

To the courtroom and beyond: supporting PNG women to escape from violence



by Kath Taplin

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The wild countryside on the approach to Lae by road is beguiling. Rolling green hills teem with tropical flowers. It is a thing of beauty and serenity. The irony is not lost on me as I view it through a lattice of security mesh covering the windows of a Guard Dog Security bus. The burly driver ably dodges potholes and oncoming trucks, speeding to avoid trouble on a stretch of road well known for it.

I'm on my way to meet the Femili PNG team for the first time, having just started work with the centre. **Femili PNG** runs a case management centre to assist survivors of family and sexual violence in Papua New Guinea, which opened in July last year.

The office is in Lae city, the capital of Morobe Province, and, according to official murder rates, one of the world's most violent cities. The president of *Medicins Sans Frontieres* has **labelled** PNG's levels of sexual and domestic violence a 'humanitarian crisis', unique outside of a war zone or state of civil unrest.

When I arrive, the front page of the newspaper details a case currently before the Court: the 2014 shooting of a Lae woman by a police officer. Members of the Femili PNG team shake their heads as we discuss the story.

Ian, our centre logistics manager mutters, "it's a good city, except for a few bad people." His colleagues concur. They would know better than most—this group sees the best and the worst of folks on a daily basis.

Betty, a Highlands-born Femili PNG case worker with years of experience, drives me to the Lae Courthouse. Today she's assisting our clients to seek legal protection from extremely violent partners. Interim Protection Orders (IPOs) are usually what's requested.

Betty is upbeat. "The Court is good," she says. The day's case lists are posted

outside the courtrooms, and the officials are busy calling out the names of those appearing.

One man waiting to appear in a land dispute wears a shirt printed with the words: *Every great idea I have gets me into trouble*. I think to myself that he might be leading with his chin in what is reputedly a tough courtroom.

Many of Femili PNG's clients have tried for years to stop the violence in their lives without external help: cajoling, appeasing and fleeing their partners. Some have even tried to fight back. Finally recognising they cannot protect themselves or their children, they have mustered the courage to enter the PNG legal system.

As they wait nervously for their names to be called, that courage is tested.

I have worked in the court system and I know, no matter the case, it is stressful to divulge personal details and experiences in a courtroom full of strangers. I have seen witnesses seize up, have panic attacks and, in one instance, a man suffered a heart attack.

Here, women who have never before set foot in the courtroom, some of whom cannot read and write, are trying to understand how the court works and how they should present their stories. It is an alien world, a far cry from the settlements and villages where time and stories flow differently.

Many of the woman have lived through machete attacks, bloody beatings, and have had their children hidden from them. How do they convey their stories effectively to an overworked magistrate with a never-ending caseload?

The messy facts must be neatly presented, the paperwork in order and the evidence strictly relevant. Betty and the Femili PNG team work hard to make sure this happens.

One of our clients, a slightly built woman, fiddles nervously with the edge of her *meri* blouse and tells me she just wants to know where her son and daughter are, and for them all to be free from her husband's beatings.

"He was good when he was young, but now he has been hurting me for too many years," she says. "He has hidden my children and I cannot find them."

Another woman waits beside her father, who has been persuaded by our case workers to travel to Lae to support his daughter through her Court appearance (and, hopefully, afterwards).

She is ready to break away after years of abuse, and she and her children will need

all the help they can get—there is no social security system here. As we wait, the father patiently explains to me, “Here, it is different from Australia. The bride price is paid so the woman is her husband’s property.”

The tension between customary and formal legal systems is inevitable, and complex.

Today, the presiding Magistrate doesn’t consider this a property case. He navigates the convoluted case of family violence, concerned for everyone in the case, particularly the children.

Each week, the Lae Court’s Interim Protection Order case list is long, reflecting the community’s need for adjudication. Court officers coordinate with Femili PNG’s case workers to ensure an appropriately swift and effective management of cases, a close collaborative effort established since the case management centre’s opening last year.

His Worship Singomat, a senior and highly respected Magistrate, is committed to this collaboration. He signed a Memorandum of Understanding sealing the relationship between Lae Court and Femili PNG in April.

Today in the courtroom, after careful deliberation of the women’s cases by the presiding Magistrate, Interim Protection Orders are made in favour of each of Femili PNG’s clients. Betty is elated. Survivors need these wins.

Safe transport for each woman to Lae safe houses is arranged. Betty returns to the office, focusing on the way forward for these women. An Interim Protection Order is a good thing, but it is only one step on the path to a life free from violence. Betty now has to look at how to assist over the coming days and weeks, be it through the provision of legal assistance, counselling, safe accommodation or relocation to another province—or all of these, in the most extreme cases. It is intense and soul-searching work, with a steady stream of clients having already become a flood.

Betty’s energy to continue in the face of this sad and sometimes dangerous work is boosted when parts of the system work effectively together to assist survivors, as happened in Lae today.

*Kath Taplin is the Senior Development Manager for **Femili PNG**. Femili PNG’s Lae Case Management Centre is supported by the Australian aid program, Oxfam PNG and **other partners**, including the Development Policy Centre.*

*For more information on Femili PNG’s case management centre or to support its work visit **the website** or contact Kath at **info@femilipng.org**.*

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