

# Pacific priorities for the prevention of violence against women and girls

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## INTRODUCTION

The Pacific region is typically highlighted as having among the highest estimated lifetime intimate partner violence (IPV) prevalence rates in the world.<sup>1</sup> There are significant data gaps on the full extent and types of IPV and gender-based violence documented across Pacific populations.<sup>2</sup> Reducing violence against women and girls (VAWG) is a regional priority, but the narratives of 'the Pacific' as 'violent', 'exceptional' and 'remote' are reductive. These are narratives that do not recognise the diverse cultural, geographical and social contexts within and across Pacific communities. Nor do these narratives recognise the historical injustices and legacies of colonisation which contributed to the erosion of Indigenous women's power within their cultural context due to the introduction of European legal and political systems that undermined matrilineal and matriarchal structures.<sup>3,4</sup>

In this Commentary, we argue that VAWG prevention programmes in the Pacific must incorporate Pacific-centred approaches. Pacific/Pasifika-centred or relational approaches call for decolonisation of the mind and all aspects of life in the Pacific to rediscover Pacific ways and thinking.<sup>5</sup> There is a need to tackle the root causes of violence and this requires time as well as support for populations to (re)connect with their cultural frameworks, culturally-aligned knowledge and cultural practices to know about and understand VAWG.<sup>6</sup>

There are important regional frameworks and programmes underway such as The Pacific Community's Pacific Platform for Action on Gender Equality and Women's Human Rights (2018–2030) and the Australian government–The Pacific Community partnered Pacific Women Lead programme.<sup>17</sup> There are opportunities to design and pilot approaches through national commitments,

## SUMMARY BOX

- ⇒ The prevention and elimination of violence against women and girls (VAWG) in the Pacific is a regional priority, but solutions must be Pacific-centred.
- ⇒ In this Commentary, we define the Pacific or Oceania region as consisting of the South Pacific Islands, Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia. This region spans over 800 000 square kilometres of land and millions of square kilometres of ocean. It is culturally, linguistically, politically and economically diverse.
- ⇒ Pacific-centred approaches to the prevention of VAWG must acknowledge the historical injustices of colonisation, while empowering present leaders and institutions to be accountable.
- ⇒ Early intervention and prevention approaches must be holistic with a whole of community approach to address the root causes of violence.
- ⇒ We suggest a Pacific-centred Call to Action approach to bring attention to efforts to prevent VAWG.

such as Fiji's National Action Plan to Prevent Violence Against All Women and Girls, 2023–2028 (Government of Fiji 2023).<sup>7</sup> We outline below how local services and communities must also be empowered to own their potential to end VAWG and to hold their leaders and institutions accountable.<sup>8</sup>

We conclude with a Call to Action for a Pacific-centred approach to prevent VAWG workshopped at the 2024 World Health Summit Meeting Session (April 2024) titled, Pacific Priorities for the Prevention of VAWG, held in Melbourne, Australia. The session began with a question discussed by panellists, most of whom are the authors of this Commentary: What is a Pacific-centred Indigenous-led approach to prevent VAWG? The session then turned the question to the 100 participants in attendance. As small groups of 5–8 persons, most with health, education and policy sector backgrounds, they were invited to write down their reflections on VAWG Pacific-centred research, VAWG Pacific-centred practice and VAWG advocacy across the Pacific. Tables

### Box 1 Pacific priorities in prevention Call to Action

1. Primary prevention models positive social and cultural relations. Health curriculum and services currently reinforce gendered stereotypes that do not capture culturally informed alternative gendered roles.
2. Dialogue and training with healthcare workers, police, religious leaders, politicians and cultural leaders about VAWG and its harms. Create an environment of shared learning and understanding.
3. Listen to people impacted by VAWG to co-design solutions and find means to safely communicate the consequences of harm to inform community leaders.
4. Horizon and deep scan on access to information—especially access to information on VAWG for isolated communities.
5. Diverse service supports in local settings, safety permitting, when leaving violence.
6. Promote respect and attitudinal change by identifying access to support for all victims/survivors of gender-based violence in all settings—schools, universities, workplaces, sporting clubs and religions and support perpetrators to be held to account through these settings.
7. Learn and adopt local ethical principles for prevention research, such as Pacific research principles—vanua, kakala, talanoa, ula, itulagi and fa'afaletui.<sup>15</sup>
8. Identify access to support for victims and/or perpetrators of VAWG in all settings—schools, universities, workplaces, sporting clubs, religions.
9. Empower community leaders and members/families to identify how individuals can be safe from violent relationships and the rehabilitation and accountability of perpetrators.
10. Community-led culturally grounded approaches that facilitate discussion on the culture around and supporting violence.

were then encouraged to select 'one reflection' that could be viewed by other tables. Votes (with coloured post-its) were attached to the most population reflections. As each table discussed, shared and debated the priorities, strong support was voiced for a shared 'Call to Action' to guide policymakers, funders, researchers and practitioners. The Call to Action presented at the end of this Commentary (see [box 1](#)) is the product of the priorities voted as most pressing at the session.

### PACIFIC-CENTRED APPROACHES

In the Pacific, the prevention of VAWG requires a holistic understanding of peoples' reality that includes their environmental, social and spiritual dimensions when designing comprehensive strategies for prevention. This aligns with the Revitalised Pacific Leaders Gender Equality Declaration, agreed to at the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat in 2023, which seeks to accelerate the prevention of VAWG with survivor-centred, whole-of-community-centred and family-centred approaches.<sup>9</sup>

Prevention of VAWG needs to be distributed through culturally sensitive human networks, enabling people to access information in the places where they regularly meet, to learn about the life course of violence and why it needs to be prevented.<sup>10</sup> Sports clubs, cultural heritage groups, churches, mosques, temples and schools

are trusted and celebrated institutions that can begin the journey to address the root causes of violence and rebuild social and cultural bonds. Reconnection with culture and Pacific ways of thinking, as well as spirituality and faith, are also potentially powerful forces for change.

First, are we looking in the right places? Police, justice and health services are vital. Their role is essential in protecting and treating populations. These services may be impacted by community values and norms that may accept some forms of VAWG. For example, the response of a police officer to a reported intimate partner assault is informed by their understanding of the law but also their understanding of community norms.<sup>11</sup> When a survivor seeks help from a healthcare worker with injuries due to violence they need to be treated with care and guaranteed protection of privacy. To perform at their optimal level, those who work in these services need education and training on VAWG alongside community leaders, to ensure holistic supports are in place for when women and girls disclose experiences of violence.<sup>1</sup>

Learning from the COVID-19 pandemic responses and the importance of trust in communication about public health risks, we can appreciate the importance of prevention communication by trusted community members who bring the community with them to hear important messages on VAWG. Prevention initiatives and anti-violence messages need to be in places where people can ask questions, engage and learn from community role models. For instance, bringing prevention campaigns to community centres, such as sports clubs, vaccination clinics, churches, mosques and temples, starts to address community barriers to knowledge and awareness about violence and its harms. As was learnt during the COVID-19 pandemic through vaccination drives and messaging, connecting the power of prevention messages with meaningful symbols, languages, practices and champions to that community enhances ownership and community leadership.<sup>12</sup>

Second, cultural relationships are a source of strength and resilience. Culture is not static. Gender and societal norms change. The changes come when families and communities see benefits to their cohesion and livelihood. The introduction of Indigenous cultural practices into the educational curriculum, such as mat weaving used to mend relationships in cultural reconciliation processes, is foundational for empowering Indigenous culture and interpersonal relationships. We need to understand how such Indigenous practices can be supported across the Pacific that are family and community-centred.<sup>13</sup> Few prevention practices across sectors have sought to understand the history and relationship of Indigenous culture to VAWG practices with a positive mindset, rather than pejorative stereotypes. Moreover, the care economy in the Pacific is a significant untapped resource and a positive cultural factor—where the value of care is adequately recognised and supported, it can prevent violence.

Third, spirituality and faith have a powerful influence on people's belief systems and behaviours. Such beliefs

may affect their acceptance of violence and the causes of such violence. They may also encourage people to challenge violent relationships and patterns, via faith-based community prevention initiatives to address VAWG.

Most efforts to combat VAWG are focused on reforming law and justice institutions and there is limited focus on harnessing the positive role of religious norms, practices and institutions. The relationship between religion and VAWG is not yet clearly understood in theory or practice, but research is beginning to identify its inter-relatedness.<sup>10</sup> In the Pacific region, spirituality is a crucial entry point for tackling VAWG, encouraging faith-based organisations and women's organisations to work together to prioritise prevention. Underpinning spirituality is a philosophy of connectedness. Reclaiming the power of spirituality may encourage collective responsibility to acknowledge the problem of VAWG, address stigma and backlash and move forward with culturally considered interventions to end VAWG.

### EMPOWERING COMMUNITY

As well as significant prevention opportunities in the Pacific region, there are nonetheless risks to community, national and regional efforts to prevent VAWG.

The Pacific is oceanic, but its environments are also mountainous, rural and urban. There are migrant populations as well as those who are Indigenous to the lands on which they live. Some democratic institutions are thriving and some are fragile and under constant pressure. There is a strong connection to culture and faith, which over the years have become intertwined as one, providing a sense of belonging in communities and a danger for marginalised groups. Incomes are diverse: sources include minerals and resources, fishing, seasonal labour mobility schemes, subsistence, handicrafts for export and tourism, as well as professional, voluntary and civil service work. The region is increasingly the focus of geopolitical foreign policy initiatives that pull development initiatives in different directions, affecting local communities. Matriarchal and patriarchal traditions, the legacy of colonial experiences and migration (rural to urban and country relocation) pull communities in different directions. Tech connectivity is increasing, creating both opportunities and new risks—including abuse—for different generations, yet significant technology inequalities remain. There is heightened regional vulnerability to climate-induced disasters. Rising temperatures in the Pacific Islands will exacerbate the drivers of VAWG.

These unique political, social, economic and environmental contexts are just some of the considerations that exemplify the urgency for Pacific-centred prevention approaches to VAWG.

Resistance and pushback are factors constraining efforts to prevent VAWG in every context including the Pacific. Cultural leaders, for example, may perpetuate a culture of silence and patriarchal norms under the guise of tradition. Political leaders may benefit from the status

quo and be reluctant to embrace change. However, these conditions thrive in situations where community empowerment programmes are absent, prevention programmes are superficial, engagement is short-term and there is little public oversight.

VAWG is no different to any other sector where competition and organisational dynamics can affect who feels threatened and who wants to hold onto power. Recognising the potential for resistance and pushback makes it essential to be open to Pacific ways and thinking on the prevention of VAWG that is strength-based and embraces the opportunity for locally-led social benefit. Further, with climate change impacts already affecting the region, Pacific-centred gender-inclusive community resilience and adaptation is vital.<sup>14</sup>

### CONCLUSION: CALL TO ACTION

This Commentary has outlined why a Pacific-centred approach is essential to address the urgent issue of VAWG. This piece was inspired by the interactive discussions at the 2024 World Health Summit Meeting session on Pacific Priorities for the Prevention of VAWG which led to the shared identification of priorities that should inform Pacific-centred VAWG prevention activities (see [box 1](#)). Among the participants at this session, there was absolute consensus about the urgent need to prevent VAWG in the Pacific, but as this Commentary has highlighted, it is equally urgent that Pacific-centred relational thinking and holistic solutions guide VAWG prevention. This Call to Action is not intended to be generalisable to other regions because VAWG programming needs to prioritise non-generalisable factors such as cultural norms and settings, local knowledge and religious practice as integral to the effective prevention of violence against women efforts.

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