

Ten years of Femili PNG

by Elly Toimbo

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Elly Tiombo presents the conference dinner keynote address at the 2024 Australasian AID Conference.

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Femili PNG is a Papua New Guinean NGO that runs family and sexual violence case management centres. Its mission is to provide care, support and change. It aims to provide a holistic approach and intervention through the process of case management to help survivors of family and sexual violence, child abuse and sorcery-accusation-related violence have access to the basic services they need.

Femili PNG has established offices in three different provinces, starting from Lae in 2014. It started in Port Moresby, the nation's capital, in 2018 as part of the Bel isi public private partnership, and in Goroka in the Highlands Region in 2021. The organization was established with only seven staff in Lae; now we are almost 70 staff. We are all Papua New Guineans, except for our chief executive officer who is from the Philippines and who has lived in PNG since 2012. We are supported by the Australian and PNG governments, as well as by the PNG private sector, and many others.

Femili PNG's work can be divided into three types: response, prevention and advocacy.

Response is our core priority. Survivors come to one of our case management centres by word of mouth. Some are referred by a service provider and a few reach us through social media. Across our three offices, we now receive about 100 new clients a month. As survivors arrive, case workers sit with them and create a file for each survivor through the intake process. Once a survivor is registered with Femili PNG, he or she is our client. Case workers identify the needs and objectives of the client and coordinate with service providers to facilitate accessibility of the services.

This calls for a collaborative effort among service providers and so we work together with the various government agencies including the police, Family and Child Welfare Services, hospitals, the different levels of courts from the village court up to

the national court, as well as other NGOs and churches.

We operate only one safe house, on behalf of Bel isi in Port Moresby, but we support many other safe houses. Normally, on any day, we support almost 90 survivors and their dependants in safe houses across the country. Basic mental and emotional support, food and toiletries, clothes, and transport are provided to the survivors while they are at a safe house.

Many of our clients want support from the justice system, either to obtain a restraining order — an Interim Protection Order (IPO) or Protection Order (PO) — police arrest and/or some other legal action. This is a challenging part of our work, often with long delays. We have succeeded in increasing the number of IPOs our clients receive, but there is a long way to go as even today only a minority of those clients who say they want an IPO are able to get one. On a similar note, few police arrests are made even though a number of clients want perpetrators to be arrested.

We also help some survivors relocate back to somewhere safer and, most times, back to their home provinces where their families are. This isn't an option for most clients, but sometimes is the only practical solution to make clients safe.

Our overriding principle is to empower the client, to present them with options, to listen to what they say they want, and to help them achieve it.

We also run awareness programs. We provide individuals, community groups and institutions with basic information on the different types of violence and the consequences and related laws. Our aim is to change people's mindset, so that they know how important it is to raise children in a violence-free environment, and how women should be respected and not beaten. We also run training for service providers to equip them with the knowledge and skills required to assist survivors.

We work in partnership with other organisations to advocate for change with government. We try to get government organisations to take the problem of family and sexual violence more seriously and to dedicate resources to it. This is the most difficult part of our job, but extremely important. We have a very good client data system, and we use our data to feed back to government on needed changes.

Our work on response, prevention and advocacy is not separate, but goes together.

In PNG, most people respond when they witness or have evidence of something (we are like “doubting Thomas” in the bible). Someone in the community assaulting his wife will continue unless he sees police arresting another neighbor for the same reason. As such, implementing the law is paramount for prevention. We can't just tell the community that violence is unacceptable and will have consequences. We

have to show it.

In the Eastern Highlands, I have seen our integrated approach work, especially in the area of sorcery-accusation-related-violence (SARV). Our work on this issue with the police has led them to take a more pro-active approach and actually make some arrests in relation to SARV perpetrators, and this has resulted in a reduction in accusations of sorcery in the community.

Also, when we talk about awareness, we not only educate and train but also encourage communities to take action, to respond. In the Eastern Highlands, where I work, and also in Lae, this has resulted in the opening of new and much-needed safe houses.

When we look back over the last ten years, although we know there is a long way to go, and we have faced many challenges, we are proud of Femili PNG and of what we have achieved.

I want to leave you with three thoughts.

First, I know Australia is no different to PNG in terms of gender-based violence, although some responses are maybe faster. Violence is violence: there's no way it can be justified, whether it be one time or two times or many times, whether it be emotional or physical, let us **respond**. Only when we respond, report and take action can we help to reduce violence. Without response, there is no point raising awareness or doing advocacy.

Second, every country has to solve this problem of gender-based violence in its own way. Only Papua New Guineans can solve the problem of gender-based violence in PNG. Only Papua New Guineans can move their country to greater gender equality. Femili PNG is not a project. It is a national organisation that is here to stay. Femili PNG has given me an opportunity to make a difference in my own country, and all of us at Femili PNG are proud and determined to continue to make a difference, and bring about much-needed change.

Third, I know that a lot of the news coming out of PNG is negative, and there are a lot of worrying things in my country. But I also want to let you know that there are a lot of people all over PNG taking action to improve things on the ground. At Femili PNG, we don't only see the problems, we sometimes are part of the solution. And that keeps us going.

This is an edited transcript of the after-dinner speech given by Elly Toimbo at the 2024 Australasian AID Conference. Watch Elly's speech on [Devpolicy YouTube](#).

Watch a video on the work of Femili PNG on [FemiliPNG Australia YouTube](#) and find out more at femilipng.org.

Disclosures:

Elly Toimbo works for Femili PNG. The Development Policy Centre provides pro bono support to Femili PNG.

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