

Forms of Violence and Discrimination against Women in Papua New Guinea

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Abstract: Gender-based violence (GBV) is pervasive and enduring in Papua New Guinea (PNG). Women and girls in this country are to a large extent exposed to sexual assault, rape and domestic violence in urban and rural areas. Once affected, they get only little attention and support, let alone justice. Asking what triggers violence against women in PNG this paper examines the different forms, causes and reasons of GBV. It highlights PNG-specific forms of violence against women. From the analysis of GBV it argues that violence is deeply rooted in PNG societies and widely accepted. Understanding GBV is of great importance for counteraction as the government, churches and various NGOs now run programs to improve the situation for women, but measures do not show the necessary impacts, because they do not address the profoundness and complexity of GBV in PNG.

Keywords: Gender-based violence, GBV, structural violence, bride price, polygamy, sorcery, triggers and causes of violence, witch-hunt, Papua New Guinea, PNG

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Gender-based violence (GBV) against women is a human rights violation experienced by women in all countries and cultures. In Papua New Guinea (PNG) this is particularly pervasive (Biersack 2016). For example, a young woman who had just survived a mass rape said “We are growing up with [the anticipation that] this is happening to us. I survived it and that’s the most important thing” (Struck-Garbe, 1999). She did not want to go to the police and report the case, having no confidence in the police. She expected her brothers and cousins to take revenge. She had left her fiancée, who had avenged himself in this brutal way. This is neither a statement nor a case of singularity. Violence and especially GBV is a part of everyday life, widely tolerated and accepted. About two thirds of the women in PNG are subject to abuse relative to a world average of one third of women (Tatsi, 2018). In order to find appropriate countermeasures and solutions to GBV in PNG the issue must be thoroughly understood. Therefore, this research note focuses on forms, causes and reasons for GBV. We ask what triggers violence against women in PNG? It is our intention to raise awareness on the topic and shed light on the mechanisms behind it.

Due to limitations of space this article will fall short in several regards. With more than 800 different ethnic groups in the country, we strongly generalize statements on the status of women, especially since tradition and societal changes through colonization and up until now are touched far too briefly to gain a thorough understanding. Also, important issues such as the implicit predominant dualistic gender understanding or concepts of gender roles cannot be addressed. While an overview of forms of GBV, causes and reasons are provided, we do not identify recommendations to tackle this issue.



Figure 1: Chis Kauage: Domestic violence



Figure 2: Jane Wena: The power of man

Definition

For this research the understanding of violence against women is based on the United Nations definition: “Any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life” (United Nations, 1993). This is a very broad understanding of the term, including self-directed violence such as self-harm, interpersonal violence such as homebased physical or psychological violence, and collective violence such as economic violence or structural violence - avoidable impairments of fundamental human needs by society (Galtung, 1975). All of these potential categorizations of violence overlap or intertwine and rarely occur isolated. For example, physical harm can hinder labour and thus lead to economic damage. This should be kept in mind for the following analysis of violence in which the primary focus is on collective violence and the structural reasons behind it.

Systematic Gender-based Violence

Women in PNG are systematically disadvantaged in the economy, education and health for social and cultural reasons.

Women and girls are often barred from attending school since they are demanded to do housework, gardening and child care. 64% of women are literate opposed to 69% (2000) of men (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2010). At the University only 35% of the enrolled students are women (Japan International Cooperation Agency, 2010). In many cases, girls finally leave school at the age of fifteen. There are several further reasons for girls to drop out of school. First, there are not enough schools in rural areas (about 85% of the population still lives in the countryside). Thus, education often involves long journeys to school, during which they may be threatened with sexual and physical violence. Second, many girls are sexually molested by their male classmates. The teachers often do little against this or even participate in the abuses (Wilson, 2012). Third, there is a lack of sanitary conditions or missing accommodation

at schools and universities. Fourth, parents are not interested in providing girls with higher education and/or they do not have enough money to pay for it. Fifth, girls marry at a young age and often have children early (Japan International Cooperation Agency, 2009).

These unequal educational opportunities also contribute to limiting the economic possibilities of women. Women are responsible for the domestic sphere, for subsistence farming and breeding of livestock, thus for the nutrition of the family. As they receive no salary for this work, many women sell their agricultural or artisanal products on local markets to have at least some cash at their disposal. Although the vast majority of women farm the land, they generally have neither land ownership nor land use rights. Land is owned by clans and is assigned to their husbands. In the event of separation, or if the clan chief leases or sells the land, they lose the gardening opportunities they need to survive and depend on relatives to support them. In the formal work sector and in leadership positions women are barely represented. 24%



Figure 3: Gazellah Bruder: The freedom to speak out

of women work in the formal sector, whereas 40% of men do (Government of Papua New Guinea-Development Partners Gender Forum, 2012). Few women are also active in politics, and if they are, they have little chance of getting an elected position. In the election in 2017, no women made it into parliament. It becomes clear here that the majority of women are excluded from the formal economy and leadership of the country.

Another form of structural violence is the inadequate health system. Lack of medical care, especially in rural areas, leads to an extremely high maternal mortality rate, because more than half of women do not have access to medical care or accompaniment during childbirth. While the birthrate in 2016 was 3.7 (World Bank, 2018), the official maternal mortality rate was 0.22% in 2015 (ibid, 2018). Only 53% of childbirths in 2006 have been conducted by a midwife or an obstetrician (Government of Papua

New Guinea-Development Partners Gender Forum, 2012). However, under the 2006 Demographic Health Survey the rate was as high as 0.73% (ibid, 2012).

Women in PNG often do not reach the age of 70 (World Bank, 2018) due to extreme workload, poor diet, poor access to clean water, poor health care, many pregnancies, and physical and psychological GBV.

PNG Specific Forms of Violence against Women

In the following section, we examine some PNG specific forms of GBV, which are particularly important to understand violence against women.

Marriage requires the payment of a bride price. This originally important tradition for maintaining balance between two different groups did degenerate to a purchase price. Men feel that they are the owners of their wives and their bodies, and hence believe they have the right to control

their wives and abuse them. The ownership of women is particularly evident when women are given away as part of compensation payments (Dickson-Waiko, 2001). The bride price makes it difficult for the women to divorce, because it would have to be repaid then. This rule often prevents parents from taking their daughters back as women usually move to their husband's family. There they normally have no land and no right to it. Thus, when they break up, they stand without land and cannot feed themselves.

Also, financially they are not secured; they could indeed sue for support, but that will most likely not be paid. Living alone is not common. There are only a handful of very few lone women living in major cities – often bringing male relatives home for protection or employing a security guard (Macintyre and Spark 2017; Spark, 2017). To make matters worse in a possible separation, children from a marriage remain in the family of the man; therefore women who leave their husbands lose custody of their children. This causes women to stay with their violent husband (Human Rights Report, 2015).

Furthermore, polygamy is possible, mostly for men with assets who can afford to pay corresponding bride prices. Although this may have made sense in the traditional social context, today this regulation is abused. It often happens that men who move to another location due to their work (in the mines) marry another wife there, not caring about the women and children left behind. When women try to protest, this often leads to violence - on both sides. Also, when several women live together in a polygamous marriage, it is rarely peaceful. According to Lady Hannah Dadae (2018), half of all female prison inmates are murderers of other women.

Another PNG-specific form of structural violence comes with the institution of village courts. Village judges take decisions on local and family matters such as bride price, custody of children and non-violent, low-threshold criminal acts. They generally follow traditional restorative rights that still exist and they are funded by the state (with 14,000 councillors and 600,000 cases a year). Lacking sensitivity in cases of familial and sexual violence among the almost entirely male members of the courts leads to the trivialization of domestic



Figure 4: Alexander Mebri: Culture Heritage

violence as family disputes, which just require compensation payments. Reconciliation is the focus, which means the man is admonished not to do this again and the wife is sent back to her tormentor without getting any support. Many judges also do not understand that women have to be protected from their husbands and assume that the woman have earned the beating due to misconduct.

Prostitution is illegal in PNG. According to Cassey (2015) the United Nations estimates two of three girls aged between 15 and 24 have prostituted themselves for money, food or shelter. They face high levels of discrimination and hate crime, while having no protection and no advocates. The risk of being raped seems especially great for prostitutes with 80% being sexually abused in 2009 (United States Agency for International Development, 2010). Thirty-five percent of prostitutes take alcohol or drugs while they engage in prostitution to better withstand

physical and mental stress. As they rarely use contraceptives they are much more likely to be infected with the HIV virus with 13% of prostitutes being tested positive (Cassey, 2015). Women are often denied medical care when the doctor learns how they earn their money (Stewart, 2014). Societal handling of prostitutes is a insidious form of structural violence. Child prostitution has also risen sharply in recent years by 30% (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2013).

Sorcery accusation-based violence is a major problem in PNG, stemming from tradition and mostly affecting women. In contrast to the past so-called 'witches' are arbitrarily tortured and murdered in public nowadays. The previous Sorcery Act, which considered witchcraft real and allowed the courts to persecute culprits and murderers of accused witches, was only lifted in 2013 and the law change has hardly been enforced. Also, one can still be legally charged with witchcraft

at village courts (Village Courts Act 1989). In practice there are rarely legal consequences for witch-hunting in PNG. A 20-year-long study by the Australian National University of 1,440 cases of torture and 600 killings found less than one percent of perpetrators were successfully prosecuted (Neubauer, 2018). Accused witches are considered the causes of crop failures, unexpected deaths or serious illnesses. Behind the allegations and the murders of supposed witches are fears and also often the motive of enrichment (land or house). Very frequently, women who have little social protection like widows, become accused of sorcery. The belief in witchcraft and its pursuit is deeply rooted and widespread especially in the highlands, as well as within the police force and churches, which therefore are not providing effective protection.

The 'Normality' of Violence

A key reason for violence against women that has been touched

subliminally throughout the discussion so far is the widespread acceptance of violence as a means of problem-solving or as an act of revenge. PNG has one of the highest rates of domestic violence and sexual abuse worldwide. It is often husbands and other male family members or neighbourhood men who use violence against women and girls. From 2009 to 2015, Doctors Without Borders treated around 28,000 female victims of domestic violence and sexual abuse (Doctors Without Borders, 2016). Many of the victims have reported that while they were beaten at home, family members watched and did nothing. Even if the act of violence happens in public, very rarely someone steps in because the majority of viewers assume that the woman has not behaved properly and deserves the beating. Few offenders are brought to justice. Violence against women and girls, including mass rapes, has increased in recent years, especially in the cities (Amnesty International, 2006). Here the perpetrators are so-called 'raskols', gangs of mostly unemployed young men who make their raids on markets and other public places, often targeting women and girls. As already discussed, for many women selling at the market is a necessity. According to a study, 55% of women (United Nations Women, 2014) were victims of violence in the marketplace. Note that the fear of spending time in public places restricts women's freedom of movement and freedom in general. Many girls grow up knowing they will one day experience violence or be raped. Witnessing violence as part of everyday life they expect that this will happen to them and are happy if they do not carry any major physical damage and survive the violence. This form of socialization leads to violence being accepted as part of society and considered normal.

In many PNG societies a male ideology is being propagated and perpetuated: women are dangerous, inferior and unreliable (and more recently became acquirable objects) (Biersack and Macintyre 2017; Gibbs, 2017). One must avoid women or keep them under control. This ideology (usually mediated by older men) legitimizes rape and physical violence as a means of controlling allegedly resistant women. In addition, men lose the status of youthfulness only with the marriage. They compete with old men

for potential second wives. Often the young men are the losers, because the old ones have the power and control over resources to generate money in the kinship network to pay the bride price (Zimmer-Tamakoshi 2012). In urban areas, the frustrated young men join together to form gangs (raskols), which above all represent a violent ideology and in which the rape of women is part of a ritual of reception of young gang members. The pursuit of acceptance by other men, leads to sharing their partner with their friends; or, in tribal struggles, use violence against members of another family or clan or rape their wives. Violence is not just part of life for the poor or less educated in the countryside but also for the urban elite. Rape of women is justified with a desire to punish educated women or to punish a woman who has previously rejected the sexual advances of the offender. Empowerment of women does deprive men of their power to control women and their body. This seems to give rise to ego conflicts amongst men who vent their frustrations violently towards women (Biersack and Macintyre 2017; Gibbs, 2017).

Touching mainly on issues of physical violence so far, it should be mentioned that in regards to psychological consequences and psychological violence, it is almost impossible to receive psychological care. There are only three psychologists in the vast country who deal with the issues related to violence against women (Human Rights Watch, 2015). Since there is no data or more extensive information, it can only be surmised in what regard violence is a psychological burden on women.

Triggers of Interpersonal Gender-based Violence

While discussing structural and economic violence against women in PNG, acts of interpersonal violence have often been mentioned. Sometimes the structural violence in form of a societal belief is the direct trigger for interpersonal violence; however, it seems important to mention some general triggers of acts of interpersonal violence in PNG. Violence is mainly triggered by poverty, materialistic desires and resulting tensions, and social stratification; male dominated society (further enforced through a male dominated Christian religion),

patriarchal customs and their modern deformations; self-esteem decrease and frustration; drugs and alcohol; reviving tribal conflicts; and self-justice and revenge (Chandler, 2014).

Conclusion

Overall, the diversity of reasons behind violence against women in PNG has been highlighted: reaching from structural violence in education, economy, health and life expectancy to an institutionalized culture of accepting and tolerating violence also including domestic violence, bride price, polygamy, unfit village courts, handling of prostitution and witch pursuit. As the forms and reasons of GBV in PNG show the issue is multi-layered and deeply entrenched. Even though GBV is pervasive and enduring in PNG, women are vulnerable and resilient at the same time. On different levels of engagement they work hard to make their communities safer places. But while prosecuting acts of violence is possible and increases, questions remain as how to outlaw a genuine belief in sorcery. In regards to GBV and sorcery almost 150 different organizations and the Government of PNG are trying to create awareness, but there is a crucial lack of service provision to affected women (Government of PNG, 2016).

If GBV is to be tackled in the long term, it needs responses adequate to its complexity and strong entrenchment in PNG societies. There are small steps happening, especially to achieve equality through women's economic advancement and empowerment, but PNG still has a long way to go to reach freedom of violence.

Acknowledgement

The art illustrating this text is from contemporary PNG artists. Gazellah Bruder, Winnie Weoa, Jane Wena, Alexander Mebri and Chris Kauage are all born in the 1970th and they live in Port Moresby, the capital of Papua New Guinea. Their works shown here were created between 1998 and 2007 and illustrate that gender relations – particularly male dominance – are a subject that is since long echoed in the arts. Especially in urban areas where contemporary modern art is located the changing traditional gender roles, GB violence and domestic violence are discursively taken up and visually highlighted.

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Figure 5: Winnie Weoa: Behind the fence

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