

Women, the workforce, resources and violence: getting PNG companies to respond

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Dr Linda Van Leeuwen is a Capacity Building Specialist for [Anitua](#), a landholder company based on the island of Lihir in Papua New Guinea that provides a wide range of services to resource companies. She also heads their corporate social responsibility work, predominantly focused on eliminating violence against women (EVAW). Linda has also been involved heavily with the [PNG Business Coalition for Women](#), as a founding board member and chair of its addressing violence working group.

During her recent visit to Australia as part of the [ANZ PNG gender parity symposium](#), Linda discussed the challenge of gender violence for businesses operating in Papua New Guinea, and the steps that businesses, particularly in the resource sector, could take to assist their staff and wider communities. The following is an edited transcript of her conversation with Ashlee Betteridge – you can [listen to a podcast here](#).

Ashlee: What has driven Anitua's focus on EVAW?

Linda: The main starting point was our involvement with the national [Haus Krai](#) two years ago. We were really touched emotionally by the women's stories. So we started to think about what we could do as a business to make our workplaces safer for women. And also looking at the broader community, because Lihir is our birthplace, and we wanted to support the people, the women, and the families of Lihir ... When you look at statistics, roughly 70 percent of PNG women suffer violence, including sexual violence. And as a manager, or leader, or someone who cares about staff, you've got to ask yourself the question, is it acceptable? Can we tolerate, or can we afford to ignore, the fact that 70 percent of our female workforce are suffering violence?

Our answer to that is it's absolutely unacceptable. We need to address it.

Ashlee: Through your involvement with the Business Coalition for Women, are more parts of the PNG private sector starting to realise how violence affects their business?

Linda: Yes, the Business Coalition was formed in recognition that women in PNG do suffer. But also because there is a great business case for employing more women; empowering, developing, training, promoting those women, and also protecting women.

The Business Coalition for Women conducted a survey last year. 94 percent of the people who responded said that they believed gender violence has a negative impact on their workplace, on their productivity, on

their profit. These businesses are essentially crying out for services, for solutions to help them to address gender violence.

Ashlee: What are these solutions?

Linda: The main service the Business Coalition for Women has developed – with PNG business input and amazing support from the World Bank's IFC, the University of New South Wales Gender Violence Research Network, FSV specialists and service providers in PNG – is what we call the 'Model Family and Sexual Violence Workplace Policy'.

It's about thinking about what policies an organisation can have to support the workforce, in terms of looking at special leave policy, anti-violence policy, specific gender violence policies: ways that you can support your staff.

Can you change someone's roster so they're not coming in contact, or have less chance of coming in contact, with a violent partner? Can you relocate them from one particular location to another? Can you change email, phone, addresses? Can you provide them with some very basic legal advice?

Can you train point-of-contact staff, so that staff know that there is someone who is sensitive and professionally trained within their organisation who can confidentially assist them and refer them to whatever service providers are available in their area?

We've also developed a legal guide for employers because most employees and employers don't understand the various laws that can help protect and support staff. And it's not just about supporting victims – how does a workplace or a business deal with perpetrators as well?

Ashlee: That was what I was going to touch on next, whether business feels they're able to have conversations with their employees who may be perpetrators.

Linda: To deal with perpetrators that you employ is a very sensitive area. You can have policies to assist – and the most important thing is staff awareness and education campaigns – to show that this is unacceptable in your eyes as an employer.

But employers need to be very mindful, when you're trying to assist staff with gender violence, that you do no harm. If sacking a perpetrator, for example, is going to put that person's partner, typically the wife, in harm or greater risk of violence, then you just can't go down that path.

This is not an easy field to navigate, but it is a field that has to be navigated.

Ashlee: I wanted to talk about the resource sector. There's been a lot of criticism that it exacerbates gender violence. Are you seeing a greater recognition in the sector of this issue?

Linda: It's rarely acknowledged that in the mining, or in the oil and gas, footprint communities there are greater rates of gender violence than in the broader community.

We are seeing some absolutely amazing leadership through Oil Search, for example, with its establishment earlier this year of the Women's Protection and Empowerment Unit. I think some resource companies will look at them and go, "We definitely need to be doing that. That's inspiring. Let's go down the path." And I believe some other companies will be shamed into going down that path.

Something that I would really like resource companies to do is to actually reconceptualise gender violence, not just as a community problem or a law and order problem, or a private matter to be dealt with away from the workplace, but as a workplace safety issue.

Women do get assaulted in resource company workplaces. They get assaulted on company-provided

transport. They get assaulted in accommodation blocks.

Basic workplace safety legislation stipulates that employers must provide safe workplaces. If women are being assaulted, then those workplaces are obviously not safe. Resource companies have amazingly sophisticated workplace safety systems and management plans in place. There is a huge capacity for them to address gender violence as a workplace safety issue.

If they were to look at gender violence as a workplace hazard that carries a high risk – staff are injured, sometimes to the point of permanent disability, and there's a risk of death there as well – any other hazard with those characteristics would receive the utmost priority and attention.

My understanding is there is some move towards this by some companies, and I have to acknowledge that Newcrest has started to look at this, particularly on Lihir.

There's also the governance of mining, through the Mineral Resources Authority (MRA). The MRA are definitely showing leadership with their Women in Mining program and the different things that they're funding. But I'd like them to actually be forcing our mining, oil and gas companies to tick the gender box when they apply for their licenses or license renewals, in the same way that they need to tick the community box and the environment box.

Ashlee: Beyond this, is there more that government could be doing to help?

Linda: One of the things that's giving me great hope when it comes to the resources sector is that the MRA has significant planning underway for a program on family and sexual violence in PNG resource communities, looking at the provision of services, or capacity building, for setting up proper FSV units at police stations in these footprint communities. Having a family support centre at the local medical centre or hospital, having properly trained and gender-sensitised magistrates, including in the village court system. Having gender violence counselling training.

I think with this program, resource companies will see the benefits of having a properly integrated range of family and sexual violence services. They will see the benefits for the communities in which they operate, which is obviously very important. But they'll see the benefits to their workforce. It's very hard to come to work and be productive and focused and efficient, and do a great job, if you have violence in your life. The mental health toll of violence is just so extreme.

We know the resources sector plays a huge role in the PNG economy. When resource companies aren't doing all that well, the PNG economy isn't doing all that well. So shouldn't we, as a sector, be looking at ways to improve productivity? One way of doing that is looking after the women that are employed by these companies so that they can come to work and function, and be productive, and make the contributions that they have the potential to make.

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