



Culture, Health & Sexuality

An International Journal for Research, Intervention and Care

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/tchs20>

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To cite this article: Nayahamui Michelle Rooney, Miranda Forsyth, Joshua Goa, Dunstan Lawihin & Dora Kuir-Ayius (2022): Thinking incrementally about policy interventions on intimate partner violence in Papua New Guinea: understanding 'popcorn' and 'blanket', Culture, Health & Sexuality, DOI: [10.1080/13691058.2022.2103736](https://doi.org/10.1080/13691058.2022.2103736)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691058.2022.2103736>



Published online: 29 Jul 2022.



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Thinking incrementally about policy interventions on intimate partner violence in Papua New Guinea: understanding 'popcorn' and 'blanket'

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ABSTRACT

Papua New Guinea (PNG) has introduced laws and policies aimed at protecting women from intimate partner violence. This article examines how men who live in Lae, PNG, have made sense of and reacted to these laws and policies. Two evocative metaphors – 'popcorn' and 'blanket' – emerge from our research. For 'popcorn', we see how the reforms created a chain reaction similar to that when popcorn is made. Using this metaphor, we analyse men's responses to the reforms, which range from a perceived threat to their cultural dominance, to fears about their personal problems being made public, to practical limits of the reforms. For 'blanket', we show how laws and policies can act like a blanket to smother men's agency in resolving violence and conflict within their homes and communities. The blanket metaphor further highlights how women's ability to seek support under the new laws are constrained by PNG's male dominated society. Adopting the idea that productive change is sometimes incremental, we argue that reforms focused on creating paradigmatic change through legislation and state policies should not occur at the expense of open-mindedness to partial and incomplete local innovations in reducing intimate partner violence.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 17 February 2022
Accepted 16 July 2022

KEYWORDS

Intimate Partner Violence (IPV); Papua New Guinea (PNG); masculinity; restorative justice

Introduction

As in many other countries, Papua New Guinea (PNG) has unacceptably high levels of intimate partner violence.¹ Concern about this problem has led to intense political, policy and scholarly debate, with a range of domestic and international organisations advocating for change and the stronger enforcement of new laws and policies that were introduced to address this problem. Generally, the most prominent calls have been for what we conceptualise here as 'paradigmatic reform'. By this, we refer to an approach that frames addressing intimate partner violence as requiring the

overturning of patriarchy or the eradication of the gender inequality seen to underly it. Champions of this approach often see a central role for the formal criminal justice system in criminalising and punishing men, and promoting policies that adopt a zero tolerance approach to all forms of intimate partner violence.

Paradigmatic reform can be contrasted with another form of change, namely that which is incremental. Incremental change involves modest reforms, involving available spaces in which innovative responses may catalyse behavioural shifts through cumulative and multi-layered change. Incremental change is often disjointed, inconsistent and even chaotic, driven through evolutionary innovation and experimentation (Gabel 2017, 12). Advocates of a paradigmatic approach are often suspicious of reliance upon incremental change, concerned it is merely fleeting, localised and stabilising of the status quo by legitimating male dominance - thereby undermining the potential for change. This distrust has led to a tendency by academics and practitioners to police debates about the types of change needed in ways we contend are unhelpful, principally because they shut down much-needed space for dialogue and experimentation.

We argue that consideration of incremental change is important for two main reasons. First, paradigmatic change is often very hard to achieve. New laws and policies aimed at protecting women against intimate partner violence in PNG have led to some improvements for the very small proportion of women who have been able to pursue these legal avenues to resolve violence in their relationships (Putt and Kanan 2021; Putt and Dinnen 2020). However, for the most part, the results have not been transformative in dismantling the societal norms that underly masculine violence. A parliamentary inquiry into Gender Based Violence in 2021 found that 15,444 cases of domestic violence were reported but only 250 people were prosecuted, with fewer than 100 people convicted. Senior officials told the inquiry that the police could not keep women and children safe (Special Parliamentary Committee on Gender-Based Violence 2021). Court sentences in cases involving sexual and gendered violence tend to be biased against women, and to reinforce cultural norms, which work to mitigate against perpetrators' responsibilities in the violence. Too often this results in reduced or suspended sentences and lack of active accountability (Singh et al. 2018).

Paradigmatic reform, often implemented through programmes driven largely by outsiders, also tends to depend upon local institutions that themselves take a long time to change. Globally, as scholars such as Hoyle and Sanders (2000, 27) and Goodmark (2018, 167) discuss, evidence suggests that policies that emphasise formal court processes aimed at the criminalisation and incarceration of perpetrators have limited efficacy in reducing violence against women. In many instances, such policies may reinforce violence because men feel their social power and domination threatened, or may lead to over-incarceration (Coker 2016; Goodmark 2018; Kim 2019). Furthermore, large-scale structural reforms can delay or miss more easily accessed localised interventions.

The second reason for taking incremental change more seriously is that although sometimes incremental change is stabilising and supports the status quo, at other times it can be cumulative and sometimes even exponential, making it potentially - although not necessarily - transformative. Maximising this potential requires adopting a different conceptual framework to that frequently used by intimate partner violence

programmes. The current dominant approach is characterised by linear thinking, where goals are assumed to be achieved through the application of best practices or model legislation adopted from other countries. We propose instead a complex systems framing that recognises social systems as non-linear and contingent. Change in one area can lead to unpredictable consequences in another (Sterman 2006), while sustained overall change to the system is an emergent process that evolves through the dynamics of the social processes involved. Complex systems are often characterised by feedback loops that can amplify the impact of changes over time, meaning that small changes can become significant as they develop in cumulative ways. Complexity scholars such as Levin et al. (2012) stress the need to identify 'path dependent policy interventions' that can have transformative impact over time.

Because human social systems are unpredictable, it is not possible to know whether paradigmatic change will work as expected. Equally, we cannot know whether incremental changes will stabilise the status quo or cumulatively lead to change. Given this uncertainty, this paper aims to open debate in the academy and policy and practice communities about the different options available, the advantages and disadvantages of each, and the possible combinations of approaches that can be trialled. As the impacts of incremental or paradigmatic change interventions are context specific, their efficacy needs to be judged over time. This requires being attentive to the emergent impacts, and to actively develop feedback mechanisms to allow policymakers and donors to respond flexibly.

In this article, we explore the possibility of considering incremental change through empirical evidence gathered in Lae, PNG, on men's perspectives about intimate partner violence and associated laws and policies. Scholarship on men's perspectives on intimate partner violence highlights how masculine norms vary across different contexts. Thus, it is important to understand how masculine norms shape the societal transformations required to alleviate gender-based violence (Eves 2009; Lusby 2018; Schuler et al. 2018; Jewkes, Flood, and Lang 2015; Kelly-Hanku et al. 2016; Gibbs 2016; Dworkin et al. 2012; Sommer, Likindikoki, and Kaaya 2013). In the PNG context, it is important to understand how men influence the possibilities for their families to avoid or repair violence through processes embedded in family relational ties, and conflict resolution mechanisms that already exist in communities, such as those discussed by Craig and Porter (2018).

Relational approaches resonate with restorative justice approaches that enable healing. First raised by Braithwaite and Daly (1994), the use of restorative justice in relation to domestic and sexual violence was initially strongly resisted, largely as it did not involve excluding the perspectives of male perpetrators of violence (see Stubbs 2002). Today, numerous scholars are arguing for its inclusion as an option for survivors of intimate partner violence and their families (see, for example, Coker 2016; Goodmark 2018; Mills et al. 2019).

Background: the context of intimate partner violence initiatives in PNG

PNG's rate of violence against women is at national epidemic levels. Around two thirds of PNG women have experienced some form of violence in their lifetime (GOPNG 2016). In some areas, 80 percent of men admit to committing physical and/or sexual

violence against their partners (Human Rights Watch 2015, para 3). In response to international pressure and growing national agreement on the need for action, the PNG government, with support from development partners, has introduced targeted policies to address intimate partner violence over the past decade. Interventions have included the establishment of Family Support Centres at hospitals, dedicated Family and Sexual Violence Units (FSVU) at select police stations, and a number of safe houses. The PNG Government passed a Family Protection Act in 2013, and a Child Protection Act in 2015 (the *Lukautim Pikinini Act 2015*). In 2016, a National Strategy for Preventing and Responding to Gender Violence in PNG was approved (GOPNG 2016). Notably, these interventions focus largely on supporting women.

Lae has one of the highest homicide rates in the world and a high prevalence of intimate partner violence (Lakhani and Willman 2014; Lokuge et al. 2016). One response to this situation has been to establish a case management centre, Femili PNG, in 2013 (Howes, Ilave, and Planna 2017). Lae's Police FSVU was established in 2016. Growing advocacy, community outreach and awareness conducted by organisations like Femili PNG have created avenues for transformative conversations with wider community involvement than previously. The Family Support Centre at Lae's hospital includes counselling support that can be accessed post-treatment if or when emergency room staff determine the matter has involved intimate partner or other forms of gendered violence. The churches provide another important source of support for families, in terms of counselling through networks of church run schools, community outreach involving mediation, the provision of safe venues, education and refuge.

These interventions have led to some improvements in Lae. More women are utilising the court system (Putt et al. 2019), while some schools are innovating ways to support students impacted by violence in their homes (Rooney et al. 2019).

Yet, most women continue to face barriers that prevent them from pursuing formal legal resolutions to intimate partner violence. This includes fear of the violence worsening, especially given their lack of confidence in the legal system, and the impact on their families if their partner is jailed, leading to loss of income and household support. An important factor in supporting women to overcome these barriers and driving some improvements, has been stable police leadership, the introduction of community policing, a toll-free emergency number and a Facebook page. Although there are capacity limitations within the police to effectively respond to all calls related to intimate partner violence, these innovations by the police play a vital role in triaging women's complaints at the Family Sexual Violence Units and referring women to the various options available (Forsyth and Hukula 2019; Rooney et al. 2018).

This changing policy context unfolds within PNG's plural legal system, in which customary law is officially embedded in the Constitution. Parallel to the formal legal system is a diverse range of localised approaches to resolving community disputes (Craig and Porter 2018; Dinnen 2010). Urban communities in PNG are experiencing rapid social change, including intermarriage between members of different ethnic groups (over 800 different language groups exist in PNG), and overlaps and contradictions between church, traditional and modern state norms and values (Hukula 2019; Lusby 2018). This mixed socio-legal setting inherently contains contradictions between

customary norms on the one hand and notions of human rights and gender equality on the other (Jessep 2010).

Methods

Our research sought to understand community views about the evolving laws and policy landscape on intimate partner violence in PNG. The study this paper draws upon was approved by the ANU Human Research Ethics Committee, and the Government of PNG Medical Research Advisory Committee. Informed by Ellsberg and Heise (2005), to minimise potential emotional or physical harm to research participants and members of the research team that may be caused from participating in the study, we worked with the church community in Lae to recruit research participants and held interviews on church premises. Femili PNG, the local case management centre noted above, provided a referral pathway for any research participant needing support. Our interdisciplinary team comprised four women and two men who work across anthropology, law, social work, communications, and development studies. Two research team members are based in an Australian university and four in PNG universities; five of the six researchers were PNG nationals.

Interviews were conducted with men in 2019 in four focus group meetings conducted in church premises in different city locations. Each focus group meeting lasted one to two hours and included between 10 to 15 male participants. One-on-one in-depth semi-structured interviews were also conducted with fifteen men. Most participants lived in informal settlement communities and in contexts of precarity and violence. Many had no guaranteed form of income, were affected by inter-generational trauma, and lacked the ability to control their lives. To protect people's identities pseudonyms are used throughout the paper.

Findings

Our data analysis took place in the course of seminars, discussions and workshops in Lae, Port Moresby, and Canberra. We frame the themes that emerged from our research around three broad questions: how do men explain violence; how do men respond to intimate partner violence; and what are men's perceptions about services and laws addressing intimate partner violence? Here, we present men's viewpoints in order to aid understanding and form the empirical basis for our analysis in the discussion section. We are not seeking to legitimate their perspectives.

How do men explain violence?

To encourage discussion about social and cultural norms, men were asked what they thought were the reasons for intimate partner violence experienced in their families and communities.

Many explanations were provided for violence, related to anger stemming from a woman 'nagging' because the man was out late or had misused the family money on gambling, alcohol, or extramarital affairs. Other reasons included disobedience by a

wife, or accusations she had gambled with money her husband had given her, or had neglected her household duties.

One participant referred to a common trope in contemporary urban PNG society—that when women *pairap olsem pop kon* (make noise like popcorn, or nag), this can cause disharmony and trigger an angry, and often violent, response from men. We found the metaphor ‘popcorn’ to be evocative also of the disruption arising from women increasingly challenging traditional roles and social and cultural norms about how they should behave in relation to men.

Women in PNG are often morally and socially valued as subservient and nurturing providers of domestic labour, with expectations of being generous both outwardly towards society, and inwardly to the man’s family and friends, and considerate of his personal freedom and time. When these gendered assumptions about behaviour break down through social change, or are challenged directly by women, this is framed in terms of women not conforming to traditional roles and social order. Usually, this expectation of women’s behaviour is not accompanied by men reflecting on how their own behaviour and attitudes have led women to speak up. One man we interviewed was explicit about this, stating: ‘[when] we [men] observe that the woman’s character does not meet the expectations of our clan to pay the bride price, for example, to be generous and share things. If we see that she does not meet expectations like this, then I beat her. We must adhere to my people’s and clan’s ways’.

Men’s sense of entitlement to sex was another explanation for violence against women. One respondent stated:

One reason that causes us men to be angry is related to sex. When we fathers realise that I won’t be able to use her tonight, then I start to look around. I go out and when I return drunk, I want to use her [to have sex] and then this is a reason why we men may fight with women. I see sexual relationships between us men and women as a very important thing that causes arguments within families. (Mark, Focus group 1)

Some men noted that their violence was related to their own denial of their misbehaviour in the relationship - rather than accepting their behaviour as wrong, they would defend it as a social or cultural norm or entitlement. Wrong behaviour was often described in terms of a man’s drunkenness, gambling, womanising, being sexually jealous or suspicious that his partner was having an affair with another man, or generally neglecting his domestic responsibilities. Such behaviour often left the family, especially his wife, in financial hardship and caused stress in the home. A drunk man could cause havoc at home and beat up his partner, especially if she complained about his behaviour. The following statement by Tom highlights how some men view culture as entitling them to behave this way and also how men used violence to defend this sense of cultural entitlement,

One big observation I have made is that many times within our community when a man is drunk or socialising [gambling, womanising, neglecting his domestic duties], his wife comes and says to him, ‘Oh papa are you thinking?’ she will be asking about issues to do with the home. The man, in order to protect himself, he then beats her. He tells her to shut her mouth and calls her a rubbish woman and beats her up. Many times, we men try to protect ourselves from the things we ourselves are doing in terms of the some of the bad things we have done. This leads to fights. Sometimes we have not done anything wrong, or we might have done something wrong, but just because we want to

protect ourselves based on our culture such as we are the man, and I should be above. 'Who are you woman to come and speak to me?'. That's why fights occur (Tom, Focus group 3).

Some men explained that PNG's social and cultural norms emphasise the dominance of men as heads of the home, as leaders, and as landowners. These social and cultural norms compelled and entitled them to perpetrate violence against their partners when they perceived that their dominance was threatened.

Acting violently is some men's way of asserting authority publicly, so the broader community knows that the man is in control of his domestic affairs. As Henry stated:

Previously when my wife and I used to fight I would threaten people who tried to help her. The community and our family members were scared to help her. Because of our – men's – superiority, we think, 'I am the *bossman*', or 'I am the boss' or, 'I am a man'. (Henry, Focus group 3)

For some men, gains in women's freedoms, supported by laws, were connected to broader social transformations, and needed to be brought back into conformity with customary forms of gendered relations. Intimate partner violence was framed as a normal part of married life, and beating a woman was used to 'teach' her, 'punish' her, or to maintain his dominance. For example, a 64-year-old man explained the pressure he had faced from other men to beat his wife because she was verbally abusive and neglectful of her domestic duties. At one point, his adult son threatened to beat his wife (the son's mother) to 'bring her under control'. His wife's brother advised him that, 'if she behaves this way, you need to beat her. If you beat her, she will change. It is because men beat their wives that their wives change'. He had resisted these pressures, describing himself as peaceful and non-violent.

How do men respond to intimate partner violence?

Understanding how men handled conflict and disagreement in intimate relationships is important. Men reflected on both the opportunities and the limitations of non-legal forms of seeking recourse for marital violence.

Against the social and cultural normative canvas within which men explain their dominance over women, we use the term 'strategies of non-violent dominance' to refer to the multiple pathways men have pursued to address intimate partner violence. 'Strategies of non-violent dominance' are approaches to conflict within marriage and relationships premised on the man's sense of dominance, but which do not involve physical violence. They also speak to the fear of 'popcorn', or loss of control that can arise when private matters become public. For example, Graham explained how he walked away when arguments between himself and his wife get heated,

I leave the house and go and visit my family or friends and give her time. After two or three hours I return and then we speak and address the issue. I explain to her that, 'when you nag or pop corn too much and you are angry then we will argue and fight' (*taim yu pairap tumas o yu pop kon tumas and yu kros then we will kros na pait*). My solution is to leave (Graham, Focus group 2).

Men in this study spoke about keeping family matters in the private sphere of their homes, because they feared appearing weak if outside parties stepped in to resolve their family conflict. Some participants framed their traditional relationships with women through the related lens of complementarity between men and women's roles in relationships such that men needed to prevent violence or restore harmony after violence. One strategy most men highlighted was holding regular family meetings to provide opportunities to resolve potentially contentious matters before they escalated. In pursuit of this, men emphasised improving communication and understanding between partners as important elements for preventing violence.

Men also spoke about various ways of making peace after violence. One man spoke about the customary approach of mediating conflict, noting that it is a man's responsibility to lead in family meetings and make peace and amends with the whole family by preparing a meal to share. Some men also noted their responsibility to speak with their children about the conflict, to ensure they were not negatively impacted by it.

Overall, men's strategies reflected their desire to steward the peaceful resolution of family conflicts within the privacy of their homes. As the following statement by Sam suggests, this resonated with the narrative of complementary roles:

We fathers are the head of the house. We look after the house. When we don't have the authority as father of the house and we take advantage of this and we interpret being the head of the house as being the boss, boss, boss. No! We must listen to our wives. When they speak, we must sit peacefully and speak peacefully with them and then we will see our marriages will be good. (Sam, Focus group 1)

As Henry highlighted, this way of resolving domestic violence was also related to tradition:

Our customs also protect us. In my custom, my wife is forbidden from leaving my home and going away when she is unhappy. If she is cross with me and she leaves my home, then she is enabling me to say, 'You can go so I can get rid of you'. So, you must prevent your wife after you have fought from leaving your home and going to her family. If she goes and stays with her family, then in my custom, if she wants to come back to the children and I, then we have to prepare food for an exchange between families. So, if we argue it is our argument. You must stay with me and we sort it out and we stay with each other in our home. (Henry, Focus group 3)

This quote demonstrates the high importance men place on the public image of having authority and being in control.

While the desire to resolve relationship problems within the home seemed a powerful motivator for many men to deploy strategies of non-violent dominance, others noted they were responding to actual or potential family and community pressure. They reflected on how broader relationships could be jeopardised by physical violence. Given the close living and diversity of ethnic groups living in settlements, there is a heightened consciousness of the potential for intimate partner violence to trigger large-scale violence within communities if it is viewed as involving members of different ethnic or social groups. Social factors, such as community pressure and relational ties, play an important role in individual and community mechanisms to prevent violence or heal its effects.

What are men's perceptions about services and laws addressing intimate partner violence?

This question aimed at ascertaining men's perceptions about how new policies and laws changed the ways they used or viewed violence in their relationships. Men's responses suggested a complex mix of perspectives, with multiple dimensions.

One effect of the amplification of women's rights and voices is that men view the laws as 'belonging' to women and fear the potential threat of the laws exploding their personal problems in unpredictable ways. There was a keen sense of not knowing how the laws will change women's behaviour, and this created fear of potential consequences. One man stated the laws had

given strength to women to do things. Like things that have happened to me, these laws have enabled her to leave me and go and marry another man. The law means that we cannot beat women and they have all the freedom to do whatever they want. We men too we need some consideration. The Government needs to strengthen some laws to protect men as well so that men are also strong. (Peter, Individual interviewee)

Thus, the introduced laws are seen to empower and protect women against men's violent behaviour, but also to undermine men's power. One interviewee who was asked what he did when he found out his wife was having an affair said, 'I wanted to beat her. But when the law was introduced, I just stopped'.

Men also noted that sometimes this empowerment can worsen the woman's predicament by pushing the man to the periphery of society (triggering further violence), or into the legal system (and possibly imprisonment), or by threatening the family's stability. Reflecting on the tensions between the different value systems, Theo said:

When these laws did not exist, we had good family relationships between men and women because it followed custom and there was respect. As a man, I am the head of the family, so whatever decisions I made were in the interests of the family, the family abides my decisions. But now because of the laws of gender equity, the woman thinks she has rights to go over my authority as the man. I think other men will observe our relationship and think maybe this man is a woman and that woman is a man. This leads to arguments where the woman has no respect because she says, 'No. The law says there is gender equity so I can do whatever I like'. We lose unity in the family because the woman says she is boss and the man also says he is the boss. So, this creates conflict in families and arguments arise. (Theo, Focus group 1).

The new laws and policies may have empowered women to push back against men's power to perpetrate intimate partner violence, but with limited state capacity to enforce them, they may trigger further violence, while failing to resolve the underlying causes of intimate partner violence.

Men also feared that a legal response may lead to loss of control and unintended negative repercussions. One man, Ben, reflected that:

There is a lot of violence that occurs in families and among our youth. When we try to resolve these matters, the law and order actors rush in and we hastily charge people so the person is liable for his behaviour. But in my view our law is not effective. We need to improve the community justice system and village court system. Some areas we can improve are in summary offences that occur in these forms of violence in our families and on the streets. We are not controlling these issues through our village court system. The government needs to look at how it addresses summary offences that involve

violence. Instead of rushing to exclude the perpetrator by applying the law, we should try bringing him back to the community through corrective measures so he can become a good man or she can become a good woman. Such corrective approaches acknowledge that this person is part of the community, so we try to rebuild and reconcile the persons so that he or she can become a good citizen. Our village court system does not have corrective officers or mediation officers who can mediate these issues at the community level. Only when the offence exceeds a summary offence, then we can lock them behind bars. When we hastily go to the courts, this creates more problems. For many of these issues we are talking about, the law is like a blanket. Many people who try to go through to the processes of taking people to court, penalising them, end up pushing the offender all the way, because there is no way to bring the person back into the community. (Ben, Focus group 2)

The above quote demonstrates how the law is seen to polarise or sever relationships in ways that are difficult, if not impossible, to repair.

Several men viewed the law as being hasty to treat men as criminals, rather than helping to mediate to resolve conflicts. This need for mediation or healing relationships was evident in the ways some men acknowledged their role as perpetrators of violence, while also pointing out that women's violence, neglect of household and parental responsibilities, excessive consumption of alcohol, gambling or extra-marital affairs also fuelled their violence, but were hidden underneath stereotyped assumptions of victimhood.

These responses suggest that men regarded recent interventions as an encompassing, stifling 'blanket' that threatens their dominance and undermines their agency to pursue restorative local approaches to address intimate partner violence.

Many roads support men to access restorative responses to intimate partner violence

Given their reticence towards legal processes, men sometimes sought alternative ways to resolve violence. These pathways offered agency-sustaining, healing approaches in neutral spaces to mediate their cases. This was especially important when matters escalated publicly. These pathways included seeking interveners such as the church, family or community leaders, or the Family Sexual Violence Unit at the police station, in its mediation capacity. Each of these strategies was preferred to the use of the law. For example, Charles noted:

In my community, these kinds of problems occur many times and couples use many roads to sort it out. One road is they look at the church leader. Another is they see the community leaders. Another is they look within the family. If there is a good mediator in the family, they ask them to support mediation. Another is they use the law. Many times when they use the law, you will see that both the parties do not agree. While they are still angry, they turn to the law. And when they calm down, they use the church leaders or they use the community leaders or they sort it out in the home. (Charles, Focus group 3)

The alternative avenues identified by men, including the Family Sexual Violence Unit and churches, offer relative safety and privacy away from the entire community who would otherwise listen in and observe. For example, one religious leader

explained that in the church confessional men trust him and can seek support to self-reflect on their behaviour:

this kind of talk in confession works very well. How the men follow up in life I don't know but the confessional box is a protected environment. I am not allowed to speak about it. Only in general terms. They know this. They know they are protected. Nobody can overhear them. Then they can open up. In most other situations they have to play a role - they are the bosses. They are men. They are strong. But not in confession. If you speak to them in the right way, then you can speak with them. (Church Pastor)

Discussion

From these findings, two evocative metaphors of 'popcorn' and 'blanket' emerge as powerful and versatile analytical frames for exploring men's perspectives on policy interventions introduced to address intimate partner violence. The metaphors are polysemous, illustrating how any single insight or approach may be insufficient, and encouraging us to search out different perspectives to contribute to a better and more nuanced understanding. Our findings suggest that disrupting intimate partner violence in PNG requires thinking in ways that may not sit comfortably with mainstream Western approaches.

The first metaphor is that of popcorn: *pairap olsem pop kon*. As noted above, the expression '*pairap olsem pop kon*' is used in a pejorative way to refer to a woman's nagging, as cooking popcorn creates a chain reaction—one kernel explodes, and then another, and finally all you can hear is '*pop pop pop!*'. Suggestive of explosion and a lack of control, popcorn aptly represents the central fears we identified in men about family disputes becoming public – that once started, it becomes very hard to conceal and silence. Popcorn is also a useful metaphor for examining the ways in which intimate partner violence laws and policies set off chain reactions about the need to address violence and have burst open women's concerns in ways that men increasingly cannot ignore. These laws have amplified the voices, agencies and resistance of women seeking to escape violence. As such, the laws are transforming the ways that men address their own and other men's violence in their communities.

Weaknesses in the criminal justice system and scarce state resources mean the threat of legal approaches has limited utility. In choosing to pursue a legal approach, women risk creating exactly the situation men fear most (exposure and penal consequences), which may potentially aggravate further violence and lead to men's reactions that further erode women's, families' and community cohesion and security. The phrase *pairap olsem pop kon* could also apply to criticising policymakers' inability to implement laws, or their mismanagement of public resources. Leaders and policymakers make a lot of popcorn-like noise, with little to show for it. Men's reactions also demonstrate the lack of services available to assist them to change their behaviour, or to support their family as a unit, due to the focus on women as victims.

The second metaphor, 'blanket', emerged from one of the men's observations that 'the law is like a blanket', to explain his perception of the punitive effect of intimate partner violence laws. This metaphor conveys how such laws are seen by men (and sometimes also women) to smother, undermine, and further erode, local socially and

culturally appropriate approaches for preventing and responding to domestic violence and maintaining community security. The blanket metaphor is useful for representing how laws intended to be used in a homogenised, non-discriminatory manner to offer women protection, carry a risk of cloaking and smothering both women's and men's own agency in responding to family violence in their cultural and social context.

Laws and policies also blanket men uniformly by labelling them as criminals. This can lead to reactions by men that further undermine a woman's security and agency to navigate through solutions in ways befitting her own context. Laws and policies directed towards protecting women may undermine the man's own and the community's efforts to reintegrate him into the community using principles of restorative justice or traditional justice systems. Similar to Gibbs (2016), our data suggested that men perceived women resorting to the court process as smothering their ability to exercise agency to resolve matters according to social norms.

These findings resonate with the concept of hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005) which has been applied to understand the ways that PNG men are socialised such that their power is sustained and perpetuated to form a hegemonic masculinised power that permeates society (Eves 2009; Lusby 2018; Sai 2007). This is important in PNG because, as Jewkes, Flood, and Lang(2015) note, interventions that engage with masculinity seem to be more effective than those blind to the powerful influences of gender norms and systems of inequality. Such powerful cultural and social influences can be used to contain or 'blanket' women from accessing state-provided external intimate partner violence support resources.

Thinking incrementally about intimate partner violence interventions requires that we take seriously (whilst not legitimating) men's strategies of non-violent domination, as well as the ways in which men are utilising informal spaces and informal ways of preventing or resolving intimate partner violence. An incremental change approach requires a posture of open-mindedness and inquisitiveness towards localised innovations, identifying ways to learn which local strategies prompting men's behaviour changes are most likely to develop momentum or meet less resistance. For instance, strategies that enable men to resolve matters in the privacy of their homes, and to exercise their own agency to access non-state services, seem to be most useful to the men we interviewed. We note however that these strategies may undermine safety mechanisms developed by women that rely on making intimate partner violence public in order to seek help.

This is why it is important to question whether non-violent domination strategies are nudging men away from the use of violence or enabling them to maintain the status quo. We contend this is essentially an empirical question that will depend upon context. For example, one common strategy described by the participants involved walking away when an argument with their wives got too heated and the wife nagged profusely—the 'popcorn' effect. Men did not speak much about whether this cooling off strategy led to longer term resolution of the issues that had sparked arguments. It is therefore not clear if this strategy reinforced suppression of the issues that women complained about by intentionally avoiding marital problems and leaving them unresolved or was a productive way of preventing violence from escalating.

The data also suggests that men gravitate towards alternative places which may be more productive spaces for challenging notions of dominance and hegemonic masculinity than a police cell, the courtroom, or a jail sentence. For example, and notwithstanding critiques about the role of churches in reinforcing men's dominance, our findings suggest that churches that are proactive in finding ways to offer support for their members experiencing intimate partner violence or violence at home may offer alternative and potentially important spaces for both men and women. Given our suggestion to consider an incremental approach to intimate partner violence policies, this finding is important because PNG is a deeply Christian country, with missionaries arriving in the country since the start of the colonial period. Around 96 percent of the population professed to belong to a Christian church in the 2000 census and churches are a key partner to government and development agencies. Given that in 2020, the Government launched a review into constitutional provisions that stress the significance of Christian principles in PNG, it is likely that churches will continue to play an important role in solving intimate partner violence. Another potential alternative space example is the dedicated Family Sexual Violence Unit at police stations, where well-trained police can ideally conduct neutral and effective mediation or restorative dialogue in which all parties can have their say and exercise agency in determining how to move forward safely as a family in the wake of violence.

Conclusion

Our analysis contributes to the existing body of research aimed at better understanding how to include men in policy agendas addressing violence against women in PNG (for example, Kelly-Hanku et al. 2016; Gibbs 2016; Eves 2009). In this study, we asked the question, are current policy interventions doing it right? Importantly, the male participants in our research openly questioned what new laws meant for them. With laws acting both as popcorn and as a blanket, it is critical to consider the negative and the positive sides revealed by these metaphors. Ideally, the way forward might be to make the popcorn effect more about amplifying positive empowerment of families and communities and less about uncontrollable potential explosivity of state policies. In turn, the blanket effect needs to offer security and comfort without suffocating of men's agency or further subjugating women. This way, men may be more receptive to messages about intimate partner violence interventions that promote the benefits for family and community, rather than framing intimate partner violence laws and policies as women's rights perceived by men as only belonging to women. Men in PNG may also be likely to accept state interventions addressing intimate partner violence if they are complemented by support from the existing mechanisms and institutions (such as church and family) utilised to address intimate partner violence in their communities. While incremental reforms may not offer instant solutions, their potential to bring about lasting, beneficial change can give men and women the chance to weave together a blanket symbolic of new respect and understanding.

Notes

1. The terms gender-based violence (GBV), family and sexual violence (FSV), violence against women (VAW), and others are often used interchangeably or to mean specific things in the discursive arena related to violence against women in PNG. In this paper, we use the phrase intimate partner violence because the data we are focussing on largely pertain to men and women speaking about how they deal with intimate partner violence in the context of widespread gendered and community violence.

Acknowledgements

Fieldwork for this study was conducted by our UPNG based colleagues, Dora Kuir-Ayius, Dunstan Lawihin and Joshua Goa. We thank many people in the Lae community in PNG for their support and insights, especially the participants who generously shared their stories. We particularly thank members of the Catholic church in Lae for facilitating our recruitment of participants through church networks and for allowing us to conduct meetings and interviews on church premises. We thank Femili PNG for providing a referral pathway for participants who wished to utilise their services. We acknowledge the contributions of our friend and collaborator, Mary Aisi, who passed away during the finalisation of this research. All views and errors are ours alone.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This research was undertaken as part of the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade funded ANU and UPNG partnership project. An ANU Asia and Pacific Innovation Program grant supported the PNG based team to travel to Canberra to workshop and present key findings from the fieldwork.

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