



## Domestic Violence and its prevalence in Small Island Developing States- South Pacific Region

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### ABSTRACT:

This paper reviews the collective studies of domestic violence in Small Island Developing States (SIDS), in particular, Fiji, Vanuatu and Solomon Islands. Domestic violence is one form of gender inequality. Studies have shown that domestic violence is the most severe violation of human rights causing social and economic repercussions to countries. SIDS are no exception, with increase rate of domestic violence, the countries suffer through loss of productive labour and increase costs to the government, victims and society. By addressing domestic violence through education and workshops at the grass root level monetary funds can be diverted into other sectors within the economy, thus lifting a country's status quo. More importantly, women and girls will have equal outcomes as men and boys; eradicating the vicious cycle of domestic violence, thus enabling a country to reach its full economic potential.

**Key Words:** Women's Economic Empowerment; Violence against Women; Domestic Violence; Small Island Development State.

### BACKGROUND

In many developing countries, one of the biggest challenges is increasing the well-being of its people through achieving and sustaining high economic growth. The disparities in economic growth rates between developing countries and the developed nations have continued to increase and without steps to address this, the risks this trend poses - including social instability - will continue to grow.<sup>1</sup> It is in this context that 'inclusive growth' has emerged as a new development paradigm in many countries. Inclusive growth focuses on economic growth which is a necessary and crucial condition for poverty reduction. It embraces both income and non-income dimensions of well-being. Inclusive growth is one of the three strategic objectives in Asian Development Bank's (ADB) Strategy 2020, along with environmentally sustainable growth and regional cooperation and integration.<sup>2</sup> One key aspect in achieving and sustaining inclusive growth is the efficient utilisation of human capital through the equal participation of men and women in development and governance processes. However, women continue to be under-represented and experience discrimination in the development and governance process especially within developing countries. As a result, gender inequality

continues to be a significant development barrier for economic development.<sup>3</sup> Gender disparities not only diminishes the well-being of women but also affects the well-being of children and men, thus, hindering long-term economic growth. Development partners of developing countries have increasingly acknowledged the role of gender equality and women's empowerment as a powerful means to foster development and poverty reduction.<sup>4,2</sup>

One of the most significant consequences of gender inequality is gender based violence (GBV). GBV 'reflects and reinforces inequality

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between men and women... [compromising] the health, dignity, security and autonomy' of its survivors.<sup>5</sup> GBV covers a broad range of human rights violations, including sexual abuse of children, rape, domestic violence, sexual assault and harassment, trafficking of women and girls and several harmful traditional practices. Violence against women is experienced globally irrespective of ethnicity, religion and economic status yet it is the least recognised human rights abuse in the world. UN reports<sup>6</sup> that globally, one in three women will be beaten, coerced into sex or otherwise abused at some point in her life.

The Beijing Declaration<sup>7</sup> declares that: "...violence against women both violates and impairs or nullifies the enjoyment by women of their human rights and fundamental freedoms... In all societies, to a greater or lesser degree, women and girls are subjected to physical, sexual and psychological abuse that cuts across lines of income, class and culture."

Despite women and girls in the small island states receiving higher education their economic and social access are hindered by religious and customary barriers. There exists a patriarchy social system that fosters male power and control over women and girls. This inequality of power within households and communities has seen many incidences of one aspect of gender-based violence, that is, domestic violence or intimate partner violence (IPV).<sup>7</sup>

Domestic violence is pervasive, widespread<sup>8</sup> and a serious national issue in Pacific Island countries.<sup>9</sup> At the 40<sup>th</sup> Pacific Forum meeting, the Forum leaders acknowledged the prevalence of gender-based violence in the Pacific and the risk that it poses to human security and collectively committed to the eradication of gender-based violence.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, it is timely that this paper assesses the present state of gender based violence; in particular, domestic violence experienced in the Small Island Developing States of Fiji, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu. The methodology adopted is a review of available publications on IPV and its costs on the economic growth rates of Fiji, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu, including project reports, evaluations, qualitative and quantitative research reports, and policy briefs. This paper aims to highlight the status of domestic violence in the South Pacific region. The paper is organised as follows: Section Two provides the literature review on the contributing factors of domestic violence and the costs of domestic violence globally and in SIDS. Section Three provides research results gathered through archival research and lastly Section Four provides direction for future research.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The gender inequalities exist because of discrimination in the family and societal institutions, and social, cultural, and religious norms that propagate stereotypes, practices and beliefs that are detrimental to women. The importance of reducing gender inequalities saw the adoption of the Convention to Eliminate All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) by the U.N. General Assembly in 1979. CEDAW is explicitly guaranteed in many constitutions and statues globally. Domestic violence is one form of gender inequality, and it reflects and reinforces inequities between men and women and compromises the health, dignity, security and autonomy of its victims.<sup>12</sup>

According to the World Development Report on Gender Equality and Development, between 60 and 70 percent of women in Kiribati, the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu report experiencing some form of domestic violence.<sup>13</sup> Domestic violence imposes a substantial burden on its victims and society - children, education, health, families, businesses all suffer. The World Bank derived the following estimated costs of domestic violence per country.<sup>14</sup> The estimate for the United Kingdom was \$42 billion, for Chile an estimated \$1.7 billion and Nicaragua was a conservative \$34 million. In Uganda the cost of domestic violence was estimated at \$2.5 million in 2007.<sup>15</sup> An Australia study in 2002 estimated the annual cost of domestic violence at \$8.1billion,<sup>16</sup> whereas in New Zealand, the estimated cost of domestic violence in 1996 was between \$1.2 and \$5.8 billion per annum.<sup>17</sup> In today's terms, that is up to about \$8 billion each year.<sup>18</sup> In 2011, the cost of domestic violence to the Fijian economy was estimated at 6.6 percent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP).<sup>19</sup> Thus, domestic violence exhausts country's off their productive resources and finances that could otherwise be utilised into funds such as education and/or improving women's human capital and productive capacity. For SIDS these economic and human costs are unaffordable. It is important to remember that many women do not report violence and many studies do not, or cannot, capture the long-term costs or the effects on the next generation. Evidence suggests that domestic violence witnessed as a child is repeated in adulthood.

## RESULTS

### Situation of gender inequality in the small island states

#### Nature and extent of gender-based violence

In Fiji, the primary forms of violence reported by Fijian women are physical, sexual and emotional abuse by an intimate partner; sexual assault; and sexual harassment.<sup>20</sup> Violence against women imposes a considerable cost that the Fiji Reserve Bank has calculated to be FJ\$210.69-million per year, or 7% of GDP.<sup>21</sup>

Domestic violence appears widespread in Fiji with data from the Fiji Women's Crisis Centre showing 80% of women have witnessed some form of violence in the home and 66% of women have been physically abused by partners.<sup>25</sup> Police statistics showed that domestic violence made up around 13% of all crimes between 2003 and 2007. Workplace sexual harassment is also prevalent with a 2002 study showing one in three women had been sexually harassed in the workplace.<sup>20</sup> In many cases, the offender is known to the victim.

There is evidence that violence against women is increasing in Fiji with reports of sexual violence increasing by 155% from 2003-2007.<sup>21</sup> Violence against women, both from intimate partners and strangers, increased during and after coups. At the same time, police have diminished capacity and willingness to respond to violence against women.<sup>20</sup>

In the Solomon Islands, domestic violence is widespread and is the most common form of violence. Other forms of violence include incest, commercial sexual exploitation of girls (especially related to the logging and fishing industries). There is a high rate of intimate partner violence in the Solomon Islands, with 64% of ever-partnered women aged 15-49 reporting physical and/or sexual violence. Sexual partner violence was experienced by 55% of women and physical partner violence was experienced by 45% of women.<sup>5</sup>

Sexual violence increased during the civil conflict of 1999-2003.<sup>20</sup> Three-quarters of women reported direct personal trauma including rape, death of family members, threats of violence and intimidation at gunpoint.<sup>20</sup>

In Vanuatu there have been no systematic studies of domestic violence, however, a study based on the WHO methodology is underway. Information collected by the national women's groups indicate that there are high rates of gender-based violence, especially intimate partner violence.<sup>20</sup> The Vanuatu Women's Centre reported three thousand and six hundred cases

of family violence from 1993-2000 and around half of the Community Legal Centre's business relates to domestic violence.<sup>22</sup> There are reports of girls being sold by their fathers into early and transactional sex around bars in Port Vila.<sup>21</sup>

### Social and cultural factors contributing to domestic violence

#### *Low status of women and girls*

Fiji, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu have decision-making processes entrenched in custom and religious teachings. Women are still side-lined when it comes to decision making at the household level, community level and country level. In the case of the Solomon Islands, traditionally it had a matrilineal land system whereby women played a significant role in the decision making of land and resource management. However, these roles have eroded over the years with the introduction of the patriarchal, religious, legal, economic and political systems.<sup>22</sup>

The social attitude for male domination has led to discrimination against women in the workforce. Furthermore, the change in customs over the years, has led to a saying among the Wontok people that goes "women 'no save tok' (cannot/must not talk)", and that they must 'stand behind' men when it comes to speaking about and dealing with resources in the public arena. The 'kustom' of women 'no save tok' has constrain women's ability to enter the formal political system, making the Solomon Islands one of the only few countries with no female parliamentarians in its fifty-member parliament.<sup>23</sup> The low status of women and girls contribute has led to severe domestic violence. Similar results were also found in Vanuatu and Fiji.

Male perpetrators most often become angry with their wives for not conforming to traditional gender roles. For example, not preparing food, not completing housework on time, refusing sex, being disobedient or rude to them. Almost all men said they hit their wives as a form of discipline and most said that to improve the situation, their wives should learn to be obedient and do what men ask.<sup>5</sup>

Research shows that many Solomon Island women have absorbed these social norms. The majority of women agree with the statements: "a man should show his wife who is boss" (71%) and "a good wife obeys her husband even if she disagrees" (66%). Only half of women agree that "women should be able to choose their own friends" and a significant proportion of women agree that "a wife is obliged to have sex with her

husband, even if she doesn't want to" (40%). Overall, 73% of women agree there is at least one situation where a man has a good reason to beat his wife. The main justifications for violence that women agree with are: he finds out that she has been unfaithful (63%); she disobeys him (41%); and he suspects that she has been unfaithful (27%). Most women agree that a woman has a right to refuse sex with her husband in at least one situation (87%).<sup>5</sup>

#### *Marriage practices and age of consent*

The practice of bride-price is cited as a key factor in perpetuating violence against women in the Pacific. Frequently, wives believe that they must put up with violence as leaving the marriage would involve repaying the bride-price. The modern practice of paying the bride-price in cash reinforces the view that a husband has "bought" his wife and has property rights.<sup>20</sup> In Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands the traditional practice of bride price is still being carried out. Women link the violence and discrimination they suffer at the hands of men to the tradition of bride price. Many people view bride price as giving a husband ownership of his wife and the right to beat her and treat her as he wishes. Women whose bride price has not been fully paid are particularly vulnerable: they are more than 2.5 times more likely to experience violence than women whose marriage did not involve bride price. Some women gave bride price as a reason for staying in a relationship despite violent incidents.<sup>24,5</sup> Marriage at a young age is common, which can put girls at high risk of physical abuse. The legal age of marriage is usually between 14-16 for girls and higher for boys. The practice of early marriage occurs in Fiji, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. Arranged or fixed marriages are common in Indo-Fijian communities, with young girls betrothed to marry as young as fifteen years old. A new form of marriage is the sale of daughters to foreigners in return for large cash payments.<sup>21</sup>

#### *Role of Religion*

The major religions in the region – Christianity and Hinduism – support the belief that the husband is the head of the family. Most of the mainline churches in the Pacific have not taken a proactive role to denounce gender inequalities or violence against women and girls.<sup>20, 21</sup>

#### *Focus on compensation and reconciliation*

Maintaining peace between groups and their (male) leaders is highly regarded. The interests of women and girls are not seen as separate from those of the group, so injuries against a female are dealt with by compensating the males who had "rights" to her. In Solomon Islands and

Vanuatu, a woman who has been raped can be forced to marry the offender to normalise relations between the two groups.<sup>20</sup>

#### *Economic dependence and poverty*

Economic dependence and poverty put women and girls at risk of sexual violence. Women's reliance on a male breadwinner is seen as a major deterrent to complaining about violence or leaving her husband.<sup>20</sup> The majority of ever-partnered women (58%) reported controlling behaviour by an intimate partner. Forms of controlling behaviour include: wanting to know where she is at all times (42%); becoming angry if she speaks with other men (32%); controlling her access to health care (32%); and often suspecting her of being unfaithful (31%). Women who had experienced intimate partner violence were significantly more likely to report that their partner had been financially controlling, for example, 19% of women who had experienced partner violence had their earnings or savings taken by their partner against their will compared with 5% of non-abused women.<sup>5</sup> This form of economic abuse has led to the vicious cycle of poverty for women and in turn children.

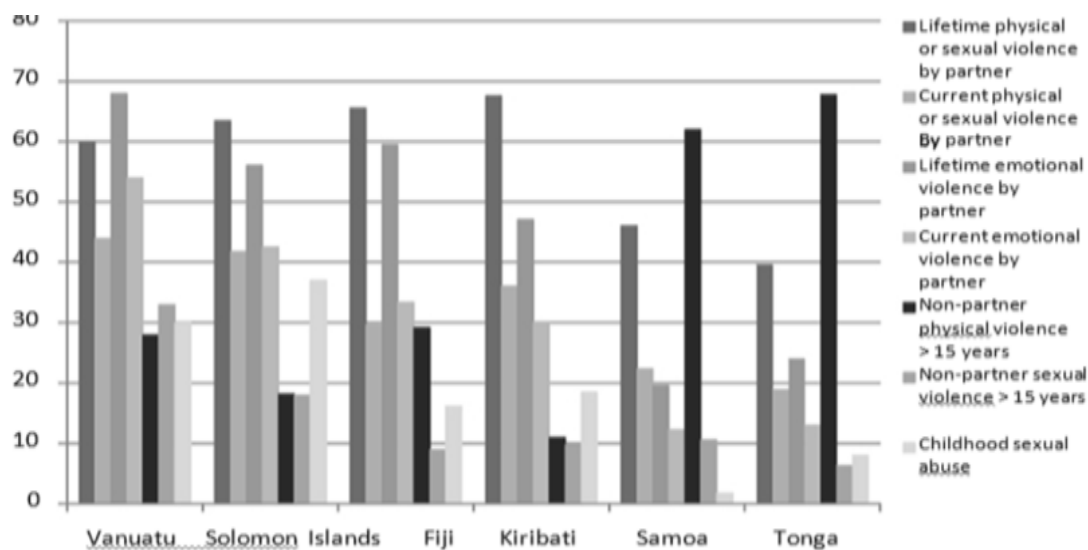
#### **Gender based policies**

Gender is a critical and cross-cutting factor in policy development. Failure to strive for gender equality creates an opportunity cost ill afforded by the Pacific Island Countries, as their development is reliant on maximising the potential of their human resources. The Pacific Island Countries that have ratified to CEDAW are working towards addressing overall gender inequalities through development of legislations and policy for countries in the Pacific region.

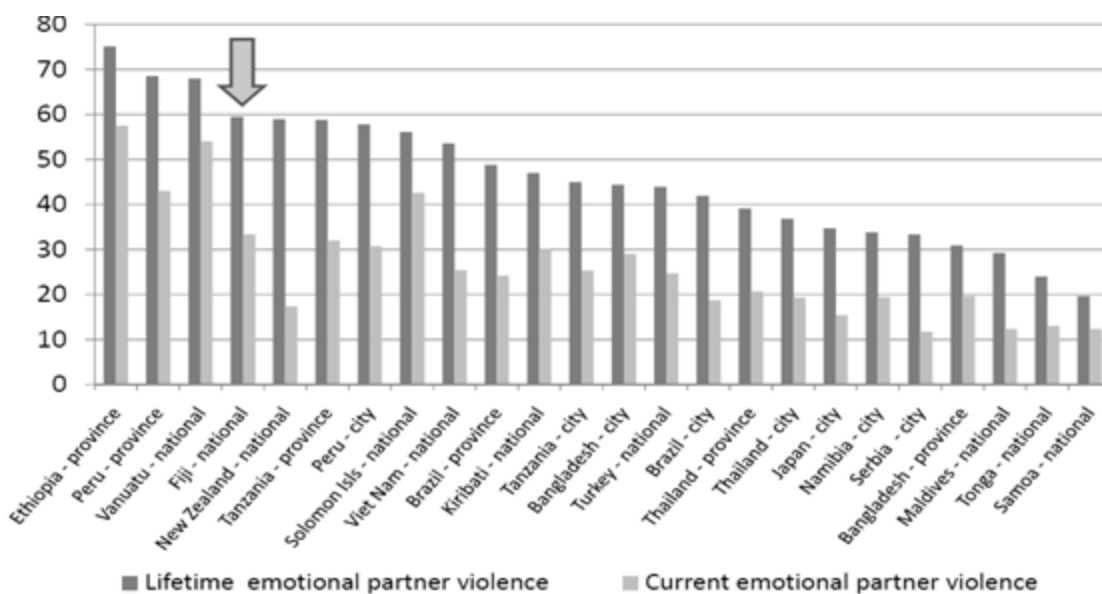
While much violence may have its origins in the household with violence against women, a recent study showed that the patterns of violence against women across countries in the Pacific were reported to be highest among most developing countries.<sup>25</sup> Figure 1 illustrates that the most common form of violence against women within the context of this paper is lifetime physical or sexual violence by partners. (Vanuatu, Solomon Islands and Fiji all have reported this as the common form of violence).

As illustrated in Figure 2, Fiji, Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands are in the high bracket of incidences of women and girls' experiencing lifetime and current emotional partner violence. Therefore, there is a need for government agencies and the community to seriously address domestic violence. The three island

**Figure 1:** Patterns of Violence against Women across six Pacific Island Countries (Fiji data recalculated for 18-49-year-old comparability). Source: Fiji Women’s Crises Centre (FWCC), 2012. Republished with permission.



**Figure 2:** Prevalence of lifetime and current emotional partner violence around the world (studies that used WHO methodology; where applicable recalculated for 15-49 or 18-49 years of age). Source: Fiji Women’s Crises Centre (FWCC), 2012. Republished with permission.



states have now taken domestic violence seriously and this is evident through the number of policies that is being implemented. Although the effective implementation of these policies have yet to eventuate it is still encouraging to note that domestic violence has reached the agenda of government and donor agencies. The next section provides a brief description of gender policies that supports the elimination of violence against women for the countries included in this study are outline in the table below (Table 1).

With the support towards advocating the elimination of all forms of violence against women, the Pacific Island Forum Secretariat alongside SPC RRRT is working towards a revised Pacific Platform for Action on the Advancement of Women and Gender Equality. This would be the key operational instrument in the promotion of gender equality for sustainable development in the Pacific Islands Region. Not only will this platform raise awareness but also push for Pacific Island Countries to undergo legislative /policy review towards development of a National Policy on Eliminating Violence against Women.

**Table 1:** Gender Policies in the Fiji, Vanuatu and Solomon Islands.

	<b>Policies and Legislations implemented</b>
Fiji	<u>No drop policy – (introduced by the Fiji Police Department)</u> In September 1995 the Fiji Police Department introduced the “No Drop” Policy which requires all cases of domestic violence to be investigated. Prior to the introduction of this policy, the police force tended to put emphasis on reconciliation of cases involving domestic violence. The policy empowers any member of the community to report on domestic violence and apply for a temporary restraining order and under the order one can put in conditions.
	<u>Domestic Violence Decree 2009</u> The government enacted the decree on 14 August 2009 but it only came into effect on September 6, 2010. The Decree is a “Decree to provide greater protection from domestic violence, to clarify the duties of police in that regard, to introduce domestic violence restraining orders and other measures to promote the safety and wellbeing of victims of domestic violence and to promote rehabilitation of perpetrators of domestic violence and for related matters.”
	<u>State party to CEDAW</u> Fiji became a state part to CEDAW on 28 August 1995. The convention seeks to protect and promote women from elimination of all forms of violence against women.
Solomon Islands	<u>Eliminating Violence against Women (EVAW) Policy</u> Policy was endorsed in 2009 but implemented in 2010. EVAW policy includes: “(1) Zero tolerance of violence, (2) Recognition of women’s rights, (3) Sharing responsibility for elimination of violence against women and (4) Achieving gender equality.
	<u>National policy Gender Equality and Women’s Development Policy (GEWD)</u> The policy was implemented in 2010. The national women machinery is working on a National Action Plan to translate this Policy into programmes and activities for implementation at all levels.
	<u>State party to CEDAW</u> Solomon Islands became a state part to CEDAW on 6 May 2002. The convention seeks to protect and promote women from elimination of all forms of violence against women.
Vanuatu	In 2009, Vanuatu Parliament enacted its Domestic Violence legislation, the Vanuatu Family Protection Act. This Act criminalises all forms of gender based violence, provides access to protection orders against such violence. It specifically states that customary reconciliation is not a defence. The government is currently working with selected communities to pilot the implementation of the Act especially in the current absence of formal legal and support services.
	Vanuatu is currently working on finalizing its National Gender and Women's Empowerment Policy 2013 - 2023. This policy aims to provide direction and guidance on strategic interventions in addressing gender inequalities. It also acts as a coordinating document for government ministries to integrate and mainstream gender perspective in all policies.
	<u>State party to CEDAW</u> Vanuatu became a state part to CEDAW on 8 September 1995. The convention seeks to protect and promote women from elimination of all forms of violence against women.

### Cost of domestic violence to SIDS

The 2012 World Bank report highlights some of the key economic impacts of GBV; direct costs – these are the costs directly incurred because of domestic violence, including, but not limited to, medical expenses, crisis services, legal services and indirect costs – these costs include impacts on the productivity and earnings of women who are abused, including productivity loss from early death or days out of the workforce due to injury. These can also include the costs (lost productivity, lower tax revenues) incurred from the incarceration of the abuser, as well as some health costs (for example, the need for later-life counselling or support for children who have witnessed violence).

In addition, it states the inadequacies in accounting-based measures of GBV costs, precisely because they fail to consider the non-monetary social costs of such violence. The report advocates for a more comprehensive measure of GBV costs, while acknowledging the difficulty of obtaining full data. On a micro level, an accounting approach also fails to recognise household or individual costs for women who leave abusive relationships – costs of relocating, replacing personal and family items like cookware or clothing, the cost of losing land or property, costs from potentially being excluded from village or family networks, or the loss of subsistence or market food production from land exclusion.

These national-level cost figures also neglect the significant household shocks that can be caused by even a small shift in productivity in subsistence economies. A relatively small loss of income can have impacts on child nutrition, health and access to education. Additionally, according to the World Development Report 2012,<sup>27</sup> children who witness domestic violence are more likely to perpetrate or experience violence themselves. So there is clearly a cyclical effect at play, which unless addressed, will continue to create constraints for women's agency and economic development as a whole in the longer-term.

There is significant interplay between the issues associated with domestic violence and economic development, both at the household and national level. Domestic violence has imposed a large economic cost on Pacific Island countries. In 2015, Professor Biman Prasad, Dean from the University of the South Pacific, calculated that the cost of domestic violence to the Fijian economy was around 6.6% of GDP. One could imagine the economic costs to be similarly high in Pacific Island countries like Kiribati, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, which have comparable

rates of gender based violence. This human and economic cost is unaffordable.

Finally, it has been noted that the three island states have seriously taken the fight to reduce gender based violence through being a state partner to CEDAW and implementing legislations to protect women and children experiencing gender based violence. However, the results of having these policies, which is a decline in domestic violence, are still in its infancy stage. Culture and tradition still takes precedence and more advocating of these legislations and women's rights need to be done in order to see positive results in having these legislations in place.

### RECOMMENDATIONS:

International and regional legal and policy instruments have clarified the obligations of countries to eradicate and punish violence against women. However, States are failing to meet the requirements of the international legal and policy framework. Violence against women must be prioritized at all levels — it has not yet received the priority required enabling significant change. Leadership and political will is critical. There is a need to firstly, involve men in gender sensitive workshops to change the mind-set of men and children. The primary and secondary education levels need to incorporate gender studies to educate children, both girls and boys the need to address gender equality and change the socially defined roles of gender.

Furthermore, access to justice system and access to support services for victims of violence needs to be readily available at minimum cost. Police officers and legal practitioners need to be more sensitive to domestic violent cases and avoid seeking traditional solutions. Most Pacific Island countries have customary reconciliation practices, which involve forgiveness ceremonies between the families of the offender and survivor, such as 'I-bulubulu' (Fiji) and 'ifoga' (Samoa). Police and courts often use these ceremonies to justify reduced sentences or not prevent charges from being filed.<sup>25</sup>

Recently the Pacific Women's Network against Violence against Women met in Fiji, to discuss actions to address gender violence in region. Amongst other priorities, they called on Pacific governments to make and maintain budgetary commitments over the long term to implement legislation on violence against women and girls.<sup>26</sup> This kind of investment, alongside sustained efforts to promote gender equality and protect Pacific women, will build a stronger and more resilient region.

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