

# A faith-based approach to reducing family violence in Vanuatu: counselling skills and men's behaviour change program

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## Acronyms

<b>CoHG</b>	Chanel of Hope for Gender
<b>GBV</b>	Gender Based Violence
<b>MBC</b>	Men's Behaviour Change (Program)
<b>REACH</b>	Relationship Education about Choices and Healing
<b>WVI</b>	World Vision International
<b>WVV</b>	World Vision Vanuatu

## Introduction

Domestic violence is a major issue in Vanuatu, where 83% of the population identifies as Christian, and over half of men and women in rural areas are likely to turn to customary or religious leaders for domestic conflict resolution<sup>1</sup>.

Research by the Vanuatu Women's centre in 2011 found that, 60% of women with an intimate partner had experienced physical violence, 68% experienced emotional violence and 69% coercive behavioural control by men.<sup>2</sup> Male family members and boyfriends perpetrate most of the violence and it occurs in all provinces and islands, among all age groups, education levels, socio-economic groups and religions. It is higher in rural (63%) than in urban (50%) areas<sup>3</sup>. Social values held by both women and men reinforce the acceptability of violence towards women and girls, and 60% of women agree with at least one "reason" for men to beat their wives.<sup>4</sup>

Women suffer short- and long-term impacts on their physical, mental and reproductive health. Children's emotional well-being, protection and schooling suffer, reducing their opportunities for development and pre-disposing them to also accept violence as normal<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Conflict Management and Access to Justice in Rural Vanuatu, Ministry of Justice and Community Services, 2016

<sup>2</sup> Vanuatu Women's Centre, 2011,

[https://mjcs.gov.vu/images/research\\_database/Vanuatu\\_National\\_Survey\\_on\\_Womens\\_Lives\\_and\\_Family\\_Relationships.pdf](https://mjcs.gov.vu/images/research_database/Vanuatu_National_Survey_on_Womens_Lives_and_Family_Relationships.pdf), *National Survey on Women's Lives and Family Relationships*

<sup>3</sup> Molony, T. 2014 *Desk Review Women's and Girl's Empowerment Program*, CARE International in Vanuatu, p.21

<sup>4</sup> Vanuatu Women's Centre, 2011,

[https://mjcs.gov.vu/images/research\\_database/Vanuatu\\_National\\_Survey\\_on\\_Womens\\_Lives\\_and\\_Family\\_Relationships.pdf](https://mjcs.gov.vu/images/research_database/Vanuatu_National_Survey_on_Womens_Lives_and_Family_Relationships.pdf), *National Survey on Women's Lives and Family Relationships*, p. 55

<sup>5</sup> Vanuatu Women's Centre. 2011.

[https://mjcs.gov.vu/images/research\\_database/Vanuatu\\_National\\_Survey\\_on\\_Womens\\_Lives\\_and\\_Family\\_Relationships.pdf](https://mjcs.gov.vu/images/research_database/Vanuatu_National_Survey_on_Womens_Lives_and_Family_Relationships.pdf), *The Vanuatu National Survey on Women's Lives and Family Relationships*.

Ni-Vanuatu turn to customary and faith leaders for conflict resolution and justice for several reasons. Firstly, they are trusted people, and are strong influencers in people's lives. Secondly, due to the geographic landscape of Vanuatu, access to police and other formal service providers is extremely low, meaning people are more likely to turn to trusted community-based leaders. However, faith and custom are often used as mechanisms to perpetuate and justify violence, and to reinforce harmful gender norms. Therefore, the focus on working with faith and community leaders for this project allowed World Vision staff members to work with them to reframe or reinterpret their religious texts and customary beliefs, to ensure that harmful traditional and faith-based practices were addressed.

## **World Vision Vanuatu's Counselling Skills Approach**

Working with faith and customary leaders as respected members of society to address the use of faith and custom to perpetuate violence, World Vision Vanuatu adapted World Vision International's (WVI) effective Channels of Hope for Gender (CoHG), approach - a faith-based approach to engage church leaders and church members in discussions about gender equality and gender-based violence (GBV). In response to both need and context, World Vision partnered with Kara Duncan-Hewitt<sup>6</sup>, a family violence expert based out of New Zealand, to contextualise the CoHG model to Vanuatu by developing the Counselling Skills Course in 2016. The Counselling Skills Course is a series of three one-week workshops delivered with and to Christian faith and community leaders and their spouses, to increase understanding of family violence and improve their ability to help both survivors and perpetrators of violence in their congregations and communities. The workshops address gendered social norms that underpin the high prevalence of violence, while also connecting the project's partners, faith and community groups, to services and information. This serves to:

- 1) support community and faith leaders to become champions against gender-based violence;
- 2) strengthen links between communities and GBV and child protection service providers, such as the Vanuatu Women's Centre and the Police Family Protection Unit; and,
- 3) support communities to increase awareness and change attitudes and behaviours related to gender-based and family violence inside communities and churches.

The Counselling Skills Course has a strong focus on working with men who use violence to accept responsibility for their actions, see violence as a choice, and provide practical tools and strategies to change their behaviour. The Course also works with women too, given that women also subscribe to harmful gender and religious norms that perpetuate violence, especially violence against children. Service providers including police and women's family violence services participated in Counselling Skills Workshops under the Course to strengthen the referral pathways to their services, build technical capacity (when appropriate) and develop an understanding of the faith-based approach to addressing GBV and family violence.

Each one-week Counselling Skills Workshop has approximately 20 community leaders and their spouses and 10 custom leaders and their spouses attending. The workshops are spread out over a 6-9 month period. Each workshop is followed by a break to allow participants to consolidate and implement learnings

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.libertytrainingnz.com/>

in their home. Approximately one month after each workshop there is a one-day refresher catch-up, where participants come together to reflect. Over the course of the three workshops the participant will discover and identify:

- what constitutes family violence and the impact of this violence on victims;
- understanding of typical patterns of violence and cover-up/minimising;
- gender equality;
- child abuse and the impact of child abuse;
- child development and healthy supportive parenting;
- intergenerational effects of trauma;
- challenging unhelpful belief systems and old ways of being that support violence, with reinterpretations of bible passages which are commonly used to perpetuate violence;
- communication skills and tools to use in times when they need to remove themselves from challenging situations; and,
- safety planning.

**An independent evaluation of the Counselling Skills approach** conducted in June 2018 found that 71% of course participants indicated that they had changed their behaviour and had stopped using violence within their own families, as a direct result of the course. It also found that the faith-based medium is ideal to support real change in the lives of ni-Vanuatu women, men, girls and boys. All participants surveyed through the evaluation, a total of 65 men and 66 women, demonstrated an increased understanding of types, pattern and effects of violence as well as the use of tools to disseminate faith-based, anti-violence messages. 58% of participants demonstrated increased acceptance of gender equality, and actively made support referrals for survivors of violence. Half of participants indicated they were working with perpetrators of violence, providing counselling on the law, and strategies to prevent violence. This resulted in a measurable reduction of violence in one-third of target communities in under two years.

However, despite evidenced changes in behaviour, traditional attitudes around gender and justification for violence persisted in both women and men's groups in target communities. While the successes above are indicative of a promising program, there were some key learnings which came from the evaluation and will direct programming moving forward. While the evaluation found the 75% of faith leaders were actively referring survivors, there was low uptake on assisting survivors or women at risk of violence to develop safety plans (8% of faith leaders). Furthermore despite 75% of faith leaders making active referrals, impacted on developing stronger networks between formal service providers and the community unevenly and inconsistently across the communities: 33% of service providers created strong connections with communities, 33% created some limited connections and 34% indicated no particular relationship with communities.

This process has reinforced that while the Counselling Skills Course is a powerful tool to create change in participants who have attended, it did not adequately build their confidence or motivation to the point where they could take anti-violence messages and support proactively into their communities and congregations.

## Men's Behaviour Change Program

Prior to the completion of the evaluation, program monitoring indicated that while the Counselling Skills Course appeared to change individual behaviour towards violence, it did not appear to create congregational and community champions for change, as was desired. On-going analysis of monitoring data found that despite the reduction in personal use of violence, traditional attitudes justifying the use of violence remained. For example, many course participants – both men and women – continued to feel that women could provoke violence by committing adultery or not fulfilling household roles such as childcare and meal preparation. To address this, as well as to create some true community champions for change, World Vision has developed and is piloting a Men's Behavioural Change (MBC) program. MBC is facilitated by World Vision national staff and trained male and female faith leaders who have been through the Counselling Skills Course. The goal of the program is to work directly with men who use violence to take responsibility for their actions, and provide practical strategies to change their behaviour.

The program addresses attitudes and behaviours underpinning abuse, while creating opportunities for men to understand the impact of their violence on their partners and families. The program strongly highlights that violence, abuse and controlling behaviour is a choice, and helps men to develop different strategies to stop their use of violence. The MBC program content themes include:

- participants understanding violence and the cycle of violence;
- strategies for stopping violence;
- protecting children;
- healthy and good relationships;
- sexual respect;
- respectful relationships; and,
- support systems and safety planning.

Given that this is one of the first men's program of its type to be developed and delivered in the Pacific Island region, World Vision engaged a highly competent and experienced technical team to develop program content. The team was comprised of consultant Kara Duncan-Hewitt, Pastor Fiana Rakau, World Vision Vanuatu's Faith & Development Technical Advisor and an experience ni-Vanuatu faith leader, and Amy Gardiner, an Australian Federal Police Social Work Advisor. This team co-authored the manual for the MBC Program and conducted the training for facilitators. The team was also responsible for project management of the pilot, including ensuring the safety of the MBC participants' partners and children during the pilot program.

In initiating a MBC Program, WVV acknowledged and assessed the risks in developing and delivering the program, particularly as WVV had not delivered this type of programming previously. Important risk factors included ensuring strategies were in place to manage disclosures of abuse, and ensuring the duty of care to participants and staff was met – particularly in developing strategies to ensure the safety and wellbeing of women and children. Stakeholder engagement was also sought, however, due to time frames and resourcing issues of services for women in Vanuatu, it was determined that WVV trainee facilitators undertake the support to women and refer to the Vanuatu Women's Centre as required.

To implement the MBC Program pilot, WVV conducted a 'train the trainers' for twelve trainee facilitators. Trainees included seven male pastors (with two WVV staff members) and five female trainers (including a pastor, deaconess, Sunday School Teacher and two community Elders). Selection of the trainees was undertaken by Pastor Fiama and included representatives from the Christian denominations that had engaged with the existing CoHG project activities, particularly the Counselling Skills Course, and an ongoing Peer Support Program, which supported Counselling graduates' capacity and ability to respond to gender based and family violence in their communities. Furthermore, facilitators were trained to conduct ongoing risk assessments, safety planning, relationship building, stakeholder and client engagement, analyse and facilitate complex group dynamics, and develop solid and nuanced facilitation skills. These requirements are not standalone concepts/principles or 'one off' but instead require ongoing reflection and adaptation, with support, mentoring, monitoring/evaluation and supervision for the facilitators.

The MBC program consists of ten sessions, running three hours in length. The program has been designed to be run once per week for ten weeks. Common practice in men's groups is to run one weekly session only to enable participants to reflect on and consolidate learning and application of new skills. Each group is run by three facilitators, two male and one female, with support from World Vision staff and consultants throughout. The consistency of the lead facilitators is an important aspect of the program, as over the ten weeks the participants build trust and strong relationships with the facilitators. This is a key aspect of the program.

One of the most important considerations during the development of the MBC program was the safety of women and children. To participate in the program, men must agree to their current partner being contacted at least once a week for the program's duration. Female MBC facilitators conduct calls with the partners (spouses and girlfriends) of male participants. Prior to contacting partners, the facilitators were provided with formal training to provide support and assess possible risk, including paper-based tools to guide facilitators making safety checks and to keep as a record of contact. During the initial safety calls, the facilitators develop a safety plan with the women. This includes a plan to avoid serious injury, including the contact details of the Vanuatu Women's Centre, how to escape violence (crisis management), and how to best ensure children's safety.

All the women contacted during the pilot elected to have ongoing communication with the facilitators but declined the home visit that was offered. Upon reflection, facilitators believed that home visits would have further strengthened the support available to the women and will reiterate the offer of home visits after week 4, once a stronger personal bond has been forged between the women and the facilitators. There were no significant safety concerns or heightened risk factors raised regarding the men's behaviour during the MBC Pilots. This was assessed by examining disclosures from the men during the MBC group, behaviour of participants during the program, collecting observations by course facilitators, and cross-referencing these with spouses' feedback during their contact calls.

As of December 2018, two pilots of the MBC program have been completed. The first pilot was run over May and June and was comprised of eight male participants who were nominated by the faith leaders facilitating the course. They were chosen because they were known users of violence and could be actively supported by their faith leader after the completion of the course. Their ages ranged from 25 – 65 years

old; it was observed that the learning and the impact of the learning was the same across the different age groups, as discussed below. The second pilot which was run over the month of November 2018 (two sessions per week for five weeks) with 12 World Vision ni-Vanuatu male staff members.

Initial results from both pilots are impressive with all course participants' intimate partners reporting not only cessation of violence but also an improved distribution of work within the home. Initial results reported anecdotally from the men themselves are also encouraging. During the MBC program closing sessions, the men articulated positive changes and their decisions not to use violence. The men recognised that they were often abused as children by their own parents and did not want to continue to replicate this behaviour with their own families.

*'Before the program I was abusive to my wife, I wasn't involved with the care of my children and did not have time for others and while I attended church with my bible I didn't have a strong belief in God. Since I have been doing the MBC I have not been abusive to my wife, I spend time with my children. This program has brought me back to God.'* MBC Program participant, pilot one

*'I was made to come to this program by my uncle otherwise I was not allowed back into the family home. I have a young child and a partner. I now walk in my new story and will not go back to my old story. My wife and I have agreed to only drink together and on special occasions [because I know that alcohol can trigger my violence]. I am doing things around the house, cooking and cleaning. Some of my friends made fun of me for this but those friends are no longer in my life.'* MBC Program participant, pilot one

*'Since the program I have become softer and more nurturing like my wife. We are now equal. I have been using what I have been learning at the MBC to run a weekly youth group and I give the messages I have learnt at the MBC group to the youth group.'* MBC Program participant, pilot one

At the completion of the MBC Program, feedback from the spouses were that they had witnessed changes in the home and a reduction in violence. One key example of this was the shift in men's attitudes to assisting in the tasks in the home, specifically those which are traditionally female roles. The women saw this as a significant change that had strengthened their marriages and friendship. The trainees also articulated a strong depth of emotion apparent in the women's voices when discussing the changes in their spouse's behaviour.

One interesting finding from both the pilots was that the participants who were also leaders, or held influence in their communities, changed the way they were managing disputes in their communities as a direct result of the program. One participant who is a community leader in his village outside of Port Vila commented that his time as a participant of the MBC program allowed him to resolve a long-standing conflict between his community and a neighbouring community, who were trespassing in order to access a water source. The participant established an agreement between the communities which allowed the latter access to water.

A young chief who was a participant in the second pilot was presented with a family conflict in his community that involved a child. The participant identified that prior to the MBC program he would have encouraged family reconciliation, which, before the program, he believed to be the best outcome for all

involved, but since the program he is now considering the safety of victims, too. While the domestic dispute was ongoing, he ensured the child was being cared for by a close family member until the child could safely return home.

WVV acknowledges the need to continue piloting and refining the program to ensure its continued effectiveness. A further two pilots are planned for the first half of 2019 with the Vanuatu National Corrections staff and a selection of inmates. Once these two pilots have been completed, an independent evaluation will take place with pilot facilitators, participants and their partners, and key community members to ensure the effectiveness of the program and sustainability of results. It is anticipated that this evaluation will take place in August 2019.