



The role of the private sector in addressing family and sexual violence

By Evonne Kennedy and Shabnam Hameed
29 September 2021

There is increasing evidence that the private sector can and should play a key role in responding to gender-based violence, and that doing so makes good business sense.

New [research](#) by the International Finance Corporation (IFC), in partnership with [Business Coalition for Women](#) (BCFW) in Papua New Guinea (PNG), finds a correlation between a gender-balanced workforce, provision of workplace responses to family and sexual violence, and benefits to businesses and their employees.

It is a finding that matters, especially now. PNG has among the highest rates of family and sexual violence in the world and, like elsewhere, COVID-19 related lockdowns and reduced mobility have led to [sharp increases in calls](#) to helplines for gender-based violence. The impact of the pandemic underscores the importance of the research contained in the report, titled [Workplace responses to family and sexual violence in PNG: Measuring the business case](#).

The research, which included a survey of over 1,400 employees of three major companies in PNG, examined not only the cost of family and sexual violence to businesses, but also the benefits to employers and employees when there are workplace responses.

While family and sexual violence harms those directly affected, their families and communities, it also imposes costs on businesses because of absenteeism and reduced productivity.

For the three companies that participated in the study, the cost of family and sexual violence was around 10 days in lost time per employee per year, either because the employee was a victim of violence, or because the employee was helping a victim of violence. This equates to a financial impact of about PGK7.3 million (A\$2.85 million). The PNG report adds to similar findings from [Fiji](#) and [Solomon Islands](#) on the cost of domestic violence to businesses.

At least 23% of all survey participants reported that family and sexual violence had affected their ability to get to work, be safe at work, and perform at work, at least once.

So, what can employers do? The study makes several recommendations.

All three companies involved in the research have implemented family and sexual violence policies, and recently trained teams of staff to respond to disclosures of violence by employees.

Interviewees involved in this research said fear of further harm made it difficult for some staff to disclose family and sexual violence. Hence, raising workplace awareness and building trust among employees is vital. This can be done through dedicated training, as part of Occupational Health and Safety training, and through everyday reminders such as posters in the workplace.

As one male study participant said: “More people need to know what family and sexual violence is. Most of them do not even know what it is and have been tolerating it, and it’s somewhat unknown to them and that is the sad thing.”

Improving financial literacy helps address financial dependence, which is often a barrier to leaving violent relationships. Companies can support their employees by partnering with organisations to offer financial literacy programs to employees, or providing financial literacy programs directly as part of professional development programs.

Given the high prevalence of family and sexual violence in PNG, companies can assume that perpetrators of violence are within their workforce. Companies could improve their workplace safety and help to prevent family and sexual violence by referring employees to counselling or peer support groups, if employees have concern that they may threaten or commit family and sexual violence.

The three companies that participated in this study all subscribe to [Bel isi PNG](#), a case management and accommodation service for those affected by family and sexual violence. Businesses should consider subscribing to a service like Bel isi PNG, to ensure that employees can access professional support for family and sexual violence.

And finally, improving gender balance, and gender equality, in the workplace is the cornerstone of addressing any form of gender-based violence, as gender-based violence is both a cause and a consequence of gender inequality. Companies with a more gender-balanced workforce that take steps to address family and sexual violence have more positive results. To achieve workplace gender equality, all companies can identify and address the barriers and enablers to hiring, promoting, and maintaining a gender-balanced workforce.

Changing attitudes starts from the top. Employers have a duty of care to create respectful workplaces that are free from all forms of violence and harassment. This will support employees and lead to improved outcomes for the business.

Read [Workplace responses to family and sexual violence in PNG: Measuring the business case](#). The study was carried out with support from the Australian and New Zealand governments.

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Link: <https://devpolicy.org/role-of-private-sector-in-addressing-family-and-sexual-violence-20210929/>

Date downloaded: 5 February 2023



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