

In search of services to address family and sexual violence in Lae communities

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A poster inside the Seventh Day Adventist Church building in Lae (Credit: Michelle N Rooney)

We conducted research in Lae for three weeks in April to explore the connections between women’s experiences of seeking support to address family and sexual violence (FSV) in their lives, and their children’s wellbeing and opportunities for education. Working through church and local networks, we held eight community focus group and town hall-style meetings reaching, over 500 participants from all over the city. We conducted individual in-depth semi-structured interviews with 70 women. At the institutional level, we conducted meetings with service providers such as the police, the public solicitor’s office, educational institutions, and case management services. We had several focus group-style and key staff meetings with staff of primary schools, high schools, and one community-based health clinic. These cut across government-funded and church-run institutions in the city and in settlement communities.

Emerging findings from this research have highlighted the multiple financial and social considerations that limit women’s ability to seek certain types of assistance. The research also highlights the gap between formal systems of support and the reality for most low-income families whose children tend to fall out of the education system because of the immediate and longer-term impact of FSV. Many of the women we interviewed have extremely low incomes and low educational levels. Their experiences of violence reflect deeply-entangled cycles of poverty, marital breakdowns, and chronic episodic violence – all of which reinforce each other. Many women are supporting others while also dealing with their own experiences of violence, and the research revealed the critical role that neighbours, family members, other survivors, schools, and churches play in assisting those experiencing FSV. Lifetime experiences and episodes of violence can also involve multiple factors and relationships.

The economic (financial and opportunity) costs of seeking support, particularly from

the state, are a major constraint on women's ability to address the violence in their lives. Many of these costs are related to their ability to provide for their children's housing, food, education, and other basic needs. These costs are exacerbated by the lack of knowledge and confusion over the support services available. Another important reason why women do not pursue the formal route for addressing FSV is the fear of losing the family income if their partner is sentenced to jail. For those living in Lae's informal settlement communities, even if they wish to resolve the matter locally in the community, they must pay 'table fees' for local leaders and *komiti* (committee) members to hear their cases of domestic violence. These local mediation fees can range from K10 to K50 per party to the dispute. If there are multiple parties in the complaint such as when there is a polygamous relationship, these costs can escalate to include other costs such as compensation.

When women do choose to seek support through the formal police and court system, their strategies vary and the outcomes are mixed depending on their personal circumstances. Many women acknowledged the improvements in the police responses and attributed these to the current strong leadership in the Lae police hierarchy, including the introduction of a toll free number for the public to call. The increasing involvement and awareness among police on these matters was also positive. Increasing awareness and publicity of family protection laws has also meant that the threat to go to the police or a visit to the police station and a follow up call from the police also helped to deescalate the situation, so that the family can help to avoid further episodes of violence.

However, most responses suggested that from the perspective of women experiencing FSV, there is a need to improve information about the processes and access to police and other services. Women from Lae's informal settlements (also called 'compounds' or 'blocks') talked about being sent between the local mediating *komiti* and the police station, often giving up in the process. Costs include being asked to pay the police for fuel or other enticements before they will attend to a domestic violence incident. The delays in responses often mean that the perpetrator has run away. The process of seeking formal support involves time to obtain a medical report for evidence, and waiting at the police station or the courthouse (often for entire days). This can result in substantial loss of income because women's wages are cut or they need to abandon their informal market activities. Other costs of pursuing legal and formal options include transport, paying lawyers, getting documents typed, and paying fees for legal documentation or medical reports.

Some women expressed concern that they are required by police to directly request a perpetrator to come to the police station to face a complaint. Others noted that police, magistrates, lawyers or local mediators were often known to both parties,

making it difficult for complaints to be dealt with independently.

Many women also expressed a wariness about the formal process especially because they fear the violence worsening if the process is unsuccessful or when the perpetrator is released from jail. For this reason, many women prefer to resolve matters within the family, the church or community. Many women said that they turned to religious spirituality for comfort and hope and found social support within their church networks. Importantly, many women's dire economic situation and the delays in seeking support for FSV also meant that their longer term prospects of securing financial support once their former partner had moved onto a new relationship was weakened, thus exacerbating the problems she faced in providing for her children.

The responses suggest that the stronger presence of police is having a positive outcome in terms of deescalating or preventing episodes of violence. Currently, the police accept women's agency in determining how to proceed with their complaints, accommodating their demands to bring their partners in for a mediation, or even calling the perpetrators to warn them about the potential legal consequences of their violence. This approach prioritises a woman's decision about her and her children's safety, given multiple financial and non-financial considerations. Such an approach would be threatened by the introduction of a 'no drop policy' as has occurred elsewhere in the Pacific, and which may have unintended consequences, such as dissuading women from seeking this valuable support from the police.

It would also be useful to provide more basic support services to ease the costs and difficulties that women face in seeking help, particularly addressing the common occurrence of children dropping out of school as a result of FSV. For example, allowing women to take leave of work to seek support, supporting their social support networks through family, friends, or church members, and providing logistical support such as assistance with documenting their cases, would all be ways to strengthen women's confidence to seek support. Strengthening school responses to supporting students affected by FSV is another way of ensuring students remain in school. Linking FSV support to longer-term support to secure childcare maintenance or property and housing rights from former partners is also important, as is linking in schools in strategic ways to assist children in coping with difficult periods.

Despite the general view expressed by our interviewees that domestic violence is a matter for the private space, we were heartened by the responses and the frank discussions in which there was an overwhelming consensus that this is a major problem faced by families, and women especially, and that a collective effort is required for any change to occur.

Although our research has focussed on women's perspectives on these issues, a strong message from women was the need to involve men, including sons, in this kind of research. A collective effort that also includes support for relationship mediation and counselling is needed to address family violence.

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Read further blogs on the [impact of FSV on families in Lae](#), on [school attendance](#), and [police responses](#).

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Link: <https://devpolicy.org/services-to-address-family-and-sexual-violence-in-lae-20180522/>