

METHODOLOGY

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Addressing methodological and ethical challenges in research with violence against women survivors in Fiji and Vanuatu

Naohiro Nakamura^{1*}, Nora Amos², Morinda Arudevi², Raveena Goundar¹, Besalina Massing², Shafiya Shamiza¹, Jenifer Tamara², Peni Wainimala¹ and Sarah Pene¹

*Correspondence:

Naohiro Nakamura

naohiro.nakamura@usp.ac.fj

¹University of the South Pacific, Suva, Fiji

²University of the South Pacific, Port Vila, Vanuatu

Abstract

Research with violence against women (VAW) survivors as a hard-to-reach population involves various methodological and ethical challenges and this is particularly so in the context of strong patriarchal ideologies and limited research capacities, such as Pacific Island Countries (PICs). PICs record substantially high rates of VAW, but empirical research that has captured the experiences of VAW survivors is scarce and gender-disaggregated data is substantially missing or out-of-date. In addition, most research on VAW has been conducted by non-PIC-based researchers, with limited evidence of a long-term impact on PIC communities regarding the eradication of VAW and the development of PIC research capacity. We conducted surveys on the effectiveness and awareness of VAW-related laws with over 300 individuals each in Fiji and Vanuatu. Although we consulted the World Health Organization's guidelines in research on VAW and other academic references on methodology, these guidelines required modifications in our data collection, considering the unique geographical and cultural contexts of the two case study countries. With the modified approaches, while the safety and confidentiality of women participants may have been somewhat compromised, the project successfully documented the views and experiences of VAW survivors (and some male abusers) with support from local postsecondary students as research assistants. The project also confirmed the high prevalence of VAW in the sample communities of the countries but the low awareness of the laws and support services among the participants. Based on the experience sharing among the authors regarding the data collection stage, this article discusses what sort of methodological approaches can be employed in research with a hard-to-reach population such as VWA survivors in the PIC (or similar) context.

Keywords Violence against women, Pacific island countries, Hard-to-reach populations, Feminist research, Research methods and ethics

1 Introduction

Research with violence against women (VAW) survivors involves various methodological and ethical challenges. VAW survivors are often hidden [1–3], making it difficult for researchers to recruit participants for their research projects. Protecting the safety and confidentiality of study participants poses additional challenges. This is particularly so in contexts where women are less empowered.

Compared to global figures, Pacific Island countries (PICs) have relatively high rates of VAW, and Fiji and Vanuatu, the case study countries of this article, are no exception to this [4, 5]. In PICs, patriarchal ideologies allow men to assault women when women do not adhere to their partners' wishes with respect, loyalty and obedience [6–8]. Societal beliefs, religions, and customary practices largely limit women's rights, roles, and livelihoods [9]. Following Christian doctrines, women are also taught that their primary duties are to nurture and care for their home and attend to family gardens and are expected not to cross the boundary of a female zone of mothering and nurturing at home [10–12]. Women who fail to perform their domestic duties are often disciplined verbally or physically by their partners. Men often quote the traditional practice of bride price and the biblical teaching to justify their actions [13, 14]. Village internal matters including VAW cases are also handled by men. The village chief or headman often attempts to reconcile the abuser and survivor. Women are not always given a chance to seek justice under the law or access support services provided by external providers. Even though each island of Fiji and Vanuatu (and PICs) is culturally diverse and so are gender roles, overall, women are prevented from reporting family violence cases to maintain communal bonds, to follow religious teachings, or not to disturb family unions.

The geographical settings of Fiji and Vanuatu also contribute to a high number of non-reporting VAW cases. Fiji and Vanuatu are small island developing countries with large rural populations. Although the larger islands have urban centres, the rural population is spread over a very large number of islands (111 in Fiji, 83 in Vanuatu). The infrastructure is not well established on smaller, more remote islands: electricity, let alone high-speed internet, is not widely available. The mountainous geographical features of the islands make many communities/villages only accessible via boat, four-wheel vehicles, or on foot. Women's daily life is often confined to their village. Without being exposed to the information given from outside the village, women sometimes do not recognize that the violence they are experiencing is classified as a crime. Even if they do recognize it, they are unaware of externally available support services. As such, Pacific women are a vulnerable and hard-to-reach population who may hesitate to share their personal experiences or views, even on non-sensitive topics [9]. Not only is it difficult for authorities to regularly update gender-disaggregated data across the country, but it is also not easy for organizations to reach those who need support [1, 15]. Researchers also cannot easily recruit study participants.

Although the literature has accumulated research outputs on VAW in PICs [8, 10–12, 17–20], most of them discuss the cultural and religious factors that contribute to high VAW rates but very few are empirical, recruiting VAW survivors as their participants and documenting women's life stories in depth. As such, these studies on VAW do not intensively discuss methodological challenges, and the voices of PIC VAW survivors are yet to be substantially heard in research despite feminist methodologies' emphasis on

capturing the everyday experiences of women and the effects of gender inequalities [21, 22].

Recently, based on their experiences in leading the team that aimed to produce a series of Gender Equality Briefs for 14 Pacific Island Countries and Territories [9], Siow and James pointed out the lack of gender-disaggregated data in PICs [23]. According to them, the data on gender-related issues in the PICs is often outdated, or worse, non-existent. For instance, in the Solomon Islands, the most recent figures on VAW are from a study done by the Secretariat of the Pacific Community in 2009 [24]. In Vanuatu, even though the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey, conducted by United Nations Children's Fund in 2023, included data on attitudes toward domestic violence (DV), it did not conduct a comprehensive survey on DV, and there was no data on experiences of violence [25]. Otherwise, the most recent comprehensive nationwide data on VAW in Vanuatu is from 2009 [16]. Siow and James point out PICs' limited state capacity for data collection, which is due to the lack of human resources and funds, in addition to the lack of awareness among the government and citizens with regards to the importance of gender-disaggregated data [23]. The organizations that advocate for VAW survivors, such as Fiji Women's Crisis Centre (FWCC) and Vanuatu Women's Centre (VWC), are already under heavy pressure to fulfil their mandate to provide services and do not have much additional capacity to take on extra tasks such as conducting a nationwide survey [23]. The shortage of empirical qualitative data that captures women's experiences, combined with missing or outdated gender-disaggregated data, has resulted in non-inclusive policy making and further exclusion of an already marginalized group – survivors of VAW [23, 26].

In this article, based on our experiences in conducting questionnaire surveys on VAW and the effectiveness of the VAW-related laws in Fiji and Vanuatu where empirical studies with VAW survivors and gender-disaggregated data are deemed limited, we discuss strategies to work with hidden and vulnerable populations in the context of strong patriarchal ideologies and limited research capacities. Particularly, we address the following three questions. First, what might be the unique methodological challenges in VAW research in the PIC context and how can they be overcome? Second, to what extent can the recommendations and strategies for researching VAW survivors proposed by international organizations and researchers [27, 28] apply to the PIC context, including rural communities where patriarchal ideologies dominate and women's privacy is less protected? Third, how can research on VAW leave a positive impact on the general public and communities regarding the eradication of VAW and contribute to capacity development in PICs?

1.1 Methodological challenges in research with VAW survivors in PICs

Previously, Ellard-Gray et al. discussed the methodological challenges associated with social science research with hidden, hard-to-reach, and vulnerable populations [28]. According to them, some populations are hard to reach because of their physical location (i.e. remote islands), their vulnerable positions (such as the target of discrimination), or their hidden existence (no published statistics). VAW survivors in PICs fall under one or more of these aspects of hard-to-reach populations. The literature on VAW, in particular in the context of rural areas across the globe, has discussed the reasons for being hard to reach. First, in rural areas, maintaining community bonds or traditions is prioritized. As

a result, women remain silent [1–3]. Speaking up and seeking help from an outside third party is viewed as a threat to community bonds. Second, in rural areas, women tend to believe that staying home and being a good wife is important and this belief includes enduring challenges such as an abusive relationship [29]. Third, the near non-existence of anonymity in rural communities makes women fear being the subject of gossip in the neighbourhood, which is an additional victimization for women who are already dealing with a challenge at home [1]. These local environments mean that a large number of VAW cases in rural areas remain unreported and the authorities do not grasp the entire picture or the reality of violence. The remoteness also makes it more difficult for survivors to access service providers [1, 15, 22].

To address the challenges associated with recruiting hard-to-reach populations, international organizations and researchers introduced several tips for recruiting hidden, hard-to-reach, and vulnerable populations in research projects [27, 28]. For instance, Ellard-Gray et al. recommended advertising to recruit participants using vague language that does not specify the research topic or conducting a screening survey with a larger and random sample [28]. Similarly, WHO recommended that the researchers do not specifically state that they are doing a survey on VAW to the household or wider communities to protect the safety and confidentiality of the participants and surveyors [27]. Instead, the researchers are advised to approach the local gatekeepers, saying that the survey is about women's health and life experiences, and interviews should be conducted only in a private setting. WHO's other recommendations include: "Prevalence studies need to [address] how to minimize the under-reporting of violence"; "Protecting confidentiality is essential to ensure both women's safety and data quality"; "All research team members should be carefully selected and receive specialized training and on-going support"; and "Researchers and donors have an ethical obligation to help ensure that their findings are properly interpreted and used to advance policy and intervention development" [27]. Overall, as the international guidelines for conducting research on VAW, the WHO's recommendations are worth considering not only in research with VAW survivors but also in research with other vulnerable populations.

However, some recommendations may be difficult or not feasible to implement in the PIC context. For instance, in PIC's small rural communities, confidentiality and anonymity barely exist. Even in cities, protecting the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants is difficult because of the small population. The limited network infrastructure (or, in some countries, the high cost of access) hampers online recruitment, which can protect anonymity and confidentiality. Community leaders such as village chiefs, headmen, or church pastors, usually men, who control the information dissemination to their community members, may hinder sensitive information such as gender-related matters from reaching to women, or they may attempt to participate in a survey as the representative of all the villagers. Because of the lack of a research culture, potential participants may not understand what the researchers are attempting and do not see the relevance of a research project to them. Even if women agree to participate in research, they may ask their husbands to speak on their behalf. These cultural settings may pose unique and/or additional methodological and ethical challenges in research with VAW survivors in PICs.

1.2 Research capacity in Pacific Island countries

The WHO recommends VAW data be collected by experienced or mature women who may better understand the feelings of VAW survivors [27]; however, in PICs, another approach may be favourable to address the lack of research culture and the limited research capacity. Even with the University of the South Pacific as a leading regional institution and with Fiji, Samoa, Tonga, the Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu having their own national universities, PIC's research capacities are still not comparable to those of neighbouring developed countries, i.e., Australia and New Zealand/Aotearoa. Several factors contribute to this lack of research capacity, including: (i) poor access to funding and facilities; (ii) a very high student–teacher ratio in PIC universities with the primary mission being teaching; (iii) poor access to scientific journals; and (iv) a limited culture of research and few skilled researchers who can train and mentor students [30–32]. Because of the limited research capacities, most social science research projects on PICs have been done by non-PIC-based researchers and gender-related research is no exception to this. Collaborative possibilities are sometimes sought; however, PIC-based researchers are often only seen as local contacts or consultants, not as researchers who equally contribute to the project. Local tertiary students are hardly hired as research assistants even though collaborative projects are good opportunities for them to be exposed to high quality projects [31–34]. While research outputs by non-PIC-based researchers contribute to the academic literature, the researchers rarely revisit to give feedback to communities or stakeholders who made the research possible in the first instance once data is collected [32]. Research projects primarily led by non-PIC-based researchers fail to consistently contribute to building research capacity in PICs. In addition, in research projects on gender, the dataset with rich information on lived experiences is not widely shared because of ethical reasons, i.e. to protect the privacy of the participants. Also, the findings are only presented to academics in peer-reviewed journals by non-PIC-based researchers, while PIC policy planners may not ever be made aware of the findings. Student researchers, who can leave actual impacts on communities, are not mentored and trained.

To conquer these geographical and cultural challenges, is there any “innovative” research methodology that can be employed in VAW research in the PIC context? It was in this context that our project was developed.

1.3 Authors' positionality and project development

The leading author, Naohiro Nakamura (he/his/him), is originally from outside of the Pacific region but has been teaching human geography in Fiji since 2014. Although his major research focus at the time of his arrival in Fiji was indigenous cultural representation with primarily qualitative approaches, he immediately recognized that VAW was a serious issue in PICs. As part of a mandate to enhance Pacific consciousness, in 2019, the last author and he applied for his institution's Strategic Research Themes research fund (SRT) with the project to examine the effectiveness and awareness of VAW-related laws in Fiji and Vanuatu. Although he had been exposed to feminist geographies in his academic career, this project was his first to look at a gender-related matter as the primary focus.

The last author, Sarah Pene (she/her/her), is originally from Fiji and teaches environmental science. Previously she worked with the Fiji Women's Crisis Centre (FWCC) in

the capacity of Research Officer for three years, leading the data analysis for Fiji's first national survey on domestic violence and sexual assault (published 1999). Based on her experiences with the FWCC, she drafted the questionnaire for our project. The process of drafting the questionnaire began with an initial review of published survey instruments from the Pacific and from outside the region that were designed to capture respondents' attitudes to, experiences of, and knowledge about domestic violence and domestic violence interventions. Questions suitable for this study (in terms of contributing to the research objectives) were re-phrased as needed to suit the local context in Fiji and Vanuatu, and in order to ensure that respondents could easily understand the question and facilitate an accurate and complete response. Some additional questions were designed specifically for this study.

Authors A (Nora Amos), B (Morinda Arudevi), C (Raveena Goundar), D (Besalina Massing), E (Shafiya Shamiza), F (Jenifer Tamara), and G (Peni Wanimala) (six female and one male) are local Pacific students, having majored in either geography, environmental management, or environmental science. They became known to the leading author through courses he taught, by part-time employment, or simply by applying for a research assistant position under the project. At the time of their joining the research team as research assistants, authors A, B, D, E, F, and G had completed or were completing a bachelor's degree program or a postgraduate diploma. Although they had been exposed to gender-related topics in university classes to some extent, intensively involving a VAW project was new to them. Author C was pursuing a master's degree, looking at rural Indo-Fijian women's gendered experiences, under the leading author's supervision.

Our project aimed to examine the awareness and effectiveness of VAW-related laws in Fiji (Domestic Violence Decree of 2009) and Vanuatu (Family Protection Act of 2008); however, it did not merely aim to contribute to the academic literature. Like many other research funds, the SRT's mandates include collaboration with external partners and contribution to capacity development in PICs. As such, the last author approached the FWCC to collaborate and it agreed to become our partner; however, our attempt to secure partners in Vanuatu was unsuccessful. For the contribution to PIC's capacity development, student research assistants were hired.

The project first started in Fiji in February 2021. Initially, authors C and G, and two other students (3 female and 1 male) were hired as research assistants. The four students and the first and last authors participated in a four-day training session organized by the FWCC to learn gender-related concepts, the Domestic Violence Decree, and VAW-related data collection techniques. This session was quite effective in developing a sense of teamwork. Unfortunately, no progress was made for the remaining year of 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic and two student assistants discontinued working on the project due to work commitments, hence another female student and author E were hired in 2022 and 2023 and the leading author individually trained them. Major data collection in Fiji started in early 2022 and continued until early 2024. In Vanuatu, authors A, B, D, and F (all female) were hired in late 2022 and the leading author ran a training session in Port Vila in January 2023. Data collection started immediately after the training session and continued for about two and a half months.

After the data collection was complete, we ran a few finding-sharing sessions with organizations in Vanuatu (VWC, Sista, and Japan International Cooperation Agency

Vanuatu Office) in 2023. We also had experience sharing sessions among the research team, one in Port Vila in July 2023 with the Vanuatu team (authors A, B, D, and F) and the other in Suva in August 2024 with the Fiji team (authors C, E, and G). In these sessions, we discussed the effectiveness of our methodology, information dissemination, methodological and ethical challenges faced during data collection, and capacity development. For this article, those who conducted surveys *and* participated in the experience sharing sessions are listed as authors, in addition to the first and last authors.

1.4 Survey structure and methodological techniques employed in the project

WHO stresses the importance of protecting the physical safety of the participants [27]. For instance, there is a risk of additional abuse by participating in a VAW-related survey if the abuser has found out, or some may instruct others not to participate in the survey if the abuser has learnt of the purposes of the presence of the researchers in the community. Survivors of VAW may also hesitate to participate. As such, the WHO recommendations suggest disclosing the actual content of the survey only to potential women participants, who have “to be fully informed about the nature of the questions” [27]. Furthermore, the sensitivity of the research topic should be raised when obtaining consent. However, as stated, one of the key components of our survey was the general public’s awareness of the law and support services. VAW is not solely a women’s issue, but everyone’s issue. As such, we needed to conduct surveys with the wider population regardless of gender, so long as they met our adult (18 or over) age criterion. As stated, research articles on VAW in PICs have predominantly looked at cultural factors and empirical research is in short supply [8]. Apparently, a challenge is how to recruit participants and have them agree to participate in a survey on a sensitive topic. Also, we had to conduct the survey in the context of strong patriarchal ideologies, where women may request their male family members to participate in the survey on their behalf. With the suggestions provided during the training sessions with the FWCC, we adopted the following strategies to overcome the challenges. First, we decided to target any adult individuals regardless of gender as participants and approach them merely by saying that our survey was a nationwide social issue survey and everyone’s perspective matters. This is because VAW survivors are often hidden, and having a large number of participants naturally increases the chance of coming across individuals who are VAW survivors. Relatedly, having interpreted that VAW is one of the social issues, we decided that the major focus of the survey is not to be disclosed to the participants at the beginning. Instead, the initial questions focused more broadly on their perceptions of social problems and crime in their neighbourhood or community. The questions on VAW started being posed thereafter. As such, the participants would become aware of the major focus in the middle of the survey. Even though this approach is against one of the WHO recommendations (fully disclosing the nature of the survey to confirmed participants before starting the survey), this was to avoid instant rejection by potential participants because of the sensitivity of the topic. For instance, potential male participants may not see the relevance of the topic and wonder why they have to participate in a survey on “women’s issues”.

Having considered these factors, the final version was a seven-page questionnaire consisting both of screening and actual questions, arranged in five sections: participants’ background; attitudes to intervention to DV cases (scenario-based); experience of DV intervention; awareness of DV and intervention; and awareness/experience of Domestic

Violence Restraining Orders (Fiji) or Family Protection Orders (Vanuatu) (see the supplementary material). The front page of the questionnaire, which was allocated for background questions, did not include any words or phrases that would directly imply VAW. A question to investigate awareness of the hotline number provided by either the FWWC or the VWC was included in the background section on the first page to determine the awareness of the participants on this number without guidance, but this question was again asked at the end of the survey with the aim of spreading this critical information to the participants. The participant's demographic information such as age and gender was decided to be recorded on a separate sheet [27]. We also decided to carry a few copies of a dummy questionnaire, containing the questions on women's health, including menstruation and delivery. These measures were also to protect ourselves from potential abuse and harassment. Furthermore, to distract the children's attention, each of us carried a set of coloured pencils and a colouring book during the survey.

In the context of PICs, established personal networks substantially influence the community's decision to accept outsiders, including researchers, especially in rural areas. As local individuals, student assistants usually have contacts in their village/remote island and are familiar with local protocols, which made it possible for us to conduct surveys in rural areas. In addition, although English is one of the official languages in the two countries, the first language of most individuals is either the iTaukei language (indigenous Fijians), Fiji Hindi (Indo-Fijians), or Bislama (Ni-Vanuatu). They are not always comfortable having a conversation in English, and seeking help from local individuals is inevitable when conducting a survey. The student assistants translated the English questionnaire into one of the above-mentioned languages, which was translated back to English by another student assistant, and we confirmed the accuracy of the nuance of the questions in each language.

Both in Fiji and Vanuatu, all the members conducted a pilot survey on the university campus of the respective country as part of training. Thereafter surveys in each country began. In Vanuatu, each assistant conducted surveys individually without on-site supervision by the leading author. In Fiji, while surveys were mostly done individually and the leading author occasionally accompanied them, three of us once visited a village on a remote island and conducted surveys as a team. The final survey number was 306 individuals in Fiji and 340 individuals in Vanuatu. Table 1 shows the basic demographic information of the participants.

1.5 Evaluating the methodologies and ethical challenges

1.5.1 Reaching a hard-to-reach population

In this section, based on our conversations in the experience-sharing sessions, we self-evaluate the methodologies we employed in the project. We confirm that most participants who agreed to participate in our survey answered all the questions posed, even though the participants were informed of the right to withdraw from the survey at any time. Null datasets were very few. Because of the structure of the questionnaire, the participants became aware that the survey was primarily about VAW in the middle of the survey and in this sense, we cannot say that the participants were comfortable during the survey, especially when survivors had to recall their negative memories. Under such circumstances, we did our best to sympathize with the survivors or provide information about counselling services and other support services. In any case, our results show that

165 (53.9%) and 239 (70.3%) participants had witnessed a DV incident in Fiji and Vanuatu, respectively, and detailed descriptions of their experiences of DV intervention prove that VAW is prevalent in the two countries. Since there was disclosure from respondents that the incident occurred to them, we demonstrate successfully reaching a hard-to-reach population - VAW survivors. The section on "experience of DV intervention" in our questionnaire captured their experiences. Some said that our survey was the first time for them to share their VAW experiences. Some male participants were the witnesses of violence against their female family members/acquaintances and were looking for a solution, while a few male participants appeared to be abusers (presumably another hard-to-reach population), who often criticized the organizations advocating for women's rights and status, or insisted that women obey men. As such, we also captured male abusers' perspectives. All the student assistants shared the view that our survey would not have reached these individuals if from the beginning we had approached potential participants saying that our survey was on VAW. This would have been particularly so in Vanuatu, where women were more subjugated to men and hardly spoke up in any context [35]. They would have made excuses not to participate or gone out before we visited them.

By no means can we say that our methodology was without drawbacks. One specific challenge we came across was accessing participants in an iTaukei (indigenous) Fijian village context. The usual protocol is that one has to first speak to the village headman (*turaga-ni-koro*), inform him of the purpose of the visit, and seek his permission. In one village, the *turaga-ni-koro* was open-minded and he encouraged us to speak with as many villagers as possible for the survey. Later he even asked us to run a workshop on VAW for the villagers. We had to decline this request as we had not been trained in that capacity. However, in another village, the *turaga-ni-koro* insisted on knowing specifically what our survey was for, and once he had learnt our survey was on VAW, he became uncomfortable, saying that the topic was too touchy. Author G, as the male iTaukei individual, repeatedly explained the purpose of our survey and eventually, the *turaga-ni-koro* was convinced. In Vanuatu, Author A came across a similar situation, where a village headman suggested calling all the villagers together for the survey for efficiency. However, doubting that women would speak openly in a group setting, Author A insisted on visiting households individually and eventually convinced the village headman.

1.5.2 Protecting the safety and the confidentiality of the participants

The safety and the confidentiality of the participants (and ourselves) were somewhat compromised in our project. In urban areas, most surveys were individually conducted at each household, usually without any interruptions or interference by any third person. However, in small rural communities, it was technically impossible to protect the privacy and confidentiality because the presence of any outsiders is immediately obvious, and everyone can see when we would visit a home. Community members instantly start wondering what is going on and the words spread very quickly. Even though we initially approached the community leaders with a nuanced disclosure of the survey content, we understood that they would eventually learn the details of our survey through word of mouth. Here, our attempt to maximize the number of participants in a community functioned well. In a few rural communities where we conducted surveys, almost all the members eventually participated in our survey. In one village in Fiji, some of the survey

was conducted in a group setting at a village hall, where many villagers were gathering for a function (we had been advised to do so by those who had completed the individual household survey). Respondents were interviewed one by one; however, we made no attempt (overt or otherwise) to specifically recruit respondents with experiences of violence and we did best that interviews were not overheard by others, so that participants' anonymity - their experiences of violence – is protected. By the end, everyone regardless of gender started openly discussing the issue of VAW in the hall. Arguably, enhancing the awareness of the entire community would have had some influence on abusers, even though the safety and confidentiality of the participants were not fully protected.

1.5.3 Spreading information

Our strategy to maximize the number of participants functioned well in this aspect. Through face-to-face conversations and interactions, a survey is often effective in spreading useful information about the topic and eventually enhancing awareness among the participants. Although our project aimed to examine the effectiveness of the laws and the awareness, we also attempted to inform the participants of support services available to survivors, including the hotline number of FWCC or VWC. In Fiji, as we partnered with the FWCC, we also carried the materials given by them in case a participant sought more detailed information. As stated, during the survey, the participants were asked twice about the awareness of the hotline number, at the beginning and end. Even though the majority were unaware of the number (24.5% and 12.4% in Fiji and Vanuatu, respectively), in the end, most of them correctly understood the purpose of the hotline. Some participants instantly saved the number on their phones or said that they would inform others of the number. In Vanuatu, one of our key findings was that the majority of participants recognized the name of the VWC (64 per cent), but they were unable to fully articulate what they did or what services the VWC provided. This finding was acknowledged by the VWC in the finding-sharing session with them. In Fiji, many participants assumed that the FWCC was only for women, even though the FWCC provides some counselling services for men as well. All of us agreed that our survey effectively spread useful information to the participants, who may be able to further spread information to others.

1.6 Other associated challenges and limitations

This section discusses a few other challenges related to our methodology. Regarding the representativeness of our data, the collected datasets in each country (306 and 340 in Fiji and Vanuatu, respectively) reflect a substantial sample size; however, the statistical robustness cannot be easily confirmed. In our project, geographical bias was an issue, primarily due to budgetary and logistical constraints. Our project is missing datasets from remote islands in Fiji and other major islands in Vanuatu. In Vanuatu, as all the assistants were based in the capital city Port Vila, we were unable to conduct the survey on other islands and all the datasets were collected on Efate and a few nearby small islands. In Fiji, while the majority of datasets were collected both in urban and rural areas on Viti Levu, where the capital city Suva is located, some datasets were collected in a few inland villages on the second largest island Vanua Levu. Another challenge was in gaining access to more affluent residential areas. Surveys in informal settlements in both Fiji and Vanuatu had fewer challenges of this kind; most residents regardless of their

Table 1 Demographic characteristics of survey participants in Fiji and Vanuatu

Variable	Fiji (N=306) Count (Percentage)	Vanuatu (N=340) Count (Percentage)	Overall (N=646) Count (Per- centage)
Gender = Women (%)	155 (50.7%)	205 (60.3%)	360 (55.7%)
Age (mean)	36.09	36.22	36.16
Ethnic Group (%)			
iTaukei/Indian	2 (0.7%)	0 (0%)	2 (0.3%)
Indo-Fijian	157 (51.3%)	0 (0%)	157 (24.3%)
iTaukei	141 (46.1%)	0 (0%)	141 (21.8%)
Tongan	1 (0.3%)	0 (0%)	1 (0.2%)
Rabi	5 (1.6%)	0 (0%)	5 (0.8%)
Ni-Vanuatu	0 (0%)	340 (100%)	340 (52.6%)
Highest Educational Attainment (%)			
No Formal Education	3 (1.0%)	2 (0.6%)	5 (0.8%)
Less than Primary	17 (5.6%)	26 (7.6%)	43 (6.7%)
Primary Education	29 (9.5%)	57 (16.8%)	86 (13.3%)
Less than Secondary	125 (40.8%)	77 (22.6%)	202 (31.3%)
Secondary Education	63 (20.6%)	40 (11.8%)	103 (15.9%)
Tertiary Education	68 (22.2%)	138 (40.6%)	206 (31.9%)
Doctorate	1 (0.3%)	0 (0%)	1 (0.2%)
Employment Status (%)			
Employed	129 (42.2%)	121 (35.6%)	250 (38.7%)
Unemployed	129 (42.2%)	180 (52.9%)	309 (47.8%)
Retired	3 (1.0%)	1 (0.3%)	4 (0.6%)
Student	42 (13.7%)	38 (11.2%)	80 (12.4%)
N/A	3 (1.0%)	0 (0%)	3 (0.5%)

Source: Authors

ethnicity were open and inviting to the surveyors who suddenly appeared in front of the door. In contrast, in affluent neighbourhoods, the homes were usually gated, had dogs, and were surrounded by walls (which also suggests that VAW occurring in these houses is less visible/apparent to their neighbours). Also, there was more likelihood of residents being out of the home or at work during the daytime. We often found only housekeepers present or felt unwelcome. There was more suspicion and more questioning of the purpose of our visit when we explained that we were conducting a nationwide social survey. When the leading author contacted a resident of an affluent residential area who was known to him, the resident harshly criticized our approach, saying that all the accurate information must be disclosed to potential participants together with a written explanation sheet prior to the survey for ethical reasons. On this occasion, we failed to implement a strategy to have potential participants understand the nature and sensitivity of VAW-related research, especially why the full information of the project is not initially disclosed.

Regarding the gender ratio of the participants, while the gender ratio of the participants was near 50–50 in Fiji, women made up the majority (60.3 per cent) in Vanuatu (see Table 1). The higher rates of female participation in Vanuatu can be attributed to a variety of factors, primarily the gender imbalance of our team. While the Fiji team had two male members (leading author and Author G) who conducted the survey and once visited a village as a team, in Vanuatu, the research team were all female. Author B admitted that she was scared to approach men, while the others said that sometimes potential male participants appeared uncomfortable having a conversation with a woman they did

not know. Even in Fiji, when we were conducting a pilot survey, a female assistant felt that men were not very honest about their opinions on VAW. As our project did not restrict participants to women or VAW survivors, it would have been ideal if our team had been gender balanced. Unfortunately, in Vanuatu, no male students applied for a research assistant position.

1.7 Capacity building

Research capacity building was an important objective in our project. Initially, not all student research assistants had a strong background in gender-related matters. In Fiji, Author C was completing her master's research on Indo-Fijian women's gendered experiences and Author E had a family member who had lodged a DVRO. Author G was new to the field. In Vanuatu, none of them were very familiar with gender-related matters. Indeed, some of them agreed to join the team for economic reasons. As such, training the students was crucial. They were paid to join a 4-day training session and required to read and summarize the materials provided, discuss, and present. On the final day of the session, the assistants conducted a pilot survey on campus. For a few individuals like Author C, the agenda of the training session may not have been particularly new, but the largest product gained from the sessions was that we built a sense of teamwork. This was particularly so in Vanuatu, where the four assistants intensively engaged in the project and surveyed more than 300 individuals over two and half-month period, even though the leading author was only able to remotely supervise them from Fiji. Despite the sensitivity of the topic, all Vanuatu assistants confirmed that they had a good experience with the project. They acquired and improved interview skills and enhanced their awareness of gender-related matters.

1.8 Methodological implications in the Pacific Island country context

By no means do we argue that our project was extremely innovative or perfect. As stated, our data collection sites were limited. Previously, WHO recommended several tips for research with VAW survivors and Ellard-Gray et al. intensively discussed the strategies to find the hidden, hard-to-reach, and vulnerable populations, including VAW survivors [27, 28]. Some strategies we discussed in this article overlap. For instance, we recruited participants "using [alternative] language that does not specify the research topic" [27, see also 28]. Also, Ellard-Gray et al. suggested researchers distribute "a screening survey to a larger (potentially random) sample in order to classify members of the hard-to-reach or hidden population" [28, see also 36]. Although we did not conduct a screening survey, by surveying a larger and random population, we attempted to reach VAW survivors.

Meanwhile, our methodological approach did not strictly follow the international guidelines such as WHO's recommendations in terms of: (1) protecting the confidentiality of the participants; (2) fully disclosing the survey information to confirmed participants, and (3) hiring mature, experienced women who may be more sympathetic with VAW survivors as surveyors [27]. As discussed, fully protecting the confidentiality (and safety) of the participants was technically impossible in small rural communities. Our approach was to involve most adult community members in the survey, which resulted in enhancing the awareness of VAW in the entire community. Regarding the full disclosure of the survey information, our aim was to have as many individuals as possible as participants, in other words, to avoid potential participants' refusal to be surveyed

once they have learnt the major focus of the survey. We designed the questionnaire as explained in the previous section. While we came across a case of refusal to participate in the survey because of the lack of full disclosure of the information (i.e. affluent residential areas), we were lucky in the sense that most participants completed the survey once they had started answering the questions. The carefully designed questionnaire, the everyone's-perspective-matters approach, and the surveyors' sympathetic attitude may result in a high completion rate. Finally, hiring and training student assistants contributed to capacity building and left a positive impact on the community. These approaches were to address unique challenges in PICs: the lack of confidentiality in small rural communities, the dominant patriarchal ideologies, and low research capacities.

2 Recommendations and conclusion

Our project was developed in the context of the lack of gender-disaggregated data, strong patriarchal ideologies, a high VAW rate, and a limited research capacity. As stated, much VAW research in PICs has been focused on cultural backgrounds but with fewer empirical studies. This is because approaching VAW survivors involves many methodological and ethical challenges. Even though some strategies in recommendations were already available regarding research with hard-to-reach populations such as VAW survivors [27, 28], in this article, we aimed to identify and overcome unique challenges in the general PIC context as well as in the context of Fiji's and Vanuatu's small rural communities more specifically. We also attempted to contribute to research capacity building and leave an impact on the communities regarding the awareness enhancement of VAW. To conclude, we provide two recommendations.

First, even though the international guidelines of research with VAW survivors and strategies for research with hard-to-reach populations are useful, they need to be modified based on the unique challenges of specific geographical and cultural contexts. Feminist methodologies have often emphasized the importance of capturing personal experiences [22]; however, our challenge was how to come across individuals with violence experiences and how to have them participate in the survey, in the context of rural communities with strong patriarchal ideologies. Our approach was to have as many individuals as possible participate in the survey without the full disclosure of the content before the survey. This methodological approach enabled us to reach previously hidden VAW survivors in some sample locations. As stated by Fuentes & Cookson, "we [had] an opportunity to 're-locate' women's experiences of gender inequality such that they become visible—and actionable—to policy makers and programme designers", at least with the women who participated in our survey [22]. Concurrently, since we did not limit our participants to women, we also collected the perspectives of men, a few of whom appeared to be abusers. In the literature on VAW, very few researchers have looked at abusers and their perspectives. Even though our samples only represent a small portion of abusers, discussing this topic with abusers may have some impact.

Second, even though a research capacity may be limited in PICs, involving local researchers, in particular junior researchers such as postsecondary students, is critical. Non-PIC-based researchers usually do not conduct follow-up projects to examine if their findings have been widely shared among local stakeholders or if there has been any impact on local communities, which results in a lack of evidence of long-term impact on communities. If PIC local individuals are intensively involved in VAW-related research projects, while they learn data collection skills and sensitive issues associated with VAW-related research, they can also

disseminate the findings on the grassroots level. In addition, they can widely share critical information such as VAW survivor support services with the participants during the survey and even after the project has been completed. As evidence, even though our research assistants are pursuing their careers in different fields, they keep distributing information and providing support to VAW survivors whenever required. In this way, projects may have a long-term impact and contribute to data sharing and capacity development. The trained individuals can support data collection activities either by the government sections or by relevant organizations whenever required and further contribute to the capacity development of the country by transmitting acquired skills to other individuals. In our project, the leading author was lucky to be able to take advantage of having contact with local students. Student assistants helped translate the questionnaire, find and contact potential survey sites, guide the team regarding local protocols, and negotiate with key people on the site. If the fundamental goal is not necessarily to contribute to academic literature but rather to eradicate VAW, involving local students and attempting to have an impact on the site is important.

Supplementary Information

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Supplementary Material 1

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Author contributions

N.N. and S.P. wrote the main manuscript text. N.N., N.A., M.A., R.G., B.M., S.S., J.T., and P.W. contributed to data collection and analysis. All authors reviewed the manuscript.

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Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

This research was carried out following the guidelines of the University of the South Pacific's research ethics committee, and the project was approved by the Research Office of The University of the South Pacific (approval # Dr Naohiro Nakamura/2020).

Consent for publication

Not applicable (this manuscript does not analyse the data collected by questionnaire survey. Our focus is methodology).

Competing interests

The corresponding author is on the Editorial Board.

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