

# Bearing the heavy load of Hela province's family violence

by Michael Main

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Sargent Alice Arigo takes a statement at Tari Family and Sexual Violence Unit

*Photo Credit: Michael Main*

The second time I met Sergeant Alice Arigo of the Tari Family and Sexual Violence Unit (FSVU), who is known in the community as Alice, she was taking down the statement of a woman who had been brutally beaten, holding her pen in one hand while cradling the woman's infant baby in the other.

It was late March 2024, a few days before Good Friday. The woman making the statement sat on the floor, preferring that to the couch behind her that stored a broken and flattened chair underneath.

"They come in with a heavy load," Alice had told me a few days earlier, referring to the broken chair. "Everything that the women face, they come here. They don't know where to go, they don't know what to do."

Sometimes the unburdening of their psychological load, Alice had observed, was enough to break the chair. At least for those who are able to make the journey into the centre of Tari, and to the FSVU office situated within the Tari police station compound. Tari is the capital of Papua New Guinea's Hela Province, and the hometown of PNG's Prime Minister, James Marape.

The woman had made her way from her village in a remoter part of Hela Province to Tari a full two weeks after her beating. Her head and back were scarred from bushknife wounds and her left arm was clearly broken, with her left hand badly swollen and kept close to her side. When I asked Alice if the woman needed to be taken to the hospital, she replied, "yes, but I don't have a car". Tari hospital lies on the opposite side of the township that is bisected by its airport. Alice used to have a car, but one time she went on leave and when she returned some other police officers had commandeered it for themselves and she never saw it again. Often the women don't walk to the hospital; they come to Alice first. Because her injuries were weeks old, Alice needed to accompany the women to explain the criminal case associated with her wounds. On that day we did have a car and we were able to give them a lift.

Alice receives on average around five or six cases per day, but this is a tiny fraction of an endemic problem spread out among Hela's substantial and **expanding population** which, as of 2021, was estimated to be 765,142 with a median age of 19.9 years. Alice is the sole FSVU officer in the province, and her reputation even extends to neighbouring provinces.

In June 2023, a Community Affairs Officer (CAO) at the Santos energy company's operations in Moro reached out to Alice following the **kidnap and rape** of several schoolgirls by the same gang that had kidnapped an **Australian archaeologist** and his team a few months before. According to Alice, the police response to both incidents was hampered by lack of communication between the Port Moresby-run operation and the Hela Provincial Police Commander (PPC). "PPC was aware of this issue and saying we could manage these things from here." The girls had been taken to Moro in Southern Highlands Province before Alice was contacted. "So I said to this CAO down at Santos, I'm not going to talk to you, tell the police to call me. This is a big thing ... Santos supplies the helicopter, they are just doing logistics. This operation is run by police, so we are supposed to be communicating."

In 2003, Alice joined the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI), where she was part of a contingent of PNG police officers serving alongside members of the Australian Federal Police (AFP), as well as police from several other nations. When I asked Alice about the role of the AFP in PNG, and especially of calls for them to be deployed to the **highlands provinces**, Alice reflected on her time in the Solomons: "To be frank ... when PNG police touched down we did most of the work. Because here it's more aggressive ... so out there it was nothing to us ... Solomons was peaceful. Really, we just need assistance, like logistical support ... otherwise we know how to solve our own problems. We need police, the AFP here, but why are they staying in Moresby and Lae? They should come to Tari".

**Logistical support** and **training are commonly cited** in PNG as being the main roles for the AFP. But exactly what type of logistical support is required in Hela Province? Some time after RAMSI, the AFP did visit Tari and Alice recognised an old friend from those days. This gave her an opportunity to explain to the AFP the difficulties of policing in Hela Province, and the kind of support that was needed. Her AFP officer friend was then able to use his budget to spend 8,000 Kina (\$3,200) at a local hardware and stationery store where he purchased printer cartridges, printer paper, and various other office supplies. So, by logistical support you are talking about the basic functioning of police administration? I wanted to know if that's what she meant. "Yeah ... it will be a great help".

Alice is also calling for management training: "Police officers need management training. I have to manage my staff here, manage this place, so everyone out there

they don't know how to manage, don't know how to write reports ... and we lose some of our cases if they can't manage these cases. But other things we can [do]. We know where the villages are, how the people are, we can deal with people, we can do it but when we come back to the office we need to manage these cases.”

Later that day we drove Alice and the injured woman with her baby, her wounds cleaned and her arm in plaster, back to the FSVU office. The woman sat on the porch outside under cover from the afternoon rain while Alice sat in her office completing the paperwork and made arrangements to find a safe place for the young mother to stay.

*For more on the current situation in Tari, read [the ABC news story](#).*

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