Not all men are violent – but PNG is not safe for women

Final year UPNG law student, Olto Thomas (Facebook)

by Geejay P. Milli

23 July 2020

I am so glad that a simple placard not even intended to stir up anything exploded into a nationwide conversation around security, safety and gender-based violence (GBV). Let's be honest, we need to have this conversation. The message the young woman Olto Thomas wrote – "PNG is not safe to live as a female" – was not an attack on anyone, regardless of gender. It was a statement that spoke to the truth of how we as Papua New Guinean women feel on a daily basis living in a country that is beautiful but sadly not safe.

Based on the public outcry, and the 2020 'PNG Man Up' campaign led by former Chief Migration Officer Solomon Kantha, many men clearly agree that PNG has become a society that is generally not safe for women. This is a positive development. In PNG, women's issues have always been left to 'only women' to address, such as through the Office of Community Development (informally the women's department or a soft ministry). Women have spearheaded women's movements in this country and rightly so, but when it comes to a deep-seated societal issue such as GBV, it will take all members of society to work collaboratively to bring about change.

Other men, however, have disagreed with the claim that PNG is unsafe. Some have commented that women in villages and rural areas have the guarantee of safety, and that security is an issue encountered only by women in cities and urban areas – those who do not have the protection of the community. Others took offence that PNG was being portrayed to the rest of the world as having 'violent men'. Others took it personally. How could PNG be unsafe when they and many other men are not violent? They felt that the violence was not representative of them and that it offered a biased and unfair view of PNG men.

As a PNG woman, I recognise that not all men in PNG are violent and I am always quick to make that point. I can attest that I am surrounded by a family of men who respect, support, love and build me up each and every day! I would not be who I am without them and I value and treasure them so much – they are not violent. I work

with male colleagues who are respectful, supportive and build me intellectually – they are not violent. We as women acknowledge that. So I would appeal to those that fall into this category not to be offended, and to focus on the issue.

We must recognise the socialisation process and the construction of gender identities. When teaching my Gender Politics course, I always begin with the example of why baby boys are dressed in blue and baby girls in pink. In many societies the world over, gender construction at an early age for men builds their masculinity. Men are raised and expected to show strength, leadership and aggression, so when a man cries it is often a big deal because he has stepped out of what is expected of him; he might even be frowned upon and regarded as weak.

And with masculinity comes male privilege. Privilege is a special right, advantage or immunity available only to a particular person or group – such as a race, or class, or in this case gender. In PNG, with our strong traditional values and patriarchal norms, men have always enjoyed a certain privilege that women have never had. That is a fact. The privilege that men in PNG society have has become so ingrained in the psyche of society that it almost goes unnoticed. A simple yet profound example I like to use is in the distribution of food. Do you ever question why you as a male are offered the biggest and choicest portion of meals? I hope your attempt to answer this question can put the notion of privilege into perspective.

Here are some more questions. Have you ever questioned why the government and international and private organisations are pushing to have more women in positions of seniority? Have you ever questioned why more women are encouraged to pursue an education? Have you questioned why there are no women in PNG's parliament? Or have you ever questioned why in Port Moresby we have the 'Meri Seif' (Safe Women) buses? If you take the time to reflect on these simple, yet profound questions then you just might realise that it's because we as women cannot access some of the privileges in life that you as men take for granted.

One of those male privileges is safety. A proper survey must be carried out to measure personal security. But clearly, many women do not feel safe living in Papua New Guinea. A sense of security is lacking in relation to many daily activities that should be able to be undertaken without much thought, such as a visit to the market, using public transport, or walking home.

Take for instance a mundane yet vital service like catching a bus. From personal experience, I can tell you that we women calculate everything: from having coins in hand so we don't have to fumble through our purses; to having our wallets and phones tucked in our bras, just in case someone decides to grab our *bilums*; to scanning the passengers on the bus; to sitting in the 'safe' zone on the bus (usually

behind the driver, or with the bus crew); and of course to making sure where we are travelling to is safe. This is not to say that men do not have unpleasant experiences while commuting, such as having their phones snatched; however, women are more frequently targeted by petty criminals than men.

This perception that rural women are safe is also questionable. The 2016–18 Demographic Health Survey asked women aged 15 to 49 about their experience of violence. Of the women who said they had "often or sometimes" experienced physical violence in the previous 12 months, 40% were from urban areas – the figure was 38% for rural women!

So you see, what Olto Thomas had on her placard speaks to our realities as women in Papua New Guinea. If the world has to see PNG for what it is, then good. That should push us to make a change, not to put up defences and assert male privilege.

It gives me so much hope when I see the younger generation and men take ownership of an issue like GBV. A recent short clip by the Koiari Park Secondary School that addresses ending GBV is uplifting and encouraging; it is an indication that the conversation around GBV is taking place and is being recognised as an evil in society that must be eradicated. The PNG Man Up initiative and the 'Senisim Pasin' (Change Your Ways) pledge by PNG Tribal Foundation are noble examples of how Papua New Guineans are taking ownership of our own issues and pledging to bring change for a better PNG.

But we have a long way to go. We need more female representation in our parliament. Those crying foul over the representation of PNG in the world media on the issue of GBV fail to acknowledge that having no women in parliament is also cause for national embarrassment. It is encouraging to see that Prime Minister James Marape is talking about addressing this disparity. With the 2022 elections only two years away, it is not too late to revisit the 2011 Equality and Participation Bill for 22 reserved seats. There is no getting away from the fact that PNG needs some form of Temporary Special Measure (such as reserved seats).

Change also has to start with the individual. As a parent of three young Papua New Guineans, I feel a great sense of responsibility. Not only do I want to fight and forge a better future for them; I also want to raise them to be God-fearing, responsible, respectful and proud to call PNG home.

We need to all work together to make PNG safe!

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Link: https://devpolicy.org/not-all-men-are-violent-but-png-is-not-safe-for-women-20200723/