate and validate the findings.
- *Participation.* Engaging key stakeholders in each country from the very beginning of the process was critical for gaining access to a broad range of informants. Including these stakeholders in the interpretation of findings and the development of recommendations created a sense of local ownership of the results. The resulting regional report had much more legitimacy as a blueprint for action than it would have, if it had been viewed simply as the work of external consultants, or a donor agency.
- *Dialogue.* The participatory process provided a neutral ground for dialogue among some sectors that rarely interacted, and in the consensus building process around the recommendations, some compromises were reached that might not have been achieved in other circumstances. Most importantly, it allowed for the voices of less powerful groups, particularly women survivors of violence, to be heard throughout the process.

The main challenges of using a participatory approach such as the one described above, is that it requires more time and resources than a traditional evaluation. To compare and synthesize such a large amount of complex data from five different countries would be a daunting endeavor under any circumstances. To attempt to build consensus around the results among participants from wildly different backgrounds and perspectives seemed at times to be a foolhardy ambition. In the end, most participants agreed that the value of the final report lay, not in the recommendations, but in the process leading up to them. Through this approach, the researchers are transformed from the traditional role as "interpreters of reality," to facilitators and co-participants in a collective construction of reality. For researchers committed to social change, this represents a most welcomed opportunity.

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**Figure 1
Who can help
Leila? Venn
Diagrams in Fiji**

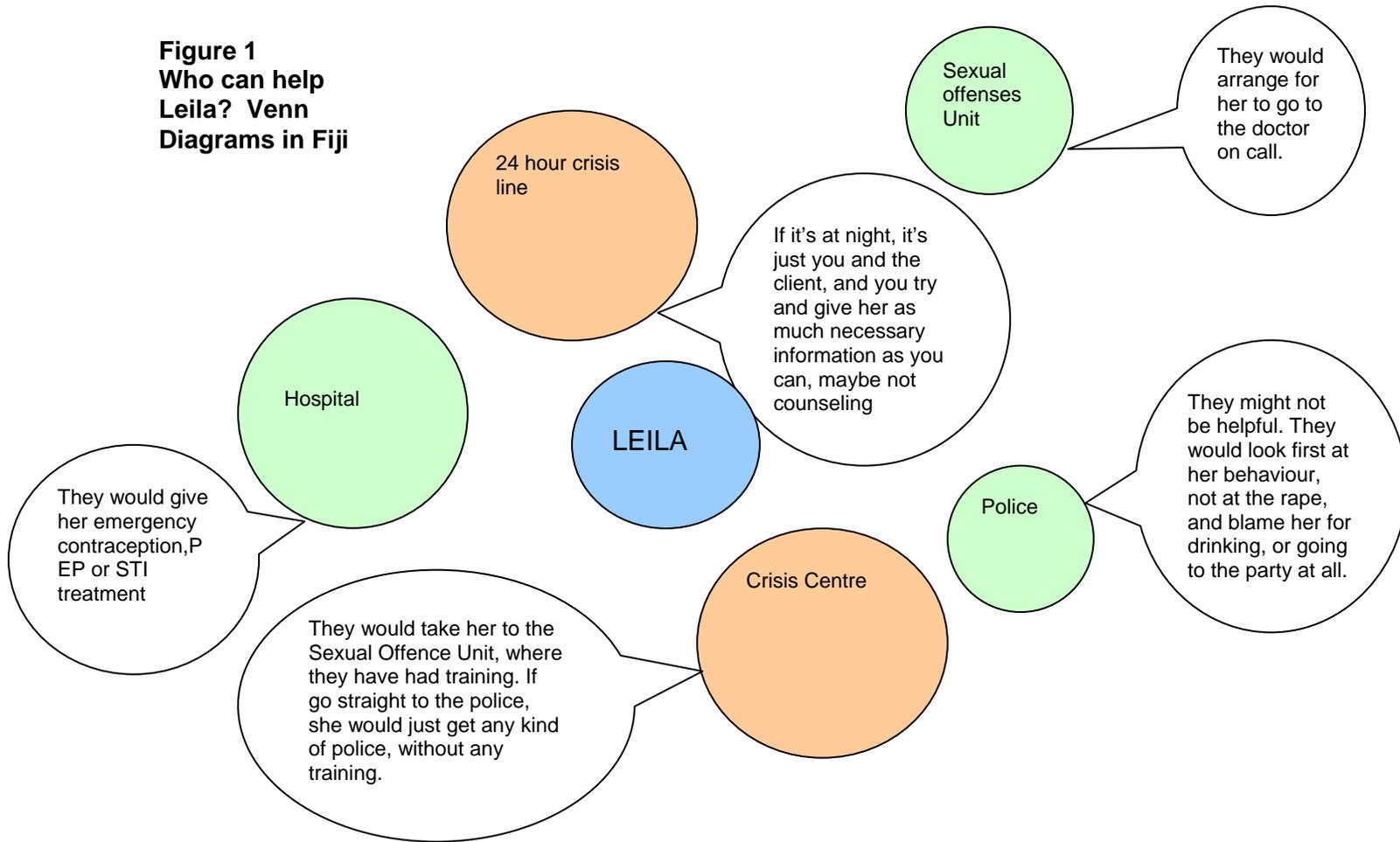


Figure 2
The Road Traveled
The history of the women's movement
in Solomon Islands

