

Vanuatu country report



Introduction

Vanuatu was one of five countries included in a study by AusAID's Office of Development Effectiveness (ODE) to assess the effectiveness of current approaches to addressing violence against women and identify promising practices. The report of the study—*Violence Against Women in Melanesia and East Timor: Building on Global and Regional Promising Approaches*—was published in 2008.

The ODE report was released by the Hon Stephen Smith MP, Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs, and the Hon Tanya Plibersek MP, Australian Minister for the Status of Women, on 25 November 2008 to coincide with White Ribbon Day, the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women.

The Vanuatu country supplement to the ODE report was launched in Port Vila on 1 December 2008 by Mr John Pilbeam, Australian High Commissioner to Vanuatu.

The ODE study used a participatory approach focused on women's own experience of violence, and on what does or does not help them in terms of protection and prevention. The research team spoke with 140 people in Vanuatu, including 43 people who were interviewed and another 97 people who participated in focus groups. The research was undertaken using international and local researchers. The local researchers in Vanuatu were Emily Niras and Naomi Bolenga. The research was also supported by a local advisory group of prominent individuals.

The ODE report made a series of recommendations for Vanuatu and the region that are relevant to all organisations and individuals who are committed to preventing and responding to violence against women.

This paper sets out Australia's initial response to the recommendations for action to end violence against women in Vanuatu. AusAID recognises that ending violence against women requires action over the long term, and that the activities set out in this report are just the first stage in intensifying our efforts to address violence against women as part of the Australian international development assistance program.



Mrs Hanson Matas Kelekele, Vanuatu's First Lady, speaking at the opening of the Vanuatu Women's Centre's National Conference on Violence against Women and launch of the ODE report. Photo: Vanuatu Women's Centre

Principles and priorities

The ODE report identified a range of principles and priorities structured around a *framework for action* for addressing violence against women. AusAID will use this framework and a set of key principles to guide its contribution to ending violence against women in Vanuatu.

Principles guiding Australia's contribution

The following principles will guide Australia's contribution to ending violence against women. AusAID will:

- > make a long-term commitment to ending violence against women
- > promote gender equality as a central principle of our work
- > work in partnership with key stakeholders and align with partner government priorities
- > adopt an integrated approach.

Further details are set out in the regional report.

A framework for action

The framework for action sets out three main *strategies* for responding to violence against women:

- > ensuring women have access to justice
- > ensuring women have access to support services
- > preventing violence against women.

The framework for action can be used by all those working to end violence against women.

The box below sets out AusAID’s vision, its aim and the outcomes it will strive to achieve within the framework recommended by the ODE report.

A framework for ending violence against women in Melanesia and East Timor		
Vision: Women in Melanesia and East Timor are able to live free from violence and the fear of violence.		
Aim: To work in partnership—with national governments, civil society, international partners, and men and women—to increase efforts to reduce and respond to violence against women.		
Outcome: Women have access to justice	Outcome: Women have access to support services	Outcome: Violence against women is prevented

The structure of this report reflects the framework for action recommended in the ODE report, with sections on each of the three key strategies—ensuring women’s access to justice, ensuring women’s access to support services, and preventing violence against women—and on efforts to support an integrated approach.

Women have access to justice

Goals for all stakeholders in Vanuatu

To increase women's access to justice.

This will include:

- > passing and implementing laws and policies that discourage violence and impose consequences on offenders
- > providing women with the means to protect themselves and their children from violence
- > providing women with the information necessary to access their rights
- > ensuring women are treated humanely and fairly by justice system personnel.

Situational analysis

Improving the response of the justice system to violence against women is a priority and an area of significant reform in Vanuatu.

In general, addressing the problem of violence against women had not been a high priority in the past, as evidenced by the 11-year delay in passing the highly contentious Family Protection Bill through the Vanuatu Parliament. The Department of Women's Affairs, supported by women's organisations, lobbied the government to table the Bill in Parliament. In 1999, a violence against women taskforce was established to manage the public consultations on the Bill. Chiefs and politicians were particularly opposed to the legislation. After 11 years of public debate, the Bill was eventually passed by Parliament on 19 June 2008. The Vanuatu Christian Council launched an appeal against the Bill as having unconstitutional content; the Supreme Court, however, ruled that the Bill was in compliance with the Constitution. The Bill was signed by the President of Vanuatu on 23 December 2008 and was gazetted by the State Law Office on 2 March 2009.

The Family Protection Act (FPA) has significantly improved legal protections for women who have experienced violence. It creates a specific domestic violence offence and confers obligations on the police to intervene if violence is suspected. Enforceable Family Protection Orders can be made by courts to constrain the behaviour of perpetrators for up to two years. Protection orders can be made on the basis that acts of domestic violence have been, or are likely to be, committed. Further, the FPA excludes the payment of bride price as grounds for defence in domestic violence cases.

Women in rural areas generally have difficulty accessing the formal justice system, due to distance and cost, and often rely on *kastom* law. Traditional courts are empowered to hear cases relating to domestic violence but are not supposed to deal with cases of sexual assault. The FPA aims to increase the accessibility of protection orders for women in remote

areas by allowing people other than a complainant to apply for a protection order orally or by telephone, and by permitting authorised community members to issue temporary protection orders to protect complainants for up to 28 days.

The Vanuatu Police Force does not currently have formal protocols in place to respond to violence against women. There is a need for formal procedures and ongoing training for police to support them in responding to violence against women.

Vanuatu is one of six countries that will be participating in the project Changing Laws, Protecting Women. The project is being carried out by the Pacific Regional Rights Resource Team with funding under the 2008 grants round of the UN Trust Fund in Support of Actions to End Violence against Women (the Global Trust Fund). Through this project, the Regional Rights Resource Team will work with the Government of Vanuatu to advance legislation to combat gender violence.¹

Government of Vanuatu priorities and actions to support women's access to justice

The Family Protection Act represents an important legislative reform for addressing violence against women, providing a specific basis for legal action for survivors of violence.

The Department of Women's Affairs is playing a key role in implementing the legislation. One objective of the Department of Women's Affairs' draft implementation strategy for the FPA is to provide a safe environment for women and increase women's access to justice. Activities proposed in the draft strategy to achieve this include improving advocacy on gender equality under the law; increasing access to legal solutions to family problems; holding workshops on gender issues with key justice system personnel; and using positive traditional justice processes.

Australian support for women's access to justice

Australia is committed to supporting Vanuatu's law and justice sector, and is providing long-term financial assistance in this area.

Australia is committed to supporting Vanuatu's law and justice sector, and is providing long-term financial assistance in this area. The aim of this support is to contribute to stability and security in Vanuatu by strengthening the legal system and thereby supporting the rule of law and public confidence in the legal system of Vanuatu. A key part of this is ensuring that women have access to justice.

The legal sector and improving access to justice

Australia provides support to the Vanuatu Women's Centre (\$3.7 million over five years from 2007-08). The centre's work includes providing:

- > legal assistance to survivors of domestic violence, psychological and sexual abuse
- > legal representation, and support to obtain protection orders
- > funding to assist poor women in remote areas to travel to attend court hearings
- > support for the volunteer Committees Against Violence Against Women to assist survivors of gender-based violence and increase awareness of human rights in remote communities.

¹ The Regional Rights Resource Team is a Fiji-based human rights organisation. It works with state and non-state organisations in the region to build capacity on human rights and gender equality.

The centre also continues to advocate on a national level for adherence to the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, to which Vanuatu is a signatory.

New Zealand's International Aid and Development Agency, NZAID, also provides financial support to the Vanuatu Women's Centre. Donor support from AusAID and NZAID is well harmonised, with both agencies sitting on the Program Coordinating Committee for the centre.

Support to the Vanuatu Police Force

Under the Vanuatu Police Force Capacity Building Project (\$28 million over five years from 2005-06), the Australian Federal Police works closely with the Vanuatu Police Force to enhance community safety, crime prevention and victim support. The project works in coordination with the New Zealand police initiative, which has a domestic violence focus.

Activities conducted through the project include:

- > developing a training session for senior management in the Vanuatu Police Force outlining the obligations of police under the new family protection legislation. It is hoped that this training will be extended to police officers around the country
- > assisting with training of recruits, which includes a module on violence and family and domestic issues. Obligations arising out of the FPA will be incorporated into this training material
- > developing pamphlets to raise awareness regarding the rights of men and women under the FPA for planned distribution in town centres and rural areas
- > implementing a national crime-reporting database. The database will improve statistics of reported domestic violence incidents, which will help monitor the implementation of the FPA on the ground.

Training for mediators

AusAID's Vanuatu Legal Sector Strengthening Program (\$10 million over five years from 2005-06) aims to improve access to justice in Vanuatu. The project is currently working with the Vanuatu campus of the University of the South Pacific to develop a training course for mediators that will meet the accreditation requirements of the FPA. Increasing the number of accredited mediators will improve coverage of services available to women in rural areas under the FPA.

Women have access to support services

Goals for all stakeholders in Vanuatu

To increase women's access to support services.

This will include:

- > increasing women's access to psychological, medical and legal support
- > increasing women's access to safe havens
- > increasing support to organisations that provide support services to women.

Situational analysis

In Vanuatu, the main support service for women who have experienced violence is the Vanuatu Women's Centre. The centre is located in Port Vila, with branches in regional centres. It provides legal support, counselling and temporary shelter for women who have been abused. The centre also supports women in rural areas through the volunteer Committees Against Violence Against Women and outreach programs. Ongoing core support for the Vanuatu Women's Centre, provided by Australia and New Zealand, has enabled the organisation to fill gaps in government service provision by expanding its assistance to isolated rural communities.

The health sector in Vanuatu does not currently have formal systems in place to respond to violence against women. There is a need for protocols and training for health service providers to identify and respond to violence against women. There is also a need to increase access to health services for women in rural areas.

Government of Vanuatu priorities and actions to support women's access to support services

The Department of Women's Affairs' draft implementation strategy for the Family Protection Act includes plans to improve support services for survivors of violence including counselling and mediation, medical support and safe haven accommodation. It seeks to increase the levels of support currently provided by government and non-government actors through institutional and management strengthening of key agencies, increasing the capacity of service providers and effectively monitoring services.

In practice, the Government of Vanuatu will be severely limited in its ability to provide services to survivors due to a lack of resources. Australia's ongoing support, particularly for the non-government sector (including the Vanuatu Women's Centre), will be critical to the successful implementation of the FPA.



Members of the Penama Committee Against Violence Against Women and AusAID's Adviser on Ending Violence Against Women discuss plans for community awareness raising at the Vanuatu Women's Centre's National Conference on Violence against Women. Photo: Vanuatu Women's Centre

Australian support for women's access to support services

Support services

Australian support for the Vanuatu Women's Centre includes funding for counselling and support services to survivors of gender-based violence. Services are provided in town centres, and through mobile counselling, the Committees Against Violence Against Women and 24-hour phone counselling in more remote areas. Phone counselling has been made more accessible for rural women due to the expansion of mobile telephony services to remote areas, facilitated by AusAID's Governance for Growth program in 2008. Australian support has also helped to widen the geographic coverage of the Committees Against Violence Against Women.

Australia will investigate the possibility of including a module on domestic violence in the Australia Pacific Technical College's planned Diploma in Social Work, which may begin later in 2009.

AusAID has provided funding to the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) Pacific Facility Fund in Support of Organisations and Actions to End Violence Against Women to support capacity building for staff from civil society organisations, including from Vanuatu. This funding (\$200,000 in 2008-09) will enable staff to participate in training and exchanges in 2009 and 2010. This will include participation in formal training programs conducted by key regional agencies such as the Regional Rights Resource Team and the Fiji Women's Crisis Centre. Training will cover practical skills such as counselling, data collection and administration. It will also increase service providers' knowledge of international human rights law and theoretical issues associated with violence against women. This support will assist in improving the quality of services provided to women who have been subjected to violence.

Health services

Australia has initiated policy dialogue with the Ministry of Health in order to identify opportunities to increase access to services and improve the capacity of service providers to respond to incidents of violence against women.

Australian funding of the Village Health Worker Program (\$1.9 million over four years from 2007-08), implemented by Save the Children Australia (in partnership with the Ministry of Health), supports the aims of the Family Protection Act through awareness-raising activities on child protection issues. Village Health Workers provide services in over 180 aid posts throughout Vanuatu and work with teachers, parents and other members of the community on child rights. Australia will investigate opportunities to incorporate a specific training module on domestic violence into the comprehensive training package delivered to Village Health Workers.

Australia also supports HIV and AIDS prevention and response work through the provision of funding to Voluntary Service Overseas for its Strengthening National Response to HIV and Sexually Transmitted Infections program in Vanuatu (\$1.3 million over four years from 2007-08). This program provides capacity-building support to the Ministry of Health (including the reproductive health unit) and other organisations (including the Vanuatu Family Health Association) in a number of provinces.

Australian support for the Vanuatu Women's Centre includes funding for counselling and support services to survivors of gender-based violence.

Violence against women is prevented

Goals for all stakeholders in Vanuatu

To prevent violence against women.

This will include:

- > raising awareness through coordinated efforts at all levels
- > changing community attitudes about violence
- > increasing women's status in society.

Situational analysis

There is a need to strengthen women's participation in economic, social and political life in Vanuatu. This will help in improving the status of women in society, which will assist in changing community attitudes to violence against women and in enabling women to respond to situations of violence.

A number of civil society organisations in Vanuatu are active in raising awareness of, and contributing to prevention of, violence against women.

- > The Vanuatu Women's Centre carries out advocacy and awareness-raising activities, including through the volunteer Committees Against Violence Against Women. These committees use key international days such as the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender Violence and International Women's Day to raise community awareness and gain support to end violence against women.
- > The Male Advocates Program, conducted by the Vanuatu Women's Centre, supports men to speak out against violence against women.
- > Wan Smol Bag, a Vanuatu theatre group, uses drama and creative materials to raise community awareness of a range of social issues, including domestic violence.

Government of Vanuatu priorities and actions to prevent violence against women

The Family Protection Act, which came into effect in March 2009, is the cornerstone of Government of Vanuatu efforts to protect women and children from domestic violence. One component of the draft implementation strategy for the FPA, managed by the Department of Women's Affairs, is the prevention of violence against women. It aims to increase community awareness of violence against women and children as being a violation of human rights. Awareness raising, community education and research into violence against women are planned to meet this objective.



Wan Smol Bag, a Vanuatu theatre group, uses drama and creative materials to raise community awareness of a range of social issues, including domestic violence.
Photo: AusAID

The Department of Women's Affairs used the occasion of International Women's Day on 8 March 2009 to conduct a series of panel discussions and a media campaign for ending violence against women. It has been collaborating with the national public broadcaster to air some talkback sessions on perceptions of how disputes should be resolved.

Australian support for preventing violence against women

Working with civil society

Community mobilisation and awareness raising

Australia supports Wan Smol Bag (\$1.4 million over three years from 2006-07) to deliver an innovative program combining community theatre, media and workshops. The program raises awareness and mobilises communities (particularly youth) on issues including gender roles, domestic violence and sexual and reproductive health. Wan Smol Bag has incorporated information about the Family Protection Act into its travelling theatre productions on domestic violence, generating considerable community discussion and engagement on these issues. The organisation also provides health services to populations in greatest hardship.

Australia will look for opportunities to address gender equality, including addressing violence against women, through involvement in management arrangements in AusAID bilateral programs such as the Vanuatu Kastom Governance Partnership.

Working with men and boys

As mentioned above, the Vanuatu Women's Centre conducts a Male Advocates Program, which engages men in positions to influence community attitudes or services to women and children. The geographic scope of this work has increased over time; along with the Committees Against Violence Against Women, the program has increased women's access to support in rural areas.

Australia partnered with the United Nations Development Programme Pacific Centre in supporting a Pacific and East Timorese delegation to attend the 'Global Symposium on Engaging Men and Boys to Achieve Gender Equality', held in March 2009. The delegation included representatives from Vanuatu.

AusAID will provide funding in 2009-10 to the Fiji Women's Crisis Centre for the development of a handbook on working with men as advocates for the elimination of violence against women in the Pacific. The handbook will provide guidelines on best practices for working with men to advocate for gender equality and the elimination of violence, including outlining a training program for men who will become gender equality advocates.

Working with faith-based organisations

Australia is a Principal Partner to the International Women's Development Agency initiative 'Asia Pacific Breakthrough: The Women, Faith and Development Summit to End Global Poverty', to be held in December 2009. The summit will bring together faith-based, women's and development organisations from across Asia and the Pacific to discuss opportunities to work together to advance gender equality, including to end violence against women.



Engaging men and boys is a key part of ending violence against women. In Port Vila, a man reads about the issue of domestic violence. Photo: AusAID

Australia will look for opportunities to address gender equality, including addressing violence against women, through involvement in management arrangements in the AusAID-funded Vanuatu Church Partnership Program.

Prevention activities through the education sector

Australia will investigate opportunities to provide training on gender-based violence through its support to the education sector, specifically to the Vanuatu Institute of Teacher Education in Port Vila, which provides training to all teachers working in Vanuatu.

Further, Australia currently encourages information dissemination on child protection issues through the Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) Sector Strengthening Program. Australia will look to extend this to gender-based violence issues to raise awareness of these issues through the TVET sector's considerable community networks.

Recognising and promoting the rights of women with disability

AusAID, through the Pacific Public Sector Linkages Program, is supporting the Australian Human Rights Commission to partner with the Pacific Disability Forum to progress disability issues in the Pacific by delivering training in nine countries. The training courses are scheduled to be held between August 2009 and July 2010. In Vanuatu, the training will bring together members of the Disability Promotion and Advocacy Association of Vanuatu and government representatives to build their capacity and knowledge of disability rights in order to progress disability issues, including the rights of women with disability.

AusAID, through the International Seminar Support Scheme, supported the attendance of a woman with disability from Vanuatu at the Pacific Regional Forum on Women with Disabilities and the Pacific Regional Disability Conference in Vanuatu on 20–23 April 2009. One of the key components at these conferences was discussion of the sensitive issue of violence against women with disability.

Gender equality and empowering women

The ODE report noted that efforts to reduce violence against women are intrinsically linked to women's political, social and economic empowerment. The report recommended that Australia ensure all its interventions focus on promoting greater equality between men and women.

Gender equality is a guiding principle of Australia's international development assistance program. The Australian Government is committed to ensuring that the needs, priorities and interests of women, as well as men, are considered in all development activities and at every stage of the development process.

Women's leadership and decision making

Australia is providing \$6.2 million over five years from 2007-08 for the Gender Equality in Political Governance Program, in partnership with UNIFEM. The program focuses on supporting women standing for elections in the Pacific and including gender issues in governance programs in the Pacific. It will undertake research and develop generic information, resource and learning materials to promote women's leadership. In Vanuatu, the program will also train women at a local level on their rights and responsibilities and increase their capacity to be active citizens and leaders.

An integrated approach

Goals for all stakeholders in Vanuatu

To deliver a coordinated and comprehensive response to violence against women, including among government and non-government actors, at the national and local levels.

This will include:

- > developing and implementing plans of action for preventing violence against women at national, provincial, municipal and community levels
- > supporting interagency taskforces on violence against women (for example, within the context of the reporting on progress required by Vanuatu as a signatory to the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women)
- > conducting national coordinated campaigns and awareness-raising activities
- > collaborating on training and capacity building of local stakeholders across all sectors.

Situational analysis

Multisectoral coordination in responding to violence against women in Vanuatu has been weak. The Family Protection Act, which came into effect in March 2009, may raise the profile of this issue and lead to increased coordination across government. The Department of Women's Affairs is playing a key role in implementing the legislation. This is expected to strengthen its role as the lead agency within government in addressing violence against women.

Government of Vanuatu priorities and actions to ensure an integrated approach

The Government of Vanuatu ratified the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1995. As a signatory to CEDAW, the government has committed itself to promote and protect women's rights, including to take measures to end violence against women.

The Government of Vanuatu's 2006–2011 Priorities and Action Agenda highlights gender parity in education, women's economic empowerment and women's participation in decision making as key focus areas for Vanuatu.

The government, through the Department of Women's Affairs, is planning a two-year implementation strategy for the Family Protection Act. The strategy, still in draft form, focuses on three key areas: prevention, protection and punishment (legal response).

A review of the FPA is scheduled to take place in two years. The draft strategy includes a plan to revive a national taskforce on violence against women.

The taskforce is to be chaired by the Ministry of Justice and Social Welfare. Key partners to the taskforce would include, in addition to the Ministry of Justice and Social Welfare:

- > Ministry of Health
- > Department of Women's Affairs
- > Chief Registrar of the Supreme Court
- > Vanuatu Police Force
- > Malvatumauri National Council of Chiefs
- > Vanuatu Christian Council
- > Vanuatu Women's Centre
- > development partners including NZAID and AusAID.

Australian support for an integrated approach

Australia will seek to support the planned national taskforce on violence against women to implement the FPA (see above).

The findings of the ODE report have been disseminated to team leaders of Australian-supported projects (including the Legal Sector Strengthening Project and the Vanuatu Police Force Capacity Building Project) and Australian-funded advisers in relevant government agencies (including the Ministry of Health and the Vanuatu Police Force). Ongoing dialogue will help to enhance opportunities for multisectoral links between programs.

The Vanuatu Women's Centre is currently undertaking a rigorous national survey on the characteristics and prevalence of gender-based violence in Vanuatu. The findings (expected to be released in late 2009) will inform evidence-based advocacy and multisectoral policy development on violence against women. AusAID provided funding (\$200,000 in 2008-09) to support the conduct of this survey.



Merilyn Tahi, Coordinator, Vanuatu Women's Centre. The centre provides legal support, counselling and temporary shelter for women who have been abused, and carries out advocacy and awareness raising.
Photo: AusAID