

Domestic and Sexual Violence, Youth and Media Reporting in Papua New Guinea

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Abstract

This paper has come from research into the impact of domestic violence on the lives of students at Divine Word University (DWU), Madang, Papua New Guinea. The main instrument employed for this research was a student survey which attempted to find out their perceptions of the causes and effects of domestic violence, as well as their views on the role of the media in dealing with the issue. There has been an increase in the number of stories published in the media, but it was noted that journalists are generally reporting the events without tackling the more difficult task of analysing them. It is recommended that there should be further training of media personnel on the subject of reporting violence, so that they can contribute more effectively to the community's understanding of the problem. Then, instead of merely reporting acts of violence, they can more proactively reflect and even influence community attitudes on this subject.

Introduction

This research was conducted in partnership with the National Research Institute (NRI) and the PNG Family and Sexual Violence Action Committee's (FSVAC) Research Centre in Port Moresby, whose members have recently stepped up their media campaign against the many forms of violence that are prevalent in our society.

Firstly, as a background to my study, I survey some of the research that has already taken place into domestic violence in PNG and the Pacific region. Next I present short samples of DWU students' writing on their experiences of domestic and sexual violence. This writing comes from assignments in a Communication Arts second year unit on Family and Social Issues in PNG. In the final section I attempt to interpret the responses to a questionnaire that was circulated among the student body at DWU in March 2006.

Background

Thorough research into domestic violence has been undertaken in the Pacific region, with findings published in comprehensive volumes (Toft, 1985; Counts et al, 1990; Brouwer et al, 1998; Dinnen & Ley, 2000; Bradley, 2001). Violence was essential for survival in the past (Crocombe, 2001, p.88) when opposing groups fought in the Pacific. But these days, with the decline in traditional opportunities for externalising aggression (Bradley, 1985), the acceptance of physical and sexual violence as normal practice within families

is a serious issue affecting all countries in the region (Bradley, 2001, pp.52, 66; UNICEF and GOPNG, 1996, p.139; Counts, 1990, p.152). Many accept the cultural patriarchy that condones violence (Filemoni-Tofaeono, 2004), believing that it is legitimated by men's general domination of societies, their right to control and their right to expect complete submission from wives and children (Toft, 1985, p.4,5). Men's identity depends on the subordination of women (Zimmer- Tamakoshi, 1993). The beliefs that women are not fully sentient beings (Counts, 1990, p.245) and that they are biologically inferior to men are still held by some people even amongst the elite and educated (Sullivan, 2006).

Violence is related to a raft of cultural factors as well as to the phenomenon of development, particularly inappropriate development strategies (Bradley, 1994), which disrupt traditional structures, undermine value systems and move whole societies into transition. Development tends to make things worse for women (Kidu, 1997). Men are disoriented in a changing world (Yawa, 2000) where control seems to be slipping from their grasp so inevitably that their frustration begets violence. Rural to urban drift sees people arrive in squatter settlements with no possibility of engaging in traditionally sustainable land usage. Even in remote locations, changing forms of family life place intolerable stresses on conjugal relationships. Drugs, alcohol, delinquency and the demands for modernisation often push people beyond the limits of their endurance and into dysfunctional lifestyles featuring regular outbursts of violence. Contrary to popular belief, criminals are responsible for only a small fraction of the violence that occurs in PNG. Most of it is perpetrated by 'ordinary people' (Dinnen & Ley, 2000, p.105).

Extreme cases of sadistic and pathological violence towards wives and children have been well documented (Bradley, 2001, p.73). Even with a complete absence of provocation, violence can be perpetrated on the casual whim of one person (Strathern, 1985, p.10). There is a view that domestic violence is always calculated to gain control over another person (Helpguide, 2006). However, it can at times be characterised by unrestrained vindictiveness which is not directed at solving problems or even of establishing relationships of power, although there is evidence that men use such random violence to sustain their sense of identity in gangs (Strathern, 1985, p.11). Violence, stemming from frustration, can be an indication that men somehow want to establish in their private world the relationships they think should exist in other areas of their lives, such as at work or in their social environment (Thorogood, 2005). This idea may help to explain the situation where the man's domination of the family is complete, with almost full compliance achieved without needing to resort to violence in order to maintain his status; yet the violence continues. A paralysis, a learned helplessness (Andrews, 1998, p.177), overtakes the family members, who are in fear of his next violent and destructive stunt. Already convinced that they are inviting further assaults if they report husbands to formal authorities (Dinnen & Ley, 2000, p.133), women do not take action to obtain redress and they resign themselves to feeling that their case is beyond redemption.

While the punishment of children is considered to be an obligation of parenthood in the Pacific, it often becomes uninhibited rage rather than discipline (Counts, 1990, p.231). Children are blamed for family difficulties, with guilt being used as a weapon to subdue them. Some parents and carers cannot distinguish between punishment and abuse (Bradley, 2001, p.75) and some don't even rationalise their violent behaviour as attempts to socialise or correct their children. It is frequently mentioned in the literature that there is a significant level of co-occurrence and correlation between violence against women and abuse of children in family units in many societies (English et al, 2003, p.43; Bradley, 2001, p.73; Counts, 1990, p.233; Bowker et al, 1988; Hughes et al, 1998; Dykstra & Alsop, 1996). The incidents described in this paper are not isolated. They depict a culture that is reinforcing endemic (UNICEF and GOPNG, 1996, p.139) and destructive forms of violence without regard for the human cost. The incidence and severity of violence is increasing whilst traditional and cultural protections against it are decreasing (Yawa, 2000).

Students' experiences

Some students have explained to me that their time at university gives them temporary respite from abuse at home, with the academic environment helping them to develop their conviction that domestic violence is destructive, criminal and preventable. But anxiety overwhelms them, as they know that other family members are still suffering and perhaps even taking their place on the receiving end. They feel frustrated that they cannot convince family members that there is a better life just around the corner if violence can be eliminated from households. Some students report that their achievements at university are earning them more and more respect from their communities, thereby reducing the likelihood that they will suffer violence. Others say they experience no noticeable change in the way people at home regard them when they return for holidays.

Readers may find the following excerpts from the students' writing rather confronting, so it is appropriate to offer some cautions. Every recall of these events requires a process of reconstruction involving some degree of distortion. Passions run deep and are seldom extinguished entirely by reason or time (Hopper, 2005).

None of these students has been assisted by any kind of professional counselling concerning the events described. They have somehow survived these painful experiences by themselves, and now they tend to either dissociate themselves from them or repress their memories of them. They have learnt the art of smiling on the outside while suffering on the inside. They still suffer from betrayal trauma (Hopper, 2005), which in turn causes chronic frustration about their inability to communicate their deep memories to any listener or reader. In any case such communication would be futile, in their estimation, as there can be no meaningful reparation or restitution for the wrongs done to them. Some are haunted by nightmares which disturb concerned room-mates so much that they eventually share in their stories of abuse. Others use poetry and

free writing as ways of releasing their inner tangle of complex emotions, where order and symmetry are not required. The most they hope for is that the personal strengths which have enabled them to survive the trauma will continue to shield them from too much damage to their emotional lives.

Naturally all names of people and places have been removed from the students' excerpts. Some students preferred to write in the third person, thereby distancing themselves a little from the unfolding tragedies and helping them to blur the picture of who exactly was the victim – themselves or someone else. Others wrote in the first person, indicating either that they were the victims themselves or that they empathise totally with the family members who were the victims. The translations of dialogue from Tok Pisin or Tok Ples into English are the students' own work. All numbered paragraphs are written by different students.

Killings

(1) His gun butt came down hard on my auntie's head as he booted her ribs. I could see she was losing consciousness. If you think this incident was a lesson to him, you're wrong because he continued hitting her until the day she left for good. He said he was deeply in love with her and couldn't understand what had gone wrong.

The couple was caught up in the cycle of violence. Initially the cycle included tensions where the abuser stole the victim's ability to resist him (Thorogood, 2005). Soon there was alcohol abuse, with arguments leading to violence, followed by a cooling off period when physical and psychological injuries were supposedly healing. Then came the contrition, the 'buy-back' phase (Bradley, 2001), the promises and the veneer of some degree of normality in the relationship. Yet the 'sorrys' were part of the strategy for keeping the victim in dependency (www.dvirc.org.au). But the cycle progressively contracted, intensified and finally became cyclonic, with violence as the only ingredient used to maintain his status (Thorogood, 2005). The young man had no prior record of criminal behaviour, yet he killed the person he said he loved. It is not uncommon for this to occur in PNG and afterwards for the man to say that he did not intend to cause her harm (Bradley, 2001). Only proactive community action will reverse the generally accepted principle of not intervening in such domestic situations. Awareness of mental health issues is another urgent imperative, as symptoms of bipolar disorder can be clearly recognised in the story above.

I present the following extracts from students' work without comment. If this is just the tip, then the size of the iceberg is unimaginable.

(2) Holding the full whiskey bottle by its neck, he smashed it down on mum's head. Mum was drenched; then followed blood that pulsed from the gaping hole in her head. She fell and lay sprawled on the floor. 'He is nothing but an animal. Please forgive me for leaving too soon,' she sobbed. I felt a strange coldness in her body.

(3) Unsatisfied, he stomped back into the kitchen and grabbed the butcher's knife. The mother screamed, but it was too late for her to run and hide. The daughter rushed out to see what would make her hate him for the rest of her life.

(4) As she cried for mercy he continued to kick her stomach. He lifted her up onto the table so he could punch her brutally on the face, breast and stomach. She fell down unconscious with blood running from her nose and mouth. The neighbours came when they heard the screaming stop. They took her all the way to the hospital but she was dead.

(5) My mum jumped out in front of me and stabbed the woman twice in the heart. The woman screamed and a lot of blood spurted out of her. That was all I saw before I fainted.

AIDS

(6) People came up with all sorts of rumours about this rare sickness – leprosy, witchcraft, lack of blood in her. Her family wanted to get it over and done with. When she sobbed in pain, they drowned her voice with laughter. If she wanted something, they would leave it till later. When she complained, they said 'shut up.' Her physical appearance brought shame to her father's status, they all said. I was furious with her father and her family. Yes, she died of AIDS, but they were the ones who killed her, I said to myself.

(7) Everything was working out well for her in her fake world as a nightclub hostess. But then she was dismissed because she tested HIV+. By the age of 20 she was on her deathbed. Her little brother told her: 'People say the job you did was bad and it's your fault you're dying. But they don't know that you did it for the people you love.'

(8) He bashed her over and over again when he found out that he was HIV+. He was taking it out on her. From then on, the abuse continued. Later she gave birth to his child. Within a year all three were dead from AIDS.

Depression

(9) When we arrived at the village, they took me to see an old lady and she helped me to get rid of the baby. I eventually had a miscarriage. There I sat – a worthless human being with no future. Alcohol has become my best friend and it will be the only one there to see me cry.

Sexual abuse

1(0) She was sexually abused continually by older men who took advantage of her vulnerability. She felt disgusted with herself even

though it was not her fault. She wished she could die and never have to think about all the misery she faced. She turned to alcohol at 15.

(11) She would go to sleep at night and be sexually abused by her auntie's husband. He would beat her, just to shut her up. She did not say a word to anyone in order to save her auntie's marriage.

(12) After mum died, dad asked me: 'Did your mum tell you about your responsibilities?' I told him that she had. Then it all happened. He raped me repeatedly that night and every night. When I tried to resist he said that he would rape my little sister if I refused.

(13) The snake, as we called him, came into our room and got into bed with my older sister. She sobbed all night every night, until she committed suicide. My heart went numb. I knew for sure that I was the next target. When I did not respond to his demands, he started calling me a useless slut who was born to be used. I began to ask God why he had to let me live and suffer like this. I decided to tell mum, hoping that she would report him to the police, but she screamed at me and called me a prostitute. The day was my refuge and I hated to face the cruelty of the night. I even tried to commit suicide too.

Abused children, as well as humiliated women, consider suicide as one exit that is available to them (Counts, 1990, p.226).

(14) I just couldn't tell anyone about the incest happening in our house. I was too frightened to even tell my parents because I thought they would only blame me. This happened nearly 15 years ago, but I still can't tell anyone about it. And I don't want to have anything to do with men.

(15) The thing that really hurts me inside is that my sister really loves this man. If I say anything, it would definitely upset my sister and break up the family. Now I have to carry this burden for the rest of my life.

(16) When I was ten I was taken to an uncle's place. Mum said to do what I was told. It was horrible. I do not want to describe what he did to me. When mum picked me up afterwards I said: 'I don't want to do it any more.' She whacked me hard on the side of my head. This was going to be my life, I thought, until I escaped from her with a friend. I am never going back home.

(17) My smile hid all my problems
How my father abused me
And bashed me
Or encouraged his friend to rape me
As he videotaped it.

Preferring to live with violence

(18) The 3 of us witnessed dad's cruelty when he bashed mum again and nearly killed her. We asked her: 'Why did dad hit you? Aren't you going to sue him? Aren't you going to run away?' 'You're the reason I'm still alive,' she answered. My dad's cruelty to mum still rages in me like fires from hell. I still feel the pain inside me; I don't think it will ever go away.

(19) When she could not hide the bruises any longer, she confessed to her friends that she deserved them for upsetting her boyfriend. She said that it was just a 'phase in their life together.'

Child trade

(20) Mum sold my baby brother to a business couple in town who wanted a mixed race boy. I cried myself to sleep that night, knowing that I was feeding on money that bought my baby brother.

Sadistic and pathological

(21) The beatings were a daily routine for me. At times my uncle would beat me till I was left unconscious on the ground. I tried figuring out what I had done wrong to deserve all those beltings, but I guess it was just his way of releasing his frustrations. His favourite expression was: 'You bitch! You should have died in the accident with your no-good parents instead of wasting our resources.' Every day after school it was my duty to cook and clean the house. And if I failed to do either of them, I was tied to a tree with no clothes on, belted and left to sleep with the dogs. I would cry my eyes out until there were no more tears to shed. When I got to high school, I found marijuana to ease my pain.

Alcohol

(22) 'Shut the f.. up, useless bitch,' growled my worthless father. 'You think you're smart, telling people about me, ha!' he roared at mum. After beating her until she lost consciousness, he poured kerosene on her and threatened to burn her alive. How I wished that I was a strong man and not a little girl then! I would torture him until I see him die, ripping off every single part of his body.

Findings from recent research in the United States tend to corroborate results from Pacific studies which indicate that children who suffer violence and children who witness it amongst family members are inclined to exhibit similar behavioural characteristics. They generally feel a loss of self-esteem, demonstrate increased levels of anxiety, tend to develop conduct disorders and experience social and relationship problems (English et al, 2003, p.44).

The student survey

In March 2006 Divine Word University students were invited to participate in a survey on domestic violence (DV). Approximately 130 students returned questionnaires, representing a return rate of 22%. As shown in Table 1 they were almost unanimous (97%) that the DV problem is severe in PNG. Many students (74%) were fully aware of the damage it has caused to their families and their communities and 60% could identify at least one family member who has been badly affected by domestic violence. In answer to questions about their own personal lives, 25% of respondents noted that they have suffered from physical violence at home, while 7% have suffered from rape and 9% from incest. It is difficult to interpret the rape and incest figures, however, as 22% of respondents found these questions perhaps too sensitive to answer and so exercised their option to leave them blank. Respondents indicated the extent to which they agreed with statements by using the following scale:

AS = Agree strongly. A = Agree. U = Uncertain. D = Disagree. DS = Disagree strongly

Table 1: Domestic violence severity Percentage response

Statement	AS	A	U	D	DS
DV is a major problem in PNG.	76	21	3	0	0
DV is damaging my extended family/village community.	25	49	17	9	0
DV has badly affected the life of at least one member of my family.	29	31	22	13	5
I have suffered from DV, especially physical violence.	6	19	19	30	26
I have suffered from rape.	4	3	10	28	55
I have suffered from incest.	2	7	13	29	49

Next, respondents were asked to consider the causes of domestic violence. As shown in Table 2, polygamy (82%) and alcohol (95%) rated highly, while traditional/cultural values were seen by 46% as causes of domestic violence, with 24% disagreeing with this statement and 30% being undecided. Several mature-age students interpreted this last figure of 30% as an indication that because the younger students tend to live in urban centres nowadays, they are not aware of the amount of violence that existed in traditional societies.

Table 2: Causes of domestic violence Percentage response

Statement	AS	A	U	D	DS
Polygamy is a major cause of DV.	57	25	14	2	2
Alcohol is a major cause of DV.	74	21	2	2	1
Traditional/cultural values cause DV.	16	30	30	13	11

The chi-square test is used to determine differences in the patterns of responses. From this survey, the distributions of item responses were severely skewed, with some items showing extended tails in their distribution. For this reason it was felt that the parametric t-test would be less robust than the non-parametric chi-square. Each item was subjected to a X^2 test, so the table was a

2 by 5 table, $df=4$. The X^2 test was applied in two areas. Firstly it was applied to item responses according to gender in order to find out if there were any differences in the patterns of responses between male and female students. Secondly it was applied to region in order to compare responses from the Highlands provinces (Western Highlands, Southern Highlands, Eastern Highlands, Chimbu and Enga) with responses from the rest of PNG. For this analysis Province was re-coded so that Highland Province was a dichotomous variable. The conventional probability level of 5% was accepted to indicate significant difference.

There is a perception that females are more at risk of suffering from domestic and sexual violence, so this study examined the self-reports of students with respect to gender. This study indicates that among our respondents there is little significant difference between males and females in this area. Results from our survey seem to indicate that male students self-report having suffered just as much as females and they have similar perceptions of the extent of the problem. The only exceptions to this generalization occurred with regard to statements that domestic violence causes permanent damage to victims (Table 3) and that victims of domestic violence themselves tend to become violent in later life (Table 4). In both cases, females supported the assertions more strongly than did their male counterparts.

Table 3: Domestic Violence causes permanent emotional damage to victims

Gender	Percentage response					Total
	AS	A	U	D	DS	
Females	63.2	32.4	4.4	0	0	100
Males	35.4	35.4	12.5	12.5	4.2	100

$$X^2 = 17.994 \quad df = 4 \quad p = 0.001$$

Table 4: Gender views on victims tending to become violent later in life

Gender	Percentage response					Total
	AS	A	U	D	DS	
Females	33.8	36.8	25	1.5	2.9	100
Males	27.1	18.8	35.4	10.4	8.3	100

$$X^2 = 10.51 \quad df = 4 \quad p = 0.033$$

With respect to the analysis by Province, in PNG there is a belief that violence in the Highlands region is greater than in other areas of the country. But results from this study show a surprising level of uniformity across the country, with all provinces being represented in the survey. There was only one item which drew significant disagreement between the two regions, and that was that statement that victims of domestic violence themselves tend to become violent in later life. For this there is a greater level of disagreement among the Highlands participants than among our non-Highlands participants.

Table 5: Highland or non-highland respondents' views on victims tending to become violent later in life

Gender	Percentage response					Total
	AS	A	U	D	DS	
Females	25.0	21.4	39.3	0	14.3	100
Males	33.7	33.7	24.5	6.1	2.0	100

$$X^2 = 11.86 \quad df = 4 \quad p = 0.018$$

This is a small and limited survey and its findings are indicative at best. Clearly a much larger sample needs to be drawn from across the country in further research before definitive conclusions can be drawn. But the results could well suggest that this is more than a gender problem and more than a province problem. It is a strong indicator that it is a national problem, pointing to a need for solutions to be found at the national level.

Four items related to the media's role in addressing the issue of domestic violence. Opinions varied in three of the items, with strong support (94%) for the idea that the media should campaign more vigorously against domestic violence. As shown in Table 6 the first item in this section asked respondents whether media reports help to reduce the number of incidents of domestic violence; half (52%) agreed with the statement, 24% disagreed while the remaining 24% were uncertain. A majority of respondents (68%) agreed that media reports help us to understand the reasons behind domestic violence. This level of agreement was not shared by members of the focus group who examined some newspaper articles in detail and commented that they could see little evidence of writers making any attempt to explore the reasons for domestic and sexual violence. As to whether the media's coverage of domestic violence is exaggerated, 30% agreed, 31% disagreed but a large percentage (39%) was uncertain.

Table 6: The media's role

Statement	Percentage response				
	AS	A	U	D	DS
Media reports about DV help to reduce the incidents of DV	15	37	24	16	8
Media reports help us understand the reasons behind DV	21	47	16	6	10
The media's coverage of DV is exaggerated	6	24	39	19	12
The media should campaign more vigorously against DV	67	27	6	0	0

The survey concluded with five open-ended questions. One item asked how people are dealing with DV. Responses indicated that most are avoiding the issue by just living through it, trying to keep it a secret, sleeping away from home, drinking or trying to justify it on customary grounds. Some concentrate on self-preservation by trying to become 'emotionally strong.' Some completely give up on life. The suffering is almost unbearable for some. Males can survive domestic violence better than females, some say, because males develop stronger bonds with their friends and they feel safer than females when they stay away from home for extended periods. A few respondents noted that

perpetrators were protected by the belief that the integrity of the family name always takes precedence over the feelings of children.

Another item asked how we can change the tendency of not interfering in situations of DV. These situations are regarded as matters for family members to sort out for themselves. Most respondents suggested awareness campaigns should be carried out. Some would like to see community policing developed. A few wanted all people in leadership positions to implement gender equality.

Students were asked if they had seen any effective ways of addressing DV. Some reported that when parents learn more about punishment, they treat people better. Education about the law shows how it is designed to protect people. When restraining orders are explained, some use them effectively. Children benefit considerably after being removed from situations of DV. Temporary shelter with friends and relatives is good. Doing away with arranged marriages seems to reduce situations of DV. Proper training of marriage partners results in happier families.

Respondents were asked to suggest some ways that students and staff can address the issue of DV. Most wanted more awareness and discussion of the problems. Some thought a DV club should have regular meetings. The issues should be publicised through story, drama, music and painting.

The final item asked the students to suggest some ways that the media might give better coverage to the issue of domestic violence. The responses confirmed the high level of support (94%) for the idea that the media has a vital role to play in the nation's efforts to combat the problem. The following is a summary of the main suggestions:

- People's right to live without violence should be widely publicised.
- Steps to avoid violence should be given.
- More talk-back time on radio should be given to the topic of violence.
- Radio and TV counsellors should be heard regularly.
- Commercials should be aired, similar to the HIV/AIDS campaign.
- 'Before and after' stories should be aired, showing how families live better lives after they remove violence from their homes.
- Really nasty footage of violence should be shown, so that everyone in the country gets angry about it. Forget about cultural sensitivity! (And media ethics?)
- A greater effort must be made to reach the uneducated through the media.
- Young people's voices must be heard.
- Children's rights must be promoted.
- Everyone must know how our children are suffering.
- Perpetrators must be named and shamed.
- The court system must be explained to ordinary people.
- Religious segments in the media should show that every church condemns the immorality of violence.

Recommendations

There is a growing groundswell of opposition to domestic violence at the institutional levels of PNG society. The Ministry of Community Development is active in this field. The FSVAC is an organisation dedicated solely to this issue, and in conjunction with the NRI it is conducting further research. NGOs including Save the Children Fund, Family Support Centre, the CWA and HELP Resources are conducting campaigns and producing materials. Musicians and recording studios are producing anti-violence messages. Community groups have conducted marches, rallies and awareness programs. Churches, church agencies, youth groups, educational institutions, education offices, the Law and Justice sector, The Red Cross, village courts, the Judiciary and service clubs are some of the organisations involved in activities that aim to reduce violence. Telikom PNG is using phone cards to spread anti-violence messages. This high level of institutional support for the campaign against violence must be maintained.

Yet campaigns will not be effective without the pro-active support of the media – an indispensable agent of change in a developing society. All organisations rely on the efforts of media personnel to understand the issues in campaigns and create messages which will influence communities. Just simply reporting violence is no longer acceptable, as negative stories do not empower people in a developing society. They only cause ordinary people to lose hope in their ability to effect behaviour change.

Media in PNG regularly report on violence. However, journalists often fail to move beyond the mere reporting of incidents of violence to engage in analytical coverage that can change public attitudes and influence policy makers. There is a need to analyse its root causes, challenge its social acceptance and engage in advocacy for its victims, all the while pointing towards possible solutions to the problem.

I recommend that workshops for journalists be conducted in order to assist them to improve the quality, accuracy and sensitivity of print and broadcast coverage of domestic and sexual violence in PNG, so that the media sector can support the broader effort to educate society and combat the problem.

While this paper is being prepared, a proposal for such workshops is being submitted to UNESCO for funding, in partnership with the PNG Media Council and FSVAC.

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