SPECIAL REPORT

Addressing Gendered Violence in Papua New Guinea: Opportunities and Options

By Negar Ashtari Abay, Kathleen Kuehnast, Gordon Peake, and Melissa Demian

A woman who fled after her husband hit her with a tire iron and put a gun to her neck, in Goroka, Papua New Guinea, on October 26, 2018. (Photo by Ben C. Solomon/New York Times)

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Summary

- Extremely high rates of gendered violence in Papua New Guinea (PNG) are a critical concern for peace and security because the political and economic stability of a country are linked to the status and security of its women.

- Rising economic inequality and lack of investment in basic services in recent years have fueled increasingly lethal intercommunal, intimate partner, and sorcery accusation–related violence in PNG.

- Violence is worse in Hela Province, home to the extractive oil industry, but is also unfolding in Morobe Province and across PNG, particularly as the number of internally displaced persons increases.

- State-centric and rule-of-law approaches to addressing gender-based violence have been ineffective in PNG, where state institutions have little reach beyond urban areas; local norms and customary law do not neatly align with other legal frameworks; and society is organized around informal, dynamic political and social networks.

- The application of USIP's Gender Inclusive Framework and Theory points to promising opportunities for programming, such as providing innovative support to micro-level initiatives led by efficacious actors, promoting nonviolent masculinities, and addressing youth disenfranchisement and intergenerational trauma.

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SPECIAL REPORT

GENDER

ABOUT THE REPORT

This report examines challenges that peace programs face in addressing gendered violence in Papua New Guinea. It also presents programmatic opportunities and options based on a conflict-sensitive gender analysis of Hela and Morobe Provinces. The review utilized the Gender Inclusive Framework and Theory developed by the Women, Peace and Security Program at the United States Institute of Peace (USIP). Desk research was funded in part by the United States Agency for International Development.

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Residents walk around the Koki Buai market in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea, on November 15, 2018. (Photo by Aaron Favila/AP)

Introduction

Statistics on gender inequality in Papua New Guinea paint a gloomy picture. The United Nations Development Programme's 2021 Gender Inequality Index ranks Papua New Guinea (PNG) second to last in the world in gender equality.[1] Over the past decade of uneven economic development in PNG, gender disparities in education, employment, and access to other basic services have persisted, and gender-based violence has increased.[2] Each year, more than 1.5 million women and girls experience gender-based violence tied to intercommunal conflict, political intimidation, sorcery-related accusations, and familial and intimate partner abuse. The country has the highest rate of intimate partner violence in East Asia and the Pacific.[3] It is therefore unsurprising that, according to Human Rights Watch's 2023 World Report, "Papua New Guinea remains one of the most dangerous places to be a woman or girl."[4]

In PNG's Hela and Morobe Provinces, the hues and shades of this national portrait are similar. In Hela, however, the picture is bleaker; the prevalence of violence against women and girls and intergenerational impacts of violence are comparable to those in areas of active armed conflict elsewhere in the world.[5] The link between the political and economic stability of a country and the status and security of its women is well established.[6] Understanding this correlation and addressing the root causes of the violence experienced by women and girls is critical to the future of PNG and, given the country's geostrategic significance, to the security of the world.[7]

To inform the design of peace programming funded by the United States Agency for International Development in PNG, the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) conducted a gender analysis focused on Hela and Morobe, where the US Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability will focus its activities in the country. The analysis incorporated insights from a review of over 90 research reports and academic articles, as well as from a dozen interviews conducted with experts with long-standing knowledge of the country. This report summarizes key findings of that analysis and offers promising approaches for advancing gender equality through peacebuilding efforts in both Hela and Morobe specifically and PNG more broadly.[8]

The review utilized USIP's Gender Inclusive Framework and Theory, which was developed to facilitate the integration of conflict-sensitive gender analysis into project design.[9] The framework's three analytic lenses—women, peace, and security; peaceful masculinities; and intersecting identities—provide important avenues for action that require greater attention if gender-based violence prevention and peacebuilding programs are to have meaningful and lasting impact in PNG.

Political and Economic Context of Hela and Morobe Provinces

The Independent State of Papua New Guinea is one of the most diverse countries in the world, with over 800 distinct language groups and complex associated cultural and social characteristics. It remains a challenge for the national government based in Port Moresby and the 22 governments based in the capitals of each province and the one autonomous region to reliably deliver services and exercise fully recognized authority over the country's population and territory.

Prior to colonial administration by Germany, the United Kingdom, and Australia, Papua New Guinean societies were small-scale and stateless, with various political formations organized mostly around the leadership of one or more powerful male leaders or "big men."[10] Many institutions that make up PNG's current state infrastructure were established between the end of World War II and the country's independence in 1975, and many resemble the government architecture of Australia. Yet this transplantation of institutional forms has only ever been partially realized.

Governance remains intensely personalistic and relational in PNG. The homegrown governance model of big men persists, and the postindependence political and legal systems continue to support the distribution of resources (for example, livestock and land)—as well as the capture of resources and wealth accumulation—as a means to cement political power and harness personal relationships.[11] With growing economic inequality, PNG ranks 155 of 191 countries in the UN's 2022 Human Development Index, and 57 percent of the population lives in multidimensional poverty.[12]

Despite the vision expressed in an institutionalist national constitution, formal institutions still have shallow roots and limited reach across the country. This is especially true in areas "beyond the tarmac road" of Port Moresby and provincial capitals—that is, the areas where the vast majority of Papua New Guineans live, including the provinces of Hela and Morobe.

PAPUA NEW GUINEA

Adapted from artwork by Rainer Lesniewski/Shutterstock
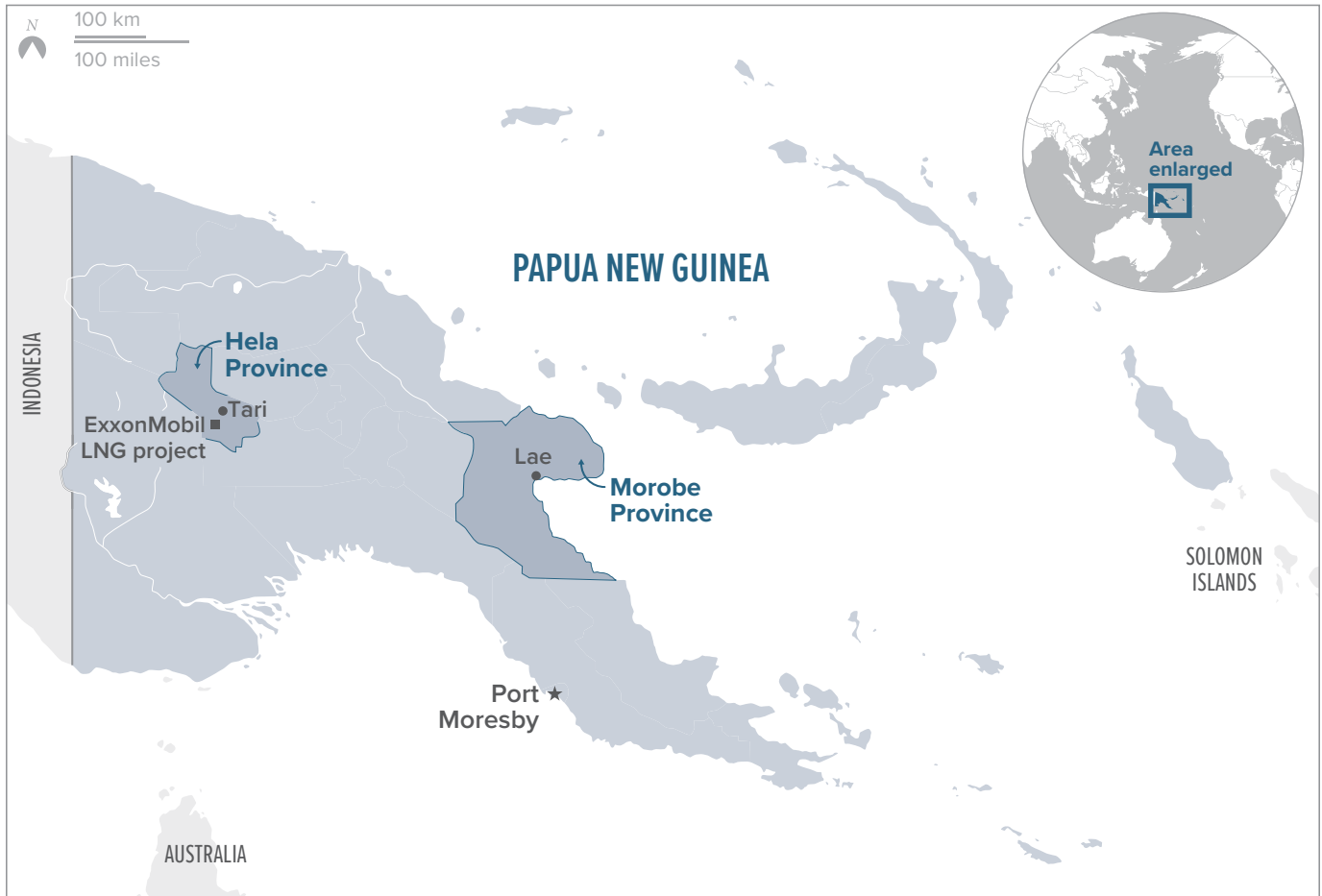
Hela Province, located in a remote area of the highlands at the center of PNG, is the country's newest province and among its least developed. Leaders of the dominant Huli ethnolinguistic group, one of the largest such groups in the country, were successful in carving Hela out of the Southern Highlands Province in 2012; they were driven by a distinct Huli identity and a desire to reap exclusive financial benefits from extractive ventures such as the ExxonMobil liquefied natural gas (LNG) project, PNG's biggest revenue earner, which is located in Huli territory.[13]

People in Hela had no contact with the world beyond the highlands until the 1930s, when Australian government patrols began brief visits. Extended contact did not begin until the early 1950s. Power and governance are highly localized, dynamic, and contested among the hundreds of interconnected clans in the province.[14] Notwithstanding Hela's rich gas fields and its status as the home province of Prime Minister James Marape, Hela suffers from widespread underdevelopment, unemployment, lack of basic services, and low rates of education. It is fragmented internally by its mountainous geography and lack of roads and by endemic, violent intercommunal conflict.[15]

In Hela, there are reportedly fewer than 60 police officers, not including the private security personnel contracted by the LNG project. The large number of guns in Hela poses an existential challenge to state security forces, as "the civilian population vastly outguns the entire PNG police force and army combined."[16] There is low public trust in police officers, who will sometimes act as self-appointed judges, and there are complaints about bribery and corruption.[17]

Hela thus exemplifies the "resource curse" affecting much of PNG. From 2009 to 2014, ExxonMobil invested billions in the LNG pipeline running from the province to the coast, raising community hopes for long-awaited wealth and development. During the construction phase, jobs abounded, infusing overwhelming amounts of cash into the local economy. The financial benefits were short-lived, however. Once the construction phase transitioned into production, laborers lost their jobs, while basic social services remained lacking.[18] The PNG government, which had been collecting royalties under an agreement to distribute them to landowners, has disbursed few funds; there is still much dispute and confusion over landownership rights, as most of Huli land is held under customary tenure.[19] Dashed hopes have been replaced by sharpened perceptions of poverty and deprivation, fueling an already volatile social environment with a history of interclan grievance and warfare.

In contrast to Hela, coastal **Morobe Province** was colonized in the late 19th century by Germany and then became part of a League of Nations mandate administered by Australia at the end of World War I. The province encompasses the urban district and provincial capital of Lae, plus nine rural districts, which produce much of the country's agricultural output.[20] Long-standing gold and silver mining operations have fostered environments of quick cash, inequality, substance abuse, and violence, while local governance mechanisms that traditionally managed conflict have degraded.[21]

Attracted by economic opportunities, migrants from across PNG have settled in and around Lae, creating a multicultural "melting pot."[22] However, Lae's present-day geography still reflects its exclusionary colonial settlement origins, as the city center amenities are unaffordable for most people. The Lae City Authority provides some municipal services to the inner settlements, but the informal and diverse settlements situated farther away from the city center, where most of the urban population is found, receive few or no services.

In the coming years, in both Hela and Morobe, climate change is expected to have significant environmental impacts. Temperature hikes, drought, more frequent and severe tropical cyclones, sea-level rises, increased flooding, freshwater shortages, and detrimental effects on fisheries, coral reefs, and forests could all have wide-ranging consequences.[23] Adding to the effects of PNG's extractive economy, these consequences will likely exacerbate inequality and conflict, leading to more displacement, further disruption to livelihoods, less access to services for basic needs, and heightened resource competition.

Gendered Dynamics of Violence in Hela and Morobe Provinces

Women and girls in PNG face one of the highest rates of gender-based violence in the world, hindering prospects for individual and societal development and extending patterns of violence from the home to the community to the political arena. Rapid economic change and uneven development have exacerbated drivers of conflict and dramatically changed gender and sexual relationships across PNG, particularly in Hela.[24] These changes have manifested in the gendered impacts of intercommunal violence, family and intimate partner violence, and sorcery accusation–related violence.

INTERCOMMUNAL VIOLENCE AND INTERNAL DISPLACEMENT

Many of PNG's clan and other social groupings have historically exercised regionally specific and often brutal forms of intercommunal warfare, which centers on resources, rivalries, territory, and other significant factors, with seemingly minor disputes quickly escalating and drawing more participants into the conflict. Retaliation is central to Huli notions of justice in Hela, as is the case in much of the highlands; sociocultural expectations demand male participation in payback violence. Though conflict is said to occur between clans, in practice, warring parties also draw from friendship and other networks to bolster their numbers.[25]

A major consequence of intercommunal violence has been the proliferation of internally displaced persons (IDPs) fleeing retaliatory attacks. According to the International Committee of the Red Cross, in the highlands areas where the organization operates, 30,000 people were displaced by intergroup warfare in 2021.[26] Even if a conflict successfully ends with a peace agreement, displaced people may not be able to reclaim their homes and livelihoods, with women often bearing disproportionate responsibility for recovery and survival.

Internal displacement due to intercommunal violence also places significant pressure on receiving communities, such as the surrounding settlements of Lae in Morobe Province. Intercommunal violence spills into Morobe's peri-urban settlements, with cycles of "ethnic" clashes between highlanders and coastal groups. Trauma is widespread among displaced populations, exacerbating the challenges of integration. With limited cultural ties or institutional structures to provide safety and accountability, rates of gender-based violence in settlements continue to rise.[27]

In Hela, the expansion of the cash economy, heightened inequality, and the introduction of guns, including military-grade assault weapons, have turned conflicts deadlier and exponentially increased the amount of cash or in-kind compensation owed for damages caused, making it more difficult for conflict parties to negotiate an end to hostilities.[28] Increasingly, political and business leaders hire gunmen out to warring groups in exchange for cash or political support and also hire gunmen for their own protection. Guns and the growing prominence of such actors have eroded the authority of traditional leaders and elders.[29] It is frequently unsafe for international organizations to work in Hela. When they do, they tend to adopt security precautions that place multiple barriers between themselves and the communities they serve.

> Women are frequently collateral damage in retaliatory violence and are subject to rape and other forms of physical assault because they are seen as legitimate targets to humiliate or avenge male conflict parties.

In this context, as is the case in many localized and large-scale conflicts around the world, women are frequently collateral damage in retaliatory violence and are subject to rape and other forms of physical assault because they are seen as legitimate targets to humiliate or avenge male conflict parties.[30] Women may be required to fund gun purchases for their clan or made to smuggle ammunition.[31] Women are also used to promote peace through obligatory marriage exchanges between clans, a practice consistent with social norms for some highlands societies, but one that contradicts constitutional assertions of gender equality and is unlawful according to established precedent in PNG.[32]

More recently, women and girls have been targeted for abduction and sexual violence, including gang rape.[33] Community and health workers forced to flee report that there now appear to be few rules of engagement; perpetrators of violence ignore both tribal boundaries and authorities.[34]

FAMILY AND INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE

Domestic violence affects more than two-thirds of women in PNG, where violence is commonly normalized within the family unit.[35] Trauma for immediate and extended survivors of such violence is widespread and intergenerational, with children witnessing firsthand the physical brutalization and emotional abuse of their mothers. While reliable data are limited, physical and sexual abuse of both girls and boys are understood to be pervasive.[36]

In Hela, a male-dominated cash economy tied to the ExxonMobil LNG plant has fed a transactional sex economy and distorted traditional marriage practices, with more men engaging in polygyny as their access to wealth increases.[37] This has resulted in an increase in marital conflict and violence, including between co-wives, as well as a rise in sexually transmitted diseases. As cash incomes have declined with the construction bust, some men have felt their status within the home challenged, and they have resorted to violence to reassert their dominance.[38]

Survivors of family violence are often unable to seek help due to social stigma and the punitive nature of legal responses that, in prosecuting men, may deprive women of their main source of financial support.[39] When a woman seeks safety from intimate partner violence, her family may not take her back, either because the family did not approve of the marriage in the first place or because to do so would require returning a bride price that has long since been spent. In other instances, perpetrators threaten police or community leaders who attempt to offer protection.[40] With few formal safe houses or informal shelters in the homes of local women leaders, many survivors of family violence have no place to go.

In Morobe, while rates of interpersonal violence are lower, male dominance remains a culturally entrenched norm, and both women and men show support for domestic violence as a way of disciplining women in the home. The wider range of social organization by ethnic groups in Morobe and the province's deeper colonial history have enabled some women to own land and establish a degree of economic independence. There is also a strong tradition of women's leadership in the province.[41] Women in Morobe have come together to critique patrilineal land inheritance and the forms of social domination that can accompany it, especially in relation to the distribution of royalties from large resource extraction projects.[42] That said, with the

expansion of extractive economic arrangements in Morobe, an influx of displaced populations, and the growth of settlements, the province is not immune from the dynamics experienced more acutely in Hela.

SORCERY ACCUSATION–RELATED VIOLENCE

Also on the rise in recent years is sorcery accusation–related violence (SARV), which involves perpetrators accusing an individual of practicing sorcery or of being possessed by a "malevolent entity" and using violence against the accused to eliminate the perceived threat.[43] SARV is prevalent across PNG and highest in the highlands provinces. It occurs in both Hela and Morobe, but it is more prevalent in Hela among the remote Hewa communities in the north. Miranda Forsyth and her team of researchers from the Australian National University estimate that six people are killed per month and another 23 suffer injury in PNG because of SARV.[44]

According to the research by Forsyth's team, anyone can be accused of sorcery, and the gender of persons most likely to be accused varies between groups within provinces. The kinds of violence experienced, however, appear to be gendered, with women more likely to be sexually assaulted, tortured, and burned and men more likely to be attacked with weapons such as bush knives (machetes).[45] Through using a SARV incident database and media dataset, the research team found that on average across four hot-spot provinces over a four-and-a-half year period (2016–2020), 57 percent of those who died or were seriously injured were women.[46]

Forsyth likens SARV to a wildfire, steadily growing more out of control. Accusations can gradually escalate from public shaming to physical violence that sometimes leads to murder of the accused. Community members may coalesce around accusations toward a lower-status member and attack, torture, or kill the person they blame for community ills such as an unexplained death. In a country that for decades has seen little investment in public health infrastructure, the preponderance of illnesses go untreated and deaths go unexplained, fueling the rise in sorcery accusations.[47]

The impacts of SARV are not limited to the accused. Shame and psychological harm are experienced by the whole family, and accusations can be intergenerational, extending to the children of the initial victim.[48] However, in areas where victims are connected to a network of protectors, including community leaders, public officials, and local and international activists, violence has been avoided in some instances through a strategy of "networked containment" in which targets can be moved to safety or the community's fears can be dispelled.[49]

Anthropologist Melissa Demian, one of the authors of this report, contends that what is commonly referred to as SARV can often be governed by a logic of vigilantism and propelled by other influences. Drivers include the kinds of outrage at state withdrawal and disinterest in the welfare of local communities that can fuel vigilantism anywhere in the world. In PNG, these drivers also include foreign and homegrown evangelical churches that preach a doctrine of "spiritual warfare" against "Satanic forces at work on Earth." This doctrine appeals to disenfranchised young men—especially those with no prospects for social advancement through education or employment—who may take it to its logical and literal conclusion. Groups of such men self-organize in the style of war parties to confront the purported sources of disorder and threats.[50]

A resident walks past a natural gas rig in Hela Province, Papua New Guinea, on September 18, 2010. In Hela, rising economic inequality tied to the ExxonMobil plant has fueled conflict and dramatically changed gender and sexual relationships. (Photo by Jes Aznar/New York Times)

Barriers to Successful Gender-Based Violence and Peacebuilding Programming

After reviewing secondary literature and conducting expert interviews, the authors synthesized and analyzed the findings through the three lenses of the USIP Gender Inclusive Framework and Theory (GIFT): women, peace, and security; peaceful masculinities; and intersecting identities.[51] The gender analysis revealed some of the key barriers to successful programming.

WOMEN, PEACE, AND SECURITY LENS

The women, peace, and security lens focuses on gender equality, protection and participation, and the political agency of women. It centers on formal levels of women's participation, but given how deeply PNG's institutions are embedded in social relationships, it also prompts the examination of less formal but salient avenues for women's participation in peacebuilding and

community life. Preventing gender-based violence and protecting women and girls are prerequisites for their sustained participation and for adhering to a "do no harm" approach in programming.

Institutional Approaches in a Relational Society Are Severely Limited

In seeking to address violence, international actors have long emphasized rights-based and rule-of-law approaches that aim to build state capacity. But such approaches have limited impact in a country where (1) state institutions barely exist outside of urban centers, (2) local norms and values do not neatly conform to European and North American notions of justice and equity, and (3) society operates through informal and changeable political and social networks rather than formal institutions.

In the last decade, PNG has pushed forward numerous legal reforms and policies to address gender-based violence. For example, in 2016, PNG adopted the National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Gender Based Violence (2016–2025), and in 2020, the legislature established a Special Parliamentary Committee on Gender-Based Violence.[52] Yet broader challenges significantly impede the efficacy of such reforms and policies; for example, women are still chronically undereducated and are rarely represented in politics or in formal economic sectors. Women's political participation on the national and subnational levels in PNG has been historically low. Only eight women have been elected to parliament since PNG's independence.[53] Currently, out of 118 members of parliament, there are only two women, both elected in 2022. Despite quotas and civil society efforts, political representation at the provincial and lower levels is not significantly better. Gender inequality in electoral outcomes is further exacerbated by an electoral system that promotes bribery and vote buying, as both practices severely limit the ability of most female candidates to compete.[54]

With respect to gender-based violence, PNG's policy advances have not translated into effective responses or prevention efforts. Most assistance in support of victims of gender-based violence is only available in urban areas and is incommensurate with the level of need. It is mainly funded by international donors for limited periods of time, while national government and provincial funds are devoted to big-ticket infrastructure projects rather than social services.

A bricolage of customary law, which is enshrined but poorly defined in the country's constitution, coexists with statutory law. When it comes to implementation, however, the coexistence of customary and statutory law is complex and sometimes contradictory.[55] In Hela, among Huli people, acts that would qualify as crimes according to statutory law and require prosecution are addressed through practices of compensation administered by local leaders or through village courts. Criminal cases officially lie outside the jurisdiction of village courts—which administer a combination of basic civil statutes and customary law—but this does not stop these courts from hearing such cases.[56] Deeply influenced by local relations, village courts are highly inconsistent in how they provide recourse for women in abusive relationships.[57]

In Hela, international, national, and faith-based organizations run a small number of victim support services, mobile health clinics, and safe spaces, but these are put in place with limited funding and as part of humanitarian service provision in crisis settings. Médecins Sans Frontières ran a Family Support Center (FSC) in the Tari district hospital in Hela from 2009 to 2016 to treat survivors of severe domestic violence, including many who had sustained injuries

from machetes and axes. The Oil Search Foundation (now the Santos Foundation) took over these services in 2016. Local groups, including the Tari District Women's Association and the Hela Meri Centre, assist IDPs affected by intergroup fighting and provide couples counseling in cases of gender-based violence.

In Morobe's largest urban center, Lae, there is a patchwork of government and nongovernmental social services to support victims of gender-based violence, but these services are constantly in flux and difficult to navigate.[58] They include government-run FSCs, family sexual violence units in police stations to make referrals for cases of family and sexual violence and supply interim protection orders, and a sexual offenses squad to investigate cases of sexual violence.[59] Unfortunately, these services are limited to large urban areas, and there is still little public understanding of them.[60]

In Lae, and occasionally elsewhere in Morobe, the nongovernmental organization Femili PNG provides a single point of contact for survivors of violence to access legal and other support services. It operates in a manner similar to FSCs but with a broader case management remit as well as training programs for other organizations, which are made possible by sustained international donor funding and individual donations. In a sense, Femili PNG has demonstrated what would be possible if FSCs had a comparable level of support from government, donor, or other sources.[61]

SARV, in recent years, has received considerable national and international attention, evidenced by national action plans and the submission of human rights reports to the United Nations. Prevention efforts have largely been made at the legislative and policy levels in PNG, though there have been some media campaigns. Psychosocial and medical support for victims has been uneven, and prevention efforts have been generally ineffective.

After years without funding, in 2022, civil society organizations working on gender-based violence and SARV received some national-level grant funding.[62] Although this is a positive step, the fact that PNG's newly formed national secretariat for gender-based violence is understaffed and underfunded is a reminder of the state's extensive shortcomings and weak commitment.[63] Similarly, PNG has established a National Council of Women to support local women's councils, but the national council is reportedly unresponsive when the local organizations request assistance. The national office has a small budget and few relationships with local organizations in the provinces.[64] In most parts of the country, there is an almost total reliance on international donors and churches to provide responses to gender-based violence and SARV, and the available resources that are spent on these responses far outweigh those directed toward prevention.

The challenge, therefore, is not so much the absence of laws and policies but that laws and policies are weakly implemented due to little material support or genuine political will and do not adequately account for the relational nature of PNG society. Approaches that take an institution-led, state-centric approach and that ignore PNG's fluid, networked society and the localized nature of conflict fail to gain traction time and again.[65]

Efficacious Local Leaders Are Often Overlooked

In the absence of effective or responsive state institutions, local activists and social innovators, many of them women, are driving violence prevention and resolution efforts. They leverage their social networks and insider knowledge to foster sustainable changes and can reach populations that conventionally designed programs often miss. For example, Hela Women for Peace grew organically from a series of women's meetings to become a registered organization focusing on mitigating intercommunal violence.[66] In Morobe, individual leaders work with remote communities to mediate and resolve intercommunal violence. And in the settlements that have grown up around urban areas, smaller and often informal local women's associations organize soup kitchens, children's homework clubs, and self-help groups for widows and abandoned wives; they also offer support to families that may be struggling with violence and other forms of vulnerability such as chronic underemployment and housing insecurity. Local activists and peacebuilders in Morobe run programs that focus on engaging men directly through male behavior change trainings across the province. Through skills development and sensitization around gender- and health-related issues, the trainings have helped participants learn ways to address conflict in their relationships without resorting to violence. Many of these initiatives draw on a range of local conflict resolution mechanisms, practices, customs, and innovations that are available and relevant to them. Such associations and community groups are part of civil society but because of their small, improvised operations, their work flies under the radar.[67]

Accordingly, the international donors that fund much of the work in this area do not "see" these loosely formed community organizations and the "efficacious personalities" behind them and therefore miss out on supporting such impactful local initiatives.[68] Donor partnerships and collaborations are almost exclusively established with registered organizations that have physical offices. And while donors and nongovernmental organizations ask community leaders to contribute information and labor for projects, the same leaders are often passed over for funding in favor of a registered entity that may or may not have the same depth or reach. As a result, local peacebuilding and resilience initiatives can be hamstrung by the most basic of expenses, such as not having sufficient funds for cell phone credit or transportation costs. One community leader recalled needing to solicit private donations from international contacts to pay for cell phone credit to conclude hostage negotiations. Limited funds also curtail the ability of local leaders and groups to connect and learn from each other.[69]

These local initiatives look and behave differently in different parts of the country. Rather than taking on a consistent form at a national scale, they are connected through multiple networks at multiple scales. They differ in shape from province to province, ward to ward, and one day to the next, making these initiatives and the shifting social reality underpinning them difficult to map. The challenge for donors is finding the local leaders behind these initiatives and effectively working with them.

Women's Empowerment Can Trigger Backlashes

Improvements in women's economic, political, or social status threaten male dominance and can place women at risk of further violence. Forsyth and others note that "whereas international rights-based approaches treat women as individuals whose rights can be separated from the community, this is challenging in the PNG context where women are deeply embedded within

their social settings."[70] Some interventions risk doing more harm than good.[71] Research suggests that men may regard rights-based interventions as a direct challenge to their authority and accordingly attempt to undermine them.[72]

Women may also find a rights-based framing inappropriately individualistic for their social contexts and experiences. These framings may incur physical, social, and economic risks for women if they are perceived as defying family, religious, or cultural norms. Fear of violence, abandonment, and exclusion can prevent women from fully participating in both local and donor-led initiatives that encourage their assertion of political agency.[73] Women are more likely to become politically active and invested when they have the support of their families and wider communities. Programs that promote advancement for women are more sustainable when men are working in tandem or in creative, culturally attuned ways of leading in partnership with women.

Extensive but Siloed Programming Leads to Dead Ends

Some community-level programs with a peacebuilding focus have successfully mediated intercommunal conflict in Hela and changed perpetrator attitudes in Morobe. But such programming is not sustainably funded or designed, often constitutes one-off endeavors, and is poorly known by anyone beyond the immediate circle of involved actors. Given the entrenched economic, political, and social drivers of conflict in PNG, a broad, interconnected movement for change from all sectors is required, yet facilitation of such an approach has been limited. Rare instances of exchange or information sharing among activists within the same region or between regions has helped to disseminate effective strategies for peacebuilding and to foster networks of peacebuilders.[74] These exchanges need to happen more frequently and strategically. It should not be assumed that all the "efficacious personalities" know each other.

PEACEFUL MASCULINITIES LENS

The GIFT's second lens examines the normalization of male violence and how violent expressions of male identity are learned and perpetuated. Masculinity encompasses the behaviors, attitudes, and values that societies expect of men and boys. Men constitute most of the combatants during conflict and also perpetrate most of the violence in times of peace. The peaceful masculinities lens shifts the focus from "the idea of men as inevitable perpetrators of violence to an understanding that masculinities are socially constructed and can be shaped around peace."[75] This approach also acknowledges that violence and conflict—including gender-based violence— have long-term impacts on men and boys that need to be addressed given the detrimental implications for the whole society.

Patriarchal Norms and Recent Drivers of Conflict Shape Violent Masculinities

The patriarchal organization of society in PNG, as elsewhere in the world, creates spheres of dominance and influence, with men as the ultimate authority in both the public and private domains. Only 1 percent of women in PNG report being the main decision-makers within their home.[76] In both Hela and Morobe, violence is widely normalized within the family unit and is also accepted beyond the family. Particularly in Hela, women's social value derives from their economic and reproductive contributions to their own clan and their husband's clan and from their

Landowners seeking money promised from a government deal with ExxonMobil gathered outside the Department of Commerce and Industry in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea, on September 14, 2010. Sharpened perceptions of poverty and deprivation fuel an already volatile social environment. (Photo by Jes Aznar/New York Times)

obedience to male family members; domestic violence is endorsed by both men and women to discipline women who "fail" to conform to these ideas of virtuous womanhood.[77]

Over the last decade, more men have embraced guns as a new form of power in some parts of PNG, usurping or transforming the authority of elders and rendering existing constructions of masculinity more violent.[78] Underemployed young men unmoored from older forms of group solidarity have embraced a nihilistic masculine identity that glorifies vigilante violence and a culture of guns, substance abuse, and transactional sex. Some HIV-positive youth who were cast out from their communities have taken up violence out of a sense of despair and meaninglessness.[79] Research has shown that young men who are alienated from traditional leaders or lack access to grievance-resolution mechanisms they trust are more likely to engage in violence.[80]

Both men and women live out their gendered socialization around violence. The complementarity of gendered activities as they are conceived in many Papua New Guinean societies extends to warfare and other forms of violence. With respect to intercommunal violence, for example, women may support their male kin by engaging in rituals that energize men to retaliate, join camps preparing for a confrontation, provide forms of "ground support" or backup for the fighters, or occasionally be combatants themselves. They do so in fulfillment of their social obligations as good wives and kinswomen.[81]

The Role of Churches Is Double-Edged

PNG is 97 percent Christian and has historically embraced a wide variety of Christian denominations. The role of churches cannot be reduced to a single narrative; churches are among the most significant institutional influences, as they can both support development initiatives and fuel conflict and gender inequality.[82]

In some cases, churches have provided community services such as education and primary health care that the PNG government has been unable to supply. In Morobe, grassroots mutual aid groups, many with church affiliations led by women and youth, self-organize around a range of social and economic issues.[83] In the absence of formal structures, such organizations hold the community together. Moreover, one can find Protestant and Catholic congregations cooperating on community projects—a scenario difficult to imagine in many parts of the world. Churches have also played a key role in conflict resolution, advocating for peaceful households, providing counseling, and even taking punitive measures against men who have abused their wives.[84]

But in other cases, churches have directly and indirectly promoted inequitable gender norms and male violence. Researchers have documented the complex relationship between the Pentecostal doctrine of "spiritual warfare"—commonly preached by churches affiliated with Australian and US-based ministries—and its literal adoption by gangs of (almost exclusively) young, male vigilantes to justify the pursuit of sorcery accusations and violence related to these in their communities.[85]

Intergenerational Trauma Perpetuates Violence

Research worldwide has shown that childhood trauma increases the likelihood of male children perpetrating intimate partner violence as adults and of female children experiencing violence as adults. Children who witness violence against a caregiver are more likely to perpetrate violence as adults than those who do not.[86] This is evidenced by a study on intergenerational trauma in the Pacific and more generally by the studies conducted by the applied research organization Equimundo: Center for Masculinities and Social Justice, which focused on breaking the cycle of intergenerational violence, with particular attention to masculine norms.[87] It is within the family unit where men commit various overlapping forms of violence and exert coercive control against household members and where gender expectations, roles, and behavior are communicated and enforced through the threat of harm. This includes threats against women's independent voting, political participation, and other forms of activity outside the home.

Yet peaceful masculinities, often obscured by the prevalence of male violence, are an important feature of some PNG societies. That men sometimes accompany women to peacebuilding trainings is indicative of this manifestation. Historically in many parts of PNG, older men passed on knowledge related to life skills and men's constructive roles in the household and community to younger men in a "men's house."[88] Programs that help men recall and affirm these traditional ways can be important resources with greater legitimacy and meaning than those imported from outside. However, as interventions build on this positive foundation, it is important to recognize that further promoting peaceful masculinities requires addressing the pervasiveness of male violence and more recent drivers of conflict. It requires grappling with, for example, how growing

economic inequality and the appeal, particularly to youth, of a "modern" lifestyle that lies beyond reach can influence constructions of male identity and the connection to violence.

INTERSECTING IDENTITIES LENS

The GIFT's third analytical lens focuses on intersecting identities. Understanding how gender interacts with other structures of inequality and social markers—such as age, education, economic status, marital status, residence, and sexual orientation—allows for more nuanced analysis of vulnerabilities to violence and potential contributions to its prevention, mitigation, and resolution.

The Predicament of Youth Is Not Being Adequately Addressed

It is estimated that more than 60 percent of PNG's population is under the age of 25 and that, according to the UN Population Fund, these children and youth are exposed to the highest rates of violence in the East Asia and Pacific Region.[89] As elsewhere in the world, PNG's young people are grappling with dramatic economic, climate, and sociocultural changes: they are experiencing growing disparities in wealth and access to resources, accompanied by increasing awareness through social media of different ways of living that appear to be closed off to all but the country's elites. At the same time, many of PNG's youth are disconnected from traditional and institutional sources of protection and guidance, which fuels and increases their vulnerability to increasingly brutal and gendered forms of violence in their homes and communities.

The involvement of male youth in expressions of violence from a young age is related to their disenfranchisement from economic opportunities and political power, violent experiences of childhood trauma, and the breakdown and corruption of traditional and institutional sources of protection and guidance. In Hela and Morobe, as in many parts of the country, norms that once might have protected children and held harmful actions in check have unraveled to varying degrees, while other narratives such as the prosperity gospel (which holds that religious devotion can overcome poverty) and the doctrine of spiritual warfare fill the vacuum.[90] For many, access to guns, cash, alcohol, and drugs has heightened susceptibility to perpetrating and experiencing violence.

Girls, too, face the inequities and vulnerabilities described, compounded by gender-based disadvantages in institutions that are meant to protect and serve them. Students who become pregnant are almost universally excluded from formal education, either because their schools expel them (a holdover from colonial-era education policies) or because their families remove them because being a student and being a mother are regarded as different, and incompatible, paths to adulthood. Often correlated with girls' low school enrollment, child marriage is also a problem. Girls removed from school due to pregnancy may be coerced into marriages they would not otherwise have chosen. Recent increases in bride prices have additionally led to increased rates of child marriage as families seek to increase income and reduce the expense of a daughter's upkeep. Higher bride prices also deter families from taking back daughters seeking safety from violent relationships because repayment is more costly.[91] Trafficking of girls, often facilitated by their own families, is also a growing problem.[92]

Opportunities and Options for Future Programming

The barriers and limitations identified in the GIFT analysis point to several promising areas for programming and action that, together with sustained government and institutional engagement, offer a constructive path forward.

Engage with and support efficacious local leaders who are actively working to resolve or prevent intersecting forms of violence in families and neighborhoods. Microlevel interventions led by such actors are the most meaningful to those experiencing violence and conflict. In the PNG context, where the state's authority is attenuated or entirely absent outside of metropolitan centers, women's networks and individual women actors—along with male partners and allies that include individuals and networks within state institutions—are the backbone of positive change.[93] Church leaders and related organizations are also particularly crucial to engage, given their extensive involvement in intervention efforts and their strong credibility with a wide segment of PNG society. Change instigated by local actors may be incremental in nature, but it is more likely, if supported, to be sustainable and have a ripple effect across communities. This is especially the case if the silos isolating their efforts can be overcome through helping them connect with each other.

Build, support, and scale out networks of local leaders, community groups, and organizations. Most actors identified in this report as key allies in programming are disconnected from one another by geography, lack of resources, inadequate transportation, and limited internet access. Creating opportunities for these actors to exchange ideas, learn from each other, and work together is important in order to build a foundation for broadening the reach and sustainability of homegrown initiatives. Given the logistical and infrastructure challenges in PNG, scaling up may not always be possible, but even the creation of localized, denser networks working in coordination can help contain and mitigate conflict. "Networked containment," which has been successful in decreasing instances of SARV, may serve as a broader principle that emphasizes the importance of connecting actors from diverse sectors when addressing violence.

Apply creative funding models to increase opportunities for community leaders, many of whom are women, and community groups to access them. Some actors do not have the organizational structures or current capacity to fulfill international donors' auditing and reporting requirements. Funding that does not come with rigid stipulations or requirements is critically needed. These actors need micro-funding (core funding) and the flexibility to meet basic operational costs such as transportation and telecommunications. Donors could initiate new and iterative approaches to meeting the needs of existing changemakers in the country rather than the standard, likely less-than-effective, top-down approaches.

Invest in long-term relationships and sustainable approaches to engagement. PNG's unique cultural diversity and its reliance on personal networks mean that access and influence depend on developing genuine partnerships and sustained relationships and building on the assets of existing networks and systems. International donors must avoid a model of "temporary

attention," where they initiate projects and then walk away after a few years of engagement. Such approaches continue to fail, in part because expectations that PNG government agencies will continue these projects are rarely if ever realized. Effective programming requires investment in long-term relationships to ensure that the right actors are involved in project design, projects are iteratively designed and respond to changes in context, and projects meet the needs identified by the affected communities themselves.

Design empowerment strategies with a whole-of-community approach in mind in order to address violence and inequality in ways that may attract broad support rather than potentially cause division and harm. To address intersecting forms of violence and to do no harm, programming needs to engage the families and communities in which individual women are embedded. Similarly, the political empowerment of women cannot happen outside of this networked context, and it is essential that any models designed for women's empowerment should include men.

Provide alternatives to violent masculinities by working directly with men and boys to prevent violence, practice positive parenting, and address gender inequalities in their families and communities. In addition, it is important to provide safe spaces, mentorship, culturally attuned trainings, and connections with like-minded community members. It is necessary to engage perpetrators or those at risk of future perpetration with genuine acknowledgment that their actions may be informed by a wide variety of rationales drawing upon their social contexts.[94] To increase legitimacy around interventions, seek programming that grounds messages of peaceful gender relations in local values of relational interdependence.[95] Also, given the importance of Christianity in PNG, faith-based programs—such as those designed and implemented in other places by global or regional organizations such as Tearfund, World Vision, and Sonke Gender Justice—could be useful entry points.[96]

Examples of violence prevention programming are limited, but some notable efforts to prevent domestic violence include parenting programs and behavior change training for male perpetrators. Specific to PNG and with a track record of success are locally led efforts such as USIP Program Manager Zuabe Tinning's "Men's Behavior Change" initiatives. There is great potential to build, learn from, and connect such efforts within and across provinces, as well as to share best practices from other programs conducted internationally. For example, Living Peace Institute's trauma-informed work in Kivu, Democratic Republic of the Congo, focuses on transforming harmful gender norms and offering psychosocial support to men in conflict settings, and it has been successful in positively changing the relationships between men and women.[97] Equimundo, in partnership with Living Peace Institute, has also developed resources and programming in different parts of the world that address male violence through a trauma-informed and conflict-sensitive lens.[98]

Invest in programs that involve and support young people. Many young men and women have limited education and employment opportunities and are increasingly disconnected from positive traditional sources of guidance. Programming is needed to help them identify the cultural strengths that promote peaceful gender relations and to help them access skills, jobs, and other opportunities that will enable their constructive engagement in PNG's changing society. Programs that enable young mothers to continue their education would help both young women and their

families to reap the economic and social benefits of gaining knowledge and skills and would also enhance their ability to avoid or remove themselves from harmful relationships safely.

Any interventions in these spaces should take into consideration that the intersection of climate change, conflict, and gender inequality will be an important nexus for the next generation. This is a promising focus for youth empowerment and peacebuilding efforts, particularly in combination with livelihood and skills training efforts.

Fund programs and initiatives that address trauma for children, youth, and adults. Given the high levels of violence in Hela and Morobe, trauma is widespread. Initiatives that address this violence must therefore be complemented by trauma-informed and conflict-sensitive programming. Programs that focus on understanding the intergenerational impacts of trauma and providing psychosocial support are particularly important for ending the cycle of violence. Valuable insights can be drawn from survivor-centered programs responding to conflict-related sexual violence that address individual and community trauma, including for male and LGBTQI survivors.[99] Mental health and psychosocial support for young boys who have experienced violence or witnessed violence in the home and wider community is particularly critical to breaking the cycle of intergenerational violence.

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To effect lasting change, peacebuilding programs must be attentive to the political economy and sociocultural contexts in PNG and how they shape gender and conflict dynamics. They must also actively engage promising local initiatives led by efficacious actors. While these actors operate differently in diverse parts of PNG and are connected through multiple networks at various scales, difficulties in mapping and working with them are not reasons for funders to avoid doing so. Moreover, programs should encourage more formal institutions, including government agencies, to integrate the learning and best practices of these actors.

To move beyond short-lived and piecemeal interventions funded by outside organizations and agencies requires strengthening traditional, new, and hybrid means to resolve conflict without violence, particularly for men. Effectively engaging and building the capacity of women and youth to support this strengthening effort is critical, but ensuring their protection while they participate is paramount. There is much more to learn about whole-of-community and trauma-informed approaches from efficacious actors in PNG, as well as from promising initiatives elsewhere in the world.

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