How Women in the Pacific Perceive and Reduce the Risk of Crime Victimisation

Judy Putt, Jasbant Kaur, Domenica Gisella Calabrò, Sara N. Amin, Gemma Malungahu, Theresa Meki, Cathy Alex, Rochelle Bailey and Amanda H.A. Watson

Introduction

In criminology, there is a strong body of literature that examines risks of crime victimisation and fear of crime. Conducted primarily in high-income countries and drawing on the analysis of crime and safety surveys, the research shows that fear of crime is often not directly associated with actual risk, and that there are gendered and age dimensions to the risks of victimisation and to fear of crime (e.g. Stanko 1997; Walklate 2017). A pilot study (Putt et al. 2025) conducted in 2024 in five countries in the Pacific region aimed to explore how women perceive their risk in terms of physical and online safety, including financial safety. In this In Brief, we summarise the main themes that emerged from the pilot study in relation to how women seek to protect themselves (and whether this seems to differ from men's behaviour).

This In Brief draws on research undertaken for the pilot study on women's safety, which involved a team of nine women researchers working in five countries. Each sub-project had a distinct area of focus and involved the local recruitment of participants based on the researcher's experience and networks. Employing mixed methods, the study primarily relied on focus groups and interviews, and the participants in each sub-project were invited to complete an online survey. More details on the methodology and on the findings from each location can be found in the report of the pilot study (Putt et al. 2025).

Common among the participants across the sites was a profound sense of disquiet and self-reported higher levels of anxiety than in the past, associated with both the physical and online environments. Precarity in livelihoods, climate change, population mobility and geopolitics have undermined confidence and fostered a more unequal and less predictable world. But participants were adopting a range of measures to assist themselves, their families and their communities. As the report underlines, gender is important because women, compared with men, were more at risk of specific forms of violent crime, were more likely to be feeling more unsafe overall, and were more worried about vulnerable groups in the community. However, such gender differences need to be understood and interpreted through an intersectional lens, as class, ethnicity, age and other factors affect perceptions of safety at a personal and community level. The same framing also applies to strategies that individuals, families and communities adopt to reduce risk of victimisation.

Preventative measures

Themes related to women's self-protection clustered around three key areas: social capital and male kin; knowing place and people; and situational measures to reduce property crime. These themes apply to both the online and the physical environment. Of the five countries, Papua New Guinea (PNG) was the location where participants felt most unsafe compared to other places, but there were also other contexts where participants in all countries felt anxiety about being a victim of crime. This was most notably in the online environment, where participants were clearly worried about the potential of fraud, scams and what children may be exposed to.

Social networks and guardianship

Across the different locations, participants referred to the importance of traversing public spaces and transport with other known people, typically family, and in Australia, friends from the same country. The notion of guardianship was evident in the way male kin were referred to as important in terms of protection and contributing to family strength, especially in PNG, where living together as a family in large numbers was considered a form of defence. Male workers in the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility scheme talked of 'looking after' their fellow female workers in unfamiliar settings, while women in multiple settings said they were concerned and responsible for nurturing the wellbeing of family members. Another form of guardianship was the way cultural knowledge and religious faith could act to guide and protect participants and their families.

Knowledge of places and people

Most participants were familiar with both urban and village life, and many had lived overseas, away from their home countries. As a result, participants referred to needing to invest in knowing places and knowing people who were not kin. There were several elements to developing local dynamic knowledge and connections, including having acquaintances and

neighbours who could keep an eye on the environment and alert the participant to risks. Knowing places entailed being aware of the times of the day, social activities and kinds of groups that may pose the greatest risk. In response to increased urbanisation and individualisation, many participants were seeking to build aspects of village communal life in new or rapidly changing contexts. In the online environment, similar principles were evident in the cautious approaches adopted in the use of social media and with online banking, where familiar or trusted groups and sites were favoured.

Situational measures

Situational crime prevention involves altering the immediate environment to reduce opportunities for crime to occur; this may include making potential targets more difficult to access and deterring criminal activity through increased surveillance. In some instances, participants chose to stay at home and rarely go outside their homes because of fear of crime. In urban centres and settlements, not having an effective and reliable power supply, including for street lighting, can contribute to there being more dangerous places at night. In Vanuatu, increased household income from overseas labour schemes has had benefits and drawbacks. Recipients of remittances, as obvious targets for property crime, had adopted various means to protect their money, including locking it up in ways that had not been done in the past. In PNG, participants described the use of 'dummy' phones and 'dressing down' on public transport in the capital city. Another example in PNG of a situational measure was the advocacy by some women of night curfews. In the online environment, participants referred to several situational measures such as parental locks and authentication processes.

Conclusion

At a strategic level, crime prevention and reduction measures that seek to improve community safety should draw on what we know about perceived threats, their seriousness and how to mitigate those risks. Strategic efforts to improve crime prevention and reduction, however, should also rely on and build on self and local community help, where the state is limited in its operation and capacity to intervene and protect. The pilot study survey indicated that participants adopt individual strategies to make themselves safer and that both local community leaders and state actors — such as the police

— are viewed as critical to preventing and mediating trouble, and for intervening when disputes and conflict erupt. To ensure that practical information and efforts to build coalitions of safety are rooted in how environments are currently navigated, community and national efforts need to build on the grassroots perspectives and actions of those most affected by crime and fear of crime. The pilot study was small scale and qualitative, and should act as a spur to develop a more robust evidence base to underpin more sophisticated and tailored crime prevention strategies that, at a minimum, should recognise gendered and intersectional dimensions to tackling social problems.

Author notes

Judy Putt, Gemma Malungahu, Theresa Meki, Rochelle Bailey and Amanda Watson are researchers based in the Department of Pacific Affairs at ANU. Jasbant Kaur, Domenica Calabrò and Sara Amin are or have been employed at the University of the South Pacific, while Cathy Alex is the Executive Director of the Advancing PNG: Women Leaders Network.

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