



Australian Government

AusAID

Office of Development Effectiveness



Violence against Women in Melanesia and East Timor

AusAID's Office of Development Effectiveness has undertaken a study to assess the effectiveness of methods currently being used to address violence against women and girls in five of Australia's neighbouring countries: Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and East Timor.

More than 700 individuals and representatives of government, Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) and international organisations were involved in the process, together with experts in this field who were determined to push for change in each country.

The result is a package of reports that outlines the perspectives and hopes of a broad spectrum of Melanesian and East Timorese society.

The November 2008 Violence against women in Melanesia and East Timor: Building on global and regional approaches reports examine the severity and causes of violence against women in the region. They also consider approaches used locally and internationally to recommend a framework for action to address violence against women in the region.

What we know about violence against women in the region

Violence against women is a serious global problem, affecting all countries around the world, including Australia. It is a violation of basic human rights and causes immeasurable trauma to women, families and the community. It is both a symptom and a cause of gender inequality and discrimination.

Impacts of violence against women in the region, and in Australia, include escalating costs in health care, social services, policing and an increased strain on the justice system. High rates of violence against women, combined with a culture of fear, obstruct women's participation in political, social and economic life.

In Melanesia and East Timor, violence against women is severe, pervasive and constrains development. A more comprehensive and effective response to violence against women is urgently required if the Millennium Development Goals are to be achieved internationally, including in Melanesia and East Timor.

Consistent with global trends, the most common forms of violence against women in these countries are physical, psychological, sexual and economic.

Obstacles to reducing violence against women

In every country where violence against women is high, cultural and economic factors play a critical role in

promoting and condoning violence as a legitimate way to resolve conflict. The poor status of women is a major obstacle to reducing violence against them.

Across the region, common customary practices and attitudes continue to put women at risk of violence and reinforce their low status in society. These practices, alongside economic factors, make it difficult, and often impossible, for women to protect themselves.

- > **Bride-price** can reduce women to the status of "property".
- > **Economic dependence** on men disempowers women and can limit their ability to escape violence.
- > **Compensation and reconciliation** may maintain peace between groups and their leaders, but often at the expense of women.

A framework for action

International research shows that efforts to reduce violence against women must be long-term. It needs to focus on addressing structural inequalities, provide victim support and increase women's access to justice. Comprehensive and linked solutions at the national, sub-national and community levels are vital. Isolated interventions are unlikely to work.

The reports build on local ideas and solutions to address violence against women. They draw on promising approaches already being used in the region. The result is a framework for action based on three strategies that have proven successful in the region, and in other countries, in reducing violence:

- > **Increasing women's access to justice**
 - pass and implement laws and policies that discourage violence and impose consequences on offenders;
 - provide women with the means to protect themselves and their children from violence;
 - provide information on the rights of women.
- > **Increasing women's access to support services**
 - provide safe havens and support services for survivors of violence;
 - provide long-term support for organisations that provide this support.
- > **Prevention of violence**
 - coordinate efforts at all levels to raise awareness, change community attitudes about violence and improve women's status in society.

The assessment of violence against women in Melanesia and East Timor identified examples of promising practices in each of these areas.

Access to justice

Law reform has often been a major step to addressing violence against women.

In **Papua New Guinea**, the Government's **Justice Sector Gender Strategy for 2005-2010** aims, among other things, to: improve women's participation in the justice sector; develop and support a human rights approach to service delivery; strengthen coordination between agencies and with civil society; and increase women's access to the formal justice system.

In 2001, the Chief Justice in **Vanuatu** issued a Court Rule enabling women to receive **Domestic Violence Protection Orders (DVPO)** as a relatively quick and effective short-term legal protection against domestic violence.

...it (the DVPO) provided me with the protection I needed against my husband...The DVPO enabled me to return to my children...my husband had to leave the house temporarily to allow me to return home. I think the DVPO was a rude awakening for my husband.

(Domestic violence survivor, Port Vila)

Access to support

Civil society groups play a major role. They provide services and advocacy for survivors of violence. They also train government and communities on the impact of violence on women and ways to prevent violence. Many inspiring initiatives start at the grassroots or community level as local groups help women cope with violence.

In **PNG**, **Kup Women for Peace** carries out house-to-house awareness raising activities.

“We move around and sleep in people's houses with families. After we speak to people from that household, we move on to other houses and do awareness there. We also go to the men's [meeting] house at night, and in the daytime, we go to the small markets in the community. People ask lots of questions and they learn so much this way.”

(Representative from Kup Women for Peace)

The **Alola Foundation** in **East Timor** uses a community income generation and awareness model to increase women's empowerment. The Foundation offers three-day village-based workshops to stimulate discussion on the main forms of violence and

lives. The workshops culminate in the formation of income-generating co-operatives that help reduce women's economic dependence on men.

The **Fiji Women's Crisis Centre** provides crisis counselling, legal, medical and other practical support services for women and children survivors of domestic violence. The Fiji Women's Crisis Centre is involved in public advocacy and community education on gender based violence and aims to influence public perceptions of violence against women to counter the culture of silence.

The **Christian Care Centre**, founded by the sisters of the Church of Melanesia, is a safe haven for abused women and girls in the **Solomon Islands**. The Centre provides counselling services and activities for women and girls living at the centre and conducts community awareness programs.

The health sector and civil society groups are also providing survivors with counselling and legal aid whilst they receive treatment and counselling.

AusAID, UNICEF and Médecins Sans Frontières provide funding to the **PNG** Department of Health for hospital-based **Family Support Centres**. These centres provide services to women who have been physically abused or raped. Women receive treatment, counselling and referrals in privacy and safety, and medico-legal evidence can be collected and documented.

Prevention

Prevention must be a key part of any strategy to eliminate violence against women. This involves providing communities with information, resources and skills necessary to take action against violence. It also means equipping communities to deal with the effects violence has on women, families and communities. A key focus is challenging attitudes that promote men's power over women and acceptance of violence as a legitimate way to resolve conflict.

An innovative approach to draw attention to issues such as gender roles and domestic violence has been used in **Vanuatu** by the **Wan Smol Bag Amateur Theatre Group**. The group developed programs through a process of formative research, performing in Bislama throughout the country.

“With these activities, we are able to create an open and conducive atmosphere whereby young people interact with peers, many of whom are themselves offenders or victims of violence so that they can understand, accept and change their behaviour to violence.”

Wan Smol Bag has programs that support youth services to change young people's attitudes.

“Many of us have changed our attitudes and behaviour after having been through this place. ...Wan Smol Bag Youth Project has helped us know our rights as well as helped us to have respect for each other and other people.”

(Participant in the Youth Project)

Men's participation in prevention, support and awareness raising activities is vital to reducing violence against women and implementing social change.

The **Vanuatu Women's Centre** has established Committee against Violence against Women (CAVAWs) to enlist men in leadership positions in their communities, particularly police officers and village chiefs, to support violence prevention activities. Men become 'male advocates' speaking out against violence against women.

“Before I became a male advocate, I had violence in my home despite the fact that I am a police officer and should be upholding the law...I was always violent towards my wife and our life at home was not a happy one.

After going through the Male Advocate Training provided by the VWC, I now treat my wife with more respect. Since 2004 when I became a male advocate, I changed because my perceptions and views towards women have changed. Being a male advocate, I am now able to put myself into the women's shoes and speak for them. Our CAVAWs...would refer all women victims to me for counselling and advice. If they choose, I also counsel their husbands and it has really helped so many couples restore peace and unity in their homes.”

(Male Advocate, CAVAW)

Role of the Australian Government

The Australian Government takes the problem of violence against women seriously – both in Australia and overseas. Violence against women is a global problem, affecting Australia, as well as our close neighbours.

Australia is committed to intensifying its efforts to address violence against women in Australia and in the region and aspires to be an international leader on this issue in partnership with regional governments. Ending violence against women is crucial to achieving gender equality and delivering positive development outcomes.

A consolidated response to ending violence against women is dependent on the combined actions of national governments, NGOs and civil society, international donors and multilateral organisations, and men and women in the community.

In line with the participatory approach that was used in undertaking this research, the Australian Government will seek to continue working in partnership with key stakeholders, including partner governments, civil society groups and international organisations, to eliminate violence against women across the region. The Australian Government will use the report as a positive platform to build effective partnerships to address violence against women.

More information

Violence against Women in Melanesia and East Timor: Building on global and regional approaches and the five supplementary country specific reports are available for download at www.ode.usaid.gov.au