

Responding to domestic and family violence in resource-constrained contexts: a case study on rural policing innovations in Melanesia

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Received 22 November 2023
Revised 12 January 2024
31 January 2024
7 February 2024
7 February 2024
8 February 2024
8 February 2024
Accepted 9 February 2024

Abstract

Purpose – Discussions about progressive gender reform across Melanesia highlight the need for more gender-inclusive policies and improved conditions for women and girls throughout all sectors. However, for many of these countries, attempts to address the problems are marred by insufficient resources and low prioritization of the issue and traditional, cultural and religious perspectives about gender and gendered roles. This article discusses how police responses are coordinated to address domestic and family violence (DFV) and provides a critical reflection on both internal responses and the complexities of multi-partner operations beyond urban spaces.

Design/methodology/approach – This article draws on the findings from a stakeholder engagement focus group with 20 participants from four Melanesian countries – Fiji, Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu – to provide insight into policing innovations in rural contexts.

Findings – There is a need for improved multisector partnerships, increased police presence and greater reliance on indigenous strategies to improve responses to DFV in resource-constrained contexts.

Originality/value – The article provides insight into an under-researched area and makes recommendations for improving responses to DFV in rural areas in small-island developing states.

Keywords Rural policing, Multi-partner operations, Domestic and family violence

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Domestic and family violence (DFV) [1] is generally referred to in the legislation of all Melanesian countries as any form of physical injury, abuse, threatening or damaging behavior against an individual committed by another individual with whom the victim is or has been in a family or domestic relationship (Fiji Domestic Violence Act, 2009; PNG Family Protection Act, 2013; Solomon Islands Family Protection Act, 2014; Vanuatu's Family Protection Act, 2008). Legislation on DFV from Melanesia goes further to identify different categories of DFV, inclusive of but not limited to child abuse and intimate partner violence. For many Pacific Island countries, DFV costs account for approximately 6% of the gross domestic product per annum. In addition to the high economic costs of violence, the social, emotional and psychological costs exact heavy tolls on the growth and development of all sectors. There is collective commitment from Pacific Islands leaders to eradicate all forms of DFV, which they perceive to be a significant regional problem and a threat to human security (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2019). All Melanesian countries have signed the



Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) (George, 2014). Membership obligations to CEDAW committees have helped to develop legislation specific to DFV (Forster, 2010), and there are many examples of regional commitments that link “upwards” to global mechanisms including the Sustainable Development Goals and “downwards” to local, national and regional mechanisms to support responses to DFV.

Recently, there has been increased recognition of the need to partner with international, regional and local stakeholders to improve responses to DFV. Stakeholders across Melanesia agree on the need for multisector engagement and improved operational mechanisms to strengthen service delivery to DFV victims and perpetrators (Taylor, 2016). Governments, civil society and development partners continue to collaborate on strategies to improve multisector service delivery pathways. Constituted by feminist and women’s rights organizations, the Pacific Women’s Network Against Violence against Women (PWNAVAW) has been a major actor in holding governments accountable for their DFV responses since 1992. The Pacific Partnership to End Violence Against Women and Girls (2018–2022) brought together government, civil society and communities to support development, strengthening and implementation of legislation and services. However, unclear operational guidelines for responders, non-inclusion of key partners, strained resources and the location of communities across large and often poorly connected geographic terrains, further hinders the ability of state agencies, notably police, to respond adequately.

This expanding legislative and policy landscape has meant additional responsibilities for police and more scrutiny in how they respond to DFV. However, as feminists and researchers have highlighted, high rates of DFV in Melanesia are not only a product of the gaps in legislative and policing implementation but are also embedded in the “pervasive legitimacy” of DFV propagated through patriarchal structures, authoritarian forms of governance and social inequalities that mediate access to justice for women and girls (Biersack, 2016). Compared to those living in urban centers, women and girls in remote areas are disadvantaged from accessing police, legal and justice services due to poor transport and communication infrastructures, socio-economic marginalization, and lack of awareness of their legal rights and what services may be possible. The linguistic diversity in Melanesian countries such as Vanuatu (100+ languages), Solomon Islands (63 languages) and Papua New Guinea (PNG) (840 languages) creates another challenge for women, especially those in rural areas, in how they can access services, including police (Biersack *et al.*, 2016). While in Fiji, linguistic diversity is not a major issue, the history of ethnic conflict has shaped distinctive approaches in how iTaukei versus Indo-Fijian women approach police (Jolly, 2010). The political instability, state-led violence and inter-ethnic conflicts that have persisted across Fiji, PNG, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu have meant that women’s access to justice remains precarious (George, 2014).

Police across Melanesia are the most visible arm of state governance in the fight against DFV. In areas where there is police presence, they serve as the primary frontline responders and the key point of contact for other stakeholders. Varied levels of legitimacy, culturally and religiously informed community perceptions about the best suited responders and responses to DFV, limited access to police posts and strained resources complicate police responses to DFV. As is the reality for all other sectors operating in such complex environments, police organizations across Melanesia are required to constantly adapt their approaches to respond to DFV, while also navigating the local response landscape. This paper problematizes policing DFV in rural resource-constrained Pacific environments and highlights local strategies that were developed to combat the problem. We provide an overview of policing in Melanesia before describing the policing innovations stakeholders in our research shared, which are indicative of their desire and commitment to improve the policing of DFV, particularly in rural areas. We conclude with recommendations on how to further advance responses to DFV across the Pacific.

Literature review: policing in Melanesia

Melanesia, specifically Fiji, PNG, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, has been of increased interest to scholars across the globe, primarily due to political posturing, increasing crime and attention from transnational criminal entities. Policing organizations in these contexts operate in complex jurisdictions – multi-islands or large land masses – with populations dispersed over poorly accessible mountainous terrains, limited resources, uncertain budgets, and human capacity challenges. Unlike policing organizations across most of the Pacific region, that have adapted to more community-oriented models of policing, police in Melanesian countries remain largely paramilitaristic in their organization and operations. Police organizations are often impacted by political interference and instability, internal conflicts and varied levels of legitimacy (Dinnen and Braithwaite, 2009; Fraenkel and Firth, 2007). The existence of other non-governmental security stakeholders means that police organizations exist alongside traditional, community and other civil society bodies as part of formalized or informal plural regulatory arrangements (Watson *et al.*, 2023). We highlight some of the historical, cultural, contextual and operational realities relevant to policing in Melanesia below.

History

Historical accounts of policing organizations in Melanesia are of entities established to aid in the development and maintenance of colonial models of governance (Watson and Dinnen, 2020). These male dominated entities were military in character and served as instruments of colonization designed to work in the service of powerful colonial stakeholders. Decolonization saw power transitions from colonial stakeholders to members of locally established elites and indigenous actors. Despite modernization and reforms aiming to make police organizations more civilian in character, remnants of the colonial constabulary model and related ideologies remain. Police working in the disservice of the larger populace and being deployed as instruments of government control and suppression of marginalized groups remain problems. Policing in Melanesia is tainted by conflict: ethnic tension in the Solomon Islands resulting in the collapse of the state and members of the police joining armed militia (Fraenkel and Firth, 2007); tribal conflicts and high levels of violence in the highlands of PNG (Dinnen, 2001); instability in Fiji from the disarming of police during coups (Trnka, 2011); and the attempted overthrow of police leadership in Vanuatu (McLeod and Morgan, 2007).

Customary and religious institutions

Customary institutions in Melanesia add another layer of complexity to policing, more so in rural areas with lesser police presence and stronger communal and customary ties. While their general roles and responsibilities remain stipulated within legislation, the discretionary aspects of policing and the approach to law enforcement is shaped by social, traditional or communal hierarchies and beliefs about what constitutes an appropriate response to a range of issues (Dinnen and McLeod, 2009). The absence or limited presence of police in much of rural Melanesia creates an ideal context for non-state actors to take the lead in the maintenance of social cohesion in communities. For example, collective responsibility is shared among community chiefs (Indigenous Fijian villages), *kastom jifs* (Vanuatu), “big men” [2] (Vanuatu, Solomon Islands and PNG) or other holders of traditional authority (e.g. elders). Despite significant advancements in policing and attempts to improve police legitimacy, traditional practices and customary laws continue to serve as the primary mechanism for responding to behaviors deemed unacceptable (Watson and Dinnen, 2020).

In relation to DFV, variations in customary practices linked to reconciliation continue to dominate, especially outside of urban centers: perpetrators (or their family) make an offering (of cultural and/or economic value) to the victim (or more often their family) as a gesture of

goodwill (Jolly, 2010). This process is usually conducted under the auspices of customary authority and often takes place without the victim's permission or participation. Consequently, many women feel that these processes do not serve their needs for justice or protection. Due to expectations that women should be silent in communal settings and concerns (from others) about how refusing the offering may lead to wider problems in the community, women feel pressured to accept (Jolly, 2010). It is not uncommon for police to echo their customary counterparts and advise women to go through the reconciliation process (Jolly, 2010). After making a report to police, some women decide to drop it and accept customary reconciliation instead (Biersack, 2016). Some victims' families will use violence against perpetrators to show their disapproval. These retributive acts, though widely accepted at the community level, are problematic for police.

In rural/maritime contexts, church leadership and customary authority are intertwined but do work differently in relation to DFV. While churches have generally shared and reinforced conservative views on gender equality and husband's control over wives, churches have also increasingly advocated against DFV and are seen by both men and women as responsible for maintaining safety in the community (Putt and Dinnen, 2023). There are three different roles that churches in Melanesia have played in relation to responding to DFV: (1) develop programs (informed by Christianity) that ask perpetrators to confront their DFV and avow a Christian manhood that does not perpetrate violence; (2) provide Christianity-based counseling services to victims who contact them that may lead to additional "work" with the couple to reassert the ideals of a Christian marriage and (3) providing shelter for victims who have fled their community. Cases of DFV reported to churches do not usually go to police, and police have been known to advise women to go to their church leaders for help.

Non-state policing approaches raise concerns about potentially low prioritization of legislated standards or human rights. This presents a significant challenge for the state where non-state actors prioritize traditional and collective policing methods over approaches aligned with the prioritization of upholding and enforcing state laws. The tensions between customary practices and state laws are primarily noted in instances relating to issues of corruption, DFV and violence against members of vulnerable groups or other instances where external intervention is deemed disrespectful to cultural practices (Watson *et al.*, 2023). It is not uncommon in some parts of Melanesia for acts of physical violence against a female spouse or minor dependents to be seen as justifiable or an act of duty by a caring and responsible male partner or parent (Biersack *et al.*, 2016). Unsurprisingly, the collective sense of responsibility for maintaining peace in communities or preserving familial relations is usually a point of conflict for state police. Police officers working in such contexts are required to navigate both formal and informal systems, while also assisting with tribal conflicts, dispute resolution and maintaining good community relations.

Contextual and operational realities

In addition to geographic, cultural and socio-political realities specific to Melanesian countries, police are required to navigate contemporary and often Westernized justice systems with longstanding colonial legacies, against an intricate backdrop of customary laws and ideologies. Attempts at improving operational realities for police continue to be met with challenges relating to poor or lacking amenities, infrastructure and strained capacity (Watson *et al.*, 2023). Dated communication networks, linguistic barriers, limited access to remote areas and a general inability to fill ranks with adequately trained and equipped officers negatively impact law enforcement operations. The low police-to-population ratio in some areas presents challenges maintaining public safety during times of unrest, conducting day-to-day policing functions, responding to calls for service and dealing with evolving security challenges, including organized and transnational crime.

Efforts to compensate for these shortcomings are evidenced in police partnerships with non-state stakeholders, capacity building initiatives and organizational reforms. Police in Fiji, PNG, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu continue to be at the forefront of internationalization of policing operations, strategic alignment with international best practices, and rebranding to improve legitimacy at the national levels. Such advancements are primarily visible in urban areas where there is stronger state presence and majority allocation of resources. Policing in rural areas or settlements on the margins of established economic centers continues to be secondary to non-state security and justice arrangements that endure due to preserved customs and strong communal ties. Local ideologies about violence as a form of conflict resolution continue to exist across the region and come into direct conflict with Western notions of peaceful societies (Newland, 2016), which underscore state policing. Gender representation and distribution across policing ranks reflects a patriarchal context, with female officers being fewer in overall numbers and a small proportion of higher-ranking officers (Bull *et al.*, 2021). While gender reforms have been made (e.g. to increase recruitment of female officers, introduce gender-sensitive policies, provide maternity uniforms etc.) the influence of traditional and cultural beliefs about gender on police and policing remain problematic. Externally imposed agendas, continuously changing priorities, and a dynamic response landscape require a high level of adaptability, which even well-resourced police organizations in less complex contexts would find difficult to sustain. It is against this backdrop that responses to DFV in Melanesia have been developed and actioned.

Methods

Data for this paper came from a workshop conducted as one of the networking events funded by the Global Challenges Research Fund. All organizations represented at the workshop are part of a larger network focused on improving responses to DFV in the Pacific. The network was used to contact participants for the workshop. The regional body, Pacific Islands Chiefs of Police (PICP), coordinated the identification of suitable police participants. Senior officials from government and nongovernmental organization (NGO) offices also nominated workshop participants.

The workshop was held over two days in March 2023 with 20 invited participants representing police (9), government (4) and NGOs (5) from Fiji, PNG, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu attending in person. Other attendees included regional co-sponsors from Australian Institute of Police Management (1) and PICP (1). The research team convened the workshop, assisted by two invited academics who served as facilitators, and two research assistants who took notes and helped with recordings.

The event was organized to include both presentations (13) and Talanoa [3] sessions (9), led by the workshop convenors with assistance from the facilitators. Presentations lasted approximately 10–15 min and Talanoas lasted approximately 20–30 min. All presentations were recorded and notes were taken by the two research assistants during Talanoa sessions. After working in smaller assigned groups to prepare and present a profile of their country's service provision landscape in relation to DFV, participants worked in groups to share ideas based on consolidated information from group discussions on the following topics:

- (1) Societal context: Changing role of women in the society; Police officers and engagement with the public; Maintaining public respect and trust when policing DFV.
- (2) Policy context: Examining existing policies and standard operational procedures; Moving from policy to practice; Current/forthcoming policing challenges.

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- (3) Multi-service delivery protocols: Identifying priority recommendations for positive change and building consensus on the way forward.

These topics were shared with participants in their pre-workshop information email along with a brief description of each topic. For topic one and three, participants were grouped according to their country, whereas for topic two, participants were grouped according to their organization. The overall aim of these sessions was to provide an opportunity for cross-national and cross-disciplinary information sharing about DFV to identify shared concerns and differences across nations; emerging best practices; and insights for overcoming challenges.

Before arrival, participants were advised that parts of the workshop would be audio recorded and that notetakers would be present to compile a written record of the event for dissemination purposes. Participants were informed that their participation would remain anonymous, and no quotes would be directly attributed to them. Written consent was obtained from all participants at the start of the first day. Ethics approval was obtained through the University of the South Pacific.

Notes and recordings from the workshops were transcribed by research assistants and examined by the research team for discourses relating to rural policing responses. Due to the relatively small group size and the length of the transcripts, this was done manually by one author then checked, verified and expanded upon by the other two authors. For the purpose of this paper, two major themes specific to rural policing of DFV were identified: (1) the importance of non-state actor cooperation and mechanisms, and (2) the complexities of multi-partner operations beyond urban spaces.

Limitations

As is the requirement for participatory workshops coordinated by non-governmental bodies involving public servants, participants received an email with pre-workshop information in advance, which may have influenced their responses. The participant sample for the study was relatively small and did not include representatives from all stakeholder groups. Due to budgetary constraints of the project, all NGOs in Melanesia could not be included and only police officers from DFV units received invitations. A more comprehensive overview would require input from a larger stakeholder group. It is important to note, however, that the largest women's rights organizations in each country were included and the officers selected were considered DFV leaders in their organizations.

Findings

Before discussing the themes emerging from our analysis, we provide an overview of the policing and DFV landscape of the four participating countries, each of which occupies an archipelago differing in size and population (see [Table 1](#)). Noteworthy is the relatively low level of DFV reporting to police in these island nations. Although PNG is by far the most populated, it has the lowest level of police force strength per capita but deals with the highest levels of DFV incidents coming to police attention.

The laws of all four nations reflect a multi-faceted definition of DFV, which includes physical assault as well as psychological abuse, stalking, sexual abuse, property damage and threatening behavior. The Solomon Islands also includes economic abuse. The law applies to a wide range of family and domestic relationships inclusive of all ages (including paid domestic workers in Fiji and the Solomon Islands). Three nations' laws establish a specific criminal offense for DFV, while Fiji applies existing criminal law to fit the circumstances of each case. All four countries have implemented referral pathways, which aim to coordinate the response provided by partners (e.g. police, NGOs, health, courts,

	Fiji	Papua New Guinea	Solomon Islands	Vanuatu
Description	300+ islands	Eastern half of New Guinea and its islands	Hundreds of islands	80+ islands
Population	924,610	9,312,000	707,851	363,000
% Rural	56%	86%	74%	80%
Legislation	Fiji Domestic Violence Act, 2009	Papua New Guinea Family Protection Act, 2013	Solomon Islands Family Protection Act 2014	Vanuatu's Family Protection Act, 2008
Police adoption of No-drop policy?	Yes (1999)	No	Yes (2014)	Yes (2015)
Policies	National Action Plan for Prevention of VAWG	National Gender Based Violence Strategy	Ending VAWG Policy	SOPs from all government departments dealing with DFV
Policing structure	5 divisions, no specialist units on DFV Sexual Crimes Unit	22 provinces, 47 Family Sexual Violence Units	9 provinces, each with a Police Station including a Family Violence Unit	6 provinces, 2 main stations with Family Protection Units, sub-stations in each province
Number of officers	5,007	4,800 (114 FSVU officers)	1,535 (16 FVU officers)	922
Ratio officers: population	1:185	1:1,940	1:461	1:394
Annual DFV incidents reported to police	1,281 (2021)	17,000 (2021)	575 (2022)	170 (2022)
Ratio officers: DFV incidents	4:1	1:4	3:1	5:1
Multi-agency partnership	Service Delivery Protocol Handbook	Referral pathway	SAFENET guidebook	MOU and SOP between Police and Vanuatu Women's Center

Table 1.
Profiles of 4
Melanesian countries

Source(s): Table by authors

churches, police, refuges, government departments, counseling, etc.). Government ministries are responsible for the legislation that guides the referral pathways. The effective implementation of referral pathways is facilitated by clear and up-to-date operating guidelines, such as a referral pathway guidebook for all service providers (available in Fiji and Solomon Islands). A memorandum of understanding between the Vanuatu Police Force and the Vanuatu Women's Center clarifies each organization's roles and responsibilities in relation to DFV. In PNG, there are standing orders for investigations into DFV, sexual offenses, and sorcery accusations related violence, and Standard Operating Procedures for the large network of Family Sexual Violence Units with mostly female officers operating throughout the country. Fiji is the only nation of the four that has not established specialist police units for responding to DFV but has a Sexual Crimes Division that is responsible for responding to sexual violence and child sexual abuse.

Policing DFV in rural island contexts: importance of non-state actor cooperation and mechanisms

All police forces have finite resources, but managing these across archipelagos involves acute operational challenges such as maintaining and deploying maritime equipment and utilizing these resources across vast areas of ocean. Extreme weather, such as typhoons, is regular events, adding further logistical difficulties and national states of emergency (e.g. as happened twice to Vanuatu in the months preceding the workshops). All participants remarked on the challenges of delivering policing within resource-constrained environments, where maintaining sufficient levels of funding, computers, vehicles and staff posed a constant challenge. Participants also drew attention to the fact that available services for DFV victims are concentrated in urban centers with little service availability from state, civil society or development partners in rural areas. As one participant from Solomon Islands explained:

Police presence is not there . . . so what the community usually do, they go to the churches depending on the type, which kind of church they have, pastor, church elder, or father or what they have [available to] utilize for counselling. They are the ones then calling in by radio in those kinds of situations. Then the police respond. It is not easy depending on the resources . . . if it is the most remote island then it takes three days by boat. There are some providers in the provinces who do not have laptops or internet access to send information to the SAFENET [4] coordinator in Honiara [capital city].

All the countries had devised methods for dealing with these extreme operational challenges. Each is distinctive yet they all share an approach whereby some level of delegation of policing powers to other state or non-state actors is enabled, or these other actors have a designated responsibility to refer people in need of police assistance to the police. Probably the most formalized of these approaches is in Fiji, under Regulation 28 of the iTaukei Affairs (Tikina and Village Council) Regulation 1996, the Turaga-ni-koro (village headman) is an authorized representative of Government. Usually elected or appointed by the villagers, this person is part of both the customary leadership and the modern Fijian government structure and is paid a government allowance to provide leadership, safeguarding and governance for their community. Each member of the village has a responsibility to report any acts that breach any section of the village by-laws to the Turaga-ni-koro. In relation to DFV, there is the explicit instruction that “where a villager becomes aware or reasonably suspects an individual(s) are assaulted, the villager must inform the Turaga-ni-koro, who will inform the responsible authorities of the crime committed.” As one participant explained:

For the gatekeepers, they live in the registered villages in Fiji. The gatekeepers are the Turaga-ni-koro [head of the village], the village nurse and the youth representative, [and] the men’s representative. The Turaga-ni-koros are the ones that get paid from the Ministry of I-Taukei Affairs. They are in charge of the village in terms reporting on the population and all activities that have been undertaken in the village. After implementation, Turaga-ni-koro needs to do a report to the Ministry of i-Taukei Affairs and the Ministry of i-Taukei Affairs then prepares an allocated budget for the Turaga-ni-koro.

Although not enshrined in legislation, Vanuatu has a designated civilian role responsible for referring criminal matters to the police. One participant shared how these civilian police groups provide policing services to DFV victims in hard-to-reach communities on remote islands:

The Crime Prevention Unit [in Vanuatu Police Force] goes down to the district, the villages. They train and run workshops. Train smart, young, strong men and women, simple and basic law, constitutional rights. These civilians are the picture of the national police. So, victims of DFV go to civilian community police, they take the victim’s report and refer it to the national police. We see that it works with the community. The investigation matters are taken by the police. This idea was tested in two provinces and it showed that it worked for safety purposes and investigation.

The civilian police groups complement the volunteer network of 39 Committees Against Violence Against Women (CAVAWs), established by the Vanuatu Women's Center across Vanuatu's provinces, which undertake local community awareness activities to prevent violence, refer matters to the police and assist women and children living in remote and rural communities who have experienced violence. The Committees Against Violence Against Women (CAVAW) model is based on the Elimination of Violence Against Women committees set up in Fiji by the Fiji Women's Crisis Center. The way that these committees are set up flip patriarchal authority structures by making committees accountable to women. They are also important in holding police leadership accountable to women.

Similarly, in Solomon Islands, limited policing resources in rural areas have been supplemented with community members who have designated roles and responsibilities for linking DFV victims with police:

The SAFENET is starting to roll out to the provinces. Our referral system based in urban areas like in Honiara is different from referral systems in the provinces. When services are not available in the provinces we utilize the existing women's groups there, the chiefs, the church leaders. They are the frontline or the entry point for the survivor or the complainant and they apply psychosocial first aid. It's not counselling but a way of calming them down and then giving them options like we have these services and we can help you travel to them. So, the chiefs, the villages, the churches can support the client to go to the nearest police station . . . safely or securely escort them to reach the police station nearby. So, this is what is currently happening in the provinces in Solomon Islands.

Policing in PNG lacks a tradition of strong local police authorities and their ability to gain cooperation from rural communities, especially in the Highland region, is seen as a perennial challenge. The region is characterized as being rich in traditional culture. It is occupied by nearly 3 million people speaking 22 languages and belonging to a number of different tribes whose clans often come into conflict trying to protect their interests. Police are seen to disrupt this traditional way of life and consequently the relationship is fraught with tension and hostility. As one participant from PNG explained, policing is restricted by these traditional power dynamics.

There is outlawness over there. Family sexual violence is a challenge, there is only one [Family Sexual Violence] unit with limited resources. They have the support of the defense force. The defense force plays a major role in mediation. For survivors, the referral pathway in the local context is village court, village court magistrate. You have the peace officers, they are the ones that hold the power, they stabilize the tension. The police are limited and they really don't have the power. It is only the village courts and the chiefs. We have to work with local partners on the ground.

Complexities of multi-partner operations beyond urban spaces

Despite the ease of identifying and utilizing non-state mechanisms available in some rural, maritime or remote areas, engagement with these networks was either described as unclear or problematic due to non-regulation or non-referencing in existing country guidelines on service delivery and referral pathways. These official documents omit reference to "wantok" systems, although these are prime examples of non-state mechanisms that influence how multi-agency responses to DFV operate in local areas. Wantok is an important concept associated with networks of distinct tribal, ethnic, linguistic, and geographic groupings in Melanesia (Nanau, 2011). Participants noted that biases can emerge when service delivery partners come from the same community, church, or social network as those experiencing DFV. This can result in a tendency for victims to be discouraged from reporting the issue, or when they do, a preference for resolving the matter informally (as opposed to law enforcement). As illustrated below, wantok issues overlay formalized multi-agency partnerships with additional cultural complexity, which must be navigated by service delivery partners:

We face the custom of reconciliations between victims and suspects [in Vanuatu]. We are halfway through investigations and the Chief comes up asking for the case to be dropped. What will we do with the No Drop Policy? So, we have to explain it to the chiefs. Chiefs and village people coming in. This is an interference to investigation, but we can't do anything about it. It's like a norm back home. We just talk to the Chief and say look, reconciliation is done but that is between you guys but we still have to go through court proceedings.

In Fiji, the longer you place them in that particular island, they start establishing relationships and then they start slowing down on what they are supposed to do. One DFV case happens, the perpetrator just goes and gives one pig, something like that and then the police officers just calm the situation, reconcile everybody.

Koro island [Fiji] has one police post which serves other surrounding islands. A particular police officer was placed to head that post. He is not from there but after two or three years he realized he was actually related to a lot of people in the village. So, whenever there was a DFV case or any sort of crime, he happens to be the same person that becomes the prosecutor, judge and he just . . . [would] somehow miraculously close each report that came in.

Various strategies emerged for dealing with these issues. For example, in Vanuatu, police policy changed to proactively post officers to communities different from their home communities. It was felt that this helped to prevent biased decisions stemming from the wantok system.

Training of frontline service providers is necessary for multi-agency working that is consistent with established referral pathways and protocols. Participants felt that key stakeholders must be well versed in their role and responsibilities, but that this was particularly challenging in remote and maritime areas. A lack of awareness and understanding, both of DFV and the referral pathway, was expressed as a continual concern.

Training [is the top priority] – specifically for gender sensitization and referral pathways for all stakeholders. For everyone to act together, work together in preventing [DFV]. An issue is that all the officers are not gender sensitized and speaking from experience, this is a great need [in PNG]. For police, we have our own gender sensitization training for every new officer coming in. In the sexual violence unit, we ensure that they are gender sensitized before they are given any other training. It helps them change their mind set and attitude towards dealing with and also the approach towards victims they are serving. The National GBV [Gender-Based Violence] Secretariat is expanding its work to the provinces, but this is a challenge as most of them are not gender sensitized. Training [is necessary] to ensure all the stakeholders are on the same page.

Gender training for all the stakeholders who are signatories to the SDP [Service Delivery Protocol] and to ensure that training is provided, the gender training is for ALL of the stakeholders at all levels and it has to be consistent. One of things noticed was that when trainings are conducted, the judiciary would send someone from the registry but will not send a magistrate or a judge to come and attend the training. Those are important stakeholders who need to attend the training to be gender sensitized and in that way responses in terms of access to justice, that system is aligned, and everyone is on the same page and talking the same language.

Despite the gaps, existing training programs, such as the gender sensitization training provided by Fiji Women's Crisis Center and other members of the PWNAAVAV for police and other frontline responders across the region, were seen to be making inroads as shown by the following examples:

So, when Fiji Women's Crisis Centre went there in 2017 and 2018 to conduct trainings, the people then started realizing that they had this right but when they go to report to the police, somehow everything just magically disappears as if there is no report at all coming in. After the people were taught what to do, internal affairs, then they started reporting this particular officer because they had a lot of DFV cases that the police never did anything about even though they reported it. Afterwards, the people started the Ending Violence Against Women taskforce and the crime

prevention committee, this particular officer was transferred out of the island. The people got the new police officer to come and attend their crime prevention committee meetings and taskforce committee. He started taking upon himself, whenever a report used to come in, he would apply for a restraining order over the phone and made sure that the perpetrator is taken off the island and he also makes sure that the survivor has a place of safety and accommodation to stay at. This is the system currently at the island which seems to be working well.

While there has been sometimes been an issue of chiefs coming in and asking cases to be dropped, over time with awareness raising [sessions delivered] by police and Vanuatu Women's Centre with the chiefs and so on this has resulted in chiefs actually coming in with women to report cases against perpetrators.

However, due to limited resources the scale and sustained impact of existing training programs was questioned. How donor funding was structured is also important. Longer-term commitments from donors, working with existing local organizations with expertise and more autonomy to local actors in directing programs is necessary for scaling up the work. Specific topic areas requiring additional training included gender sensitization, gender and human rights, policies and procedures related to the referral pathway, and upskilling police officers on how to better respond to the needs of DFV victims. Moreover, recognizing that police officers (and women) in rural contexts must engage with customary authority and church leaders, participants underscored that ongoing work to provide training for church and cultural elders across all four countries needs to be maintained, so that their powerful roles could make a positive contribution to the overall response.

Discussion and conclusion

Despite variations in government commitments, scarcity of resources, arbitrary funding sources and budgets, and local socio-economic, geographical and cultural contexts, there have been important locally developed partnerships that enable expanding women's access to justice in relation to DFV. As such, while customary practices, institutions and religious actors in Melanesia have often worked against justice needs of DFV victims, through advocacy, training and Talanoa, these innovations in policing DFV in rural contexts may actually be working to shift this dynamic. In fact, our findings suggest that by drawing on gatekeepers (chiefs, pastors, other men) as allies in the process of responding to DFV in ways that prioritize women's justice needs, these partnerships are potentially contributing to transforming aspects of patriarchal power to move away from legitimizing DFV and instead legitimize efforts to eliminate DFV. Previous studies supporting the use of multi-agency intervention strategies in both rural and urban spaces highlight the benefits of group prioritization of DFV victim support and initiatives that facilitate the pooling of resources to increase and improve services (Clarke and Wydall, 2013). While this approach also has an affinity with the recent international policy push towards a "whole of country, whole of nation" multisector response to DFV, it is important to recognize that practices linked to this were already well in place in rural areas of Fiji, PNG, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. Our findings also suggest a need to look beyond national policy frameworks as a strategy to inform improvements, revisions and expansions geared towards policy reform.

The literature on policing rural and remote communities often characterizes the under-resourcing of police in these areas as a failure of the state and consequent discretionary practices by police in rural spaces as a form of corruption or abuse of discretion (Huey and Ricciardelli, 2017; Ricciardelli, 2018). It is important to consider how these innovations and community-based solutions to responding to DFV are mechanisms that facilitate both state-building and decolonizing of policing. Through the process of citizen police and magistrates and community committees holding police, chiefs and other patriarchal authorities

accountable, rural communities are becoming integrated into state processes, but not necessarily in the top-down authoritarian colonial style. Instead, a more collaborative and egalitarian process enables citizens to become partners in governance. This aligns with arguments for both the pragmatic and the decolonial possibilities of hybrid justice systems put forward by researchers of policing in post-colonial societies, which are linked to resource constraints alongside the questioning of state legitimacy (due to colonial legacies and post-colonial political instabilities) (Dinnen and Mcleod, 2009; Boege, 2010).

Of course, the potential for positive outcomes from these innovations is mediated by local power dynamics. The unequal gender dynamic between DFV victims who are women and the male dominated policing, customary and religious institutions can become reinforced rather than explicitly challenged depending on how these innovations are practiced “on the ground” (George, 2017). Participants highlighted that partnerships involving collaborations with women’s rights organizations helped in this regard. Even more significant is the leadership from women’s organizations dedicated to finding ways to overcome the resource and service gaps that women in rural and remote areas face in accessing police, justice and DFV services. Unlike in many contexts where police and women’s rights organizations are working separately or even in opposition, our findings reveal the multiple ways these two actors work together, even as women’s organizations continue to hold police accountable. The regional network structure of women’s organizations in Melanesia, embodied most clearly for DFV in the PWNAAVAV, not only draws on feminist principles of solidarity but also explicitly on the Pacific indigenous principle of relationality. This has enabled sustained and productive relationships that promote mutual learning and build solidarity across the region. While we acknowledge the value of collaborations and the provision of an alternative to state support where no state support is available, we do not suggest the adoption of an uncritical collaborative position. Studies have shown that poor interagency collaboration can work in the disservice of victims (Stewart, 2020).

The way forward necessitates improved and better coordinated multisector partnerships and increasingly formalized arrangements that empower community actors to assist on the frontline. This in no way is meant to suggest a handover of policing roles to civilians or diminishes the need for increased police presence across rural Melanesia. While effective innovations have developed out of necessity, the absence of police denies individuals the opportunity to access state justice in a timely manner. The poor availability of services for victims is another pressing challenge. Innovations at the community level provide ideas about relatively low-cost strategies that can have a significant impact on the quality of the response made to DFV victims. What is clear from stakeholders is the need for greater reliance on indigenous strategies shown to be promising in these rural island contexts going forward.

Notes

1. DFV is used interchangeably with the term domestic violence (DV) in the four cited legislative documents from Fiji, PNG, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. The definition provided here applies to all instances where the term is used throughout this paper.
2. Big men are men who hold traditional authority within kinship or community groups.
3. Talanoa (“talk” or “discussion” in Fijian, Samoan and Tongan) is a Pacific Island form of dialog that brings people together to share opposing views without any predetermined expectations for agreement. Inclusion, empathy and mutual respect are the usual parameters for Talanoa discussions (Farrelly and Nabobo-Baba, 2014).
4. SAFENET is a referral network made up of organizations that provide essential services to DFV victims.

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