Gender violence in the Pacific Islands: Linking women's security and women's participation.

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Gender violence persists in the Pacific islands region as an epidemic that is resistant to treatment. Available figures suggest that between 40 and 70 per cent of women are subjected to violence from intimate partners and family across their lifetimes.[1] More disturbing, perhaps, is the fact that these levels have remained constant despite 30 years of aid programming in this area, and the very best efforts of local and international gender advocates to see them reduced. Indeed, there is strong evidence to suggest that in many parts of the region, gender violence may be increasing. It is time for us to develop new approaches to the problem.While much of the current work in this area has focussed on the cultural foundations of violence, it is imperative that we also turn our attention to the insidious relationship that exists between the abuse of Pacific Island women and their political and economic disempowerment.

This requires us to contend with the idea that gendered insecurity in the Pacific Islands region may also be greatly compounded by women's general marginalisaiton from political and economic life.. Put another way, if we are to confront gender violence effectively we need to give concurrent attention to the development of stronger economic and political platforms which might provide Pacific Islands women with the capacities to secure violence-free lives.

Gender violence and political marginalisation

It is no coincidence that rates of gender violence currently flourish in a region where female political representation accounts for a paltry 3.4% of national parliamentary seats.[2] My own research on women's political empowerment in Fiji indicates that these patterns are replicated at the community level in Fiji. In the first months of 2014, my field workers and I interviewed over 100 women from villages and informal settlements in and around Suva to enquire about women's attitudes to safety, their role as decision-makers and their economic well-being. Our preliminary findings indicate that women believe it is both unusual and potentially unsafe for them to speak publically at local settlement or village meetings.

However, even if political decision-making (local and national) is a firmly masculine enterprise, it does not follow that all male leaders in the Pacific Islands are inattentive to the question of women's security. Increasingly male political elites across the region make strong statements about alleviating violence against women and increasing women's well-being. In many cases this attention to women's human right to physical security is purely rhetorical and often seems designed to satisfy the demands of an international audience. But even when political leaders in the region make a concerted effort to match their words with action, their policies aiming to

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confront violence against women can fail to have a positive impact because they reflect strongly masculine ideas which replicate rather than challenge prevailing gender discriminatory social and cultural norms.

For example, in the post-2006 coup context, Fiji's military government promoted a new "zero tolerance" policing response to the phenomenon of gender violence at the community level. Villages have been encouraged to declare themselves "violence free" as part of this strategy which is combined with a Duavata or community policing program which aims to incorporate community members as both stakeholders and participants in law and order provision. Key components of the program involve building community awareness that gender violence is a crime and training community members to become designated "gatekeepers" equipped with skills to reconcile conjugal disputes so that violence in the home or family is de-escalated or avoided altogether.[3] This focus on community dispute management strategies is coupled with a government anti-violence decree which authorizes a tough law and order response towards the perpetrators of crimes of gender violence should the community interventions fail.

But deeper scrutiny of this community policing effort on gender violence reveals it to have had unintended negative consequences. Representatives from non-government organisations such as the highly regarded Fiji Women's Crisis Centre, argue that that the focus on community-based interventions tend to privilege reconciliation between aggrieved family members and see pressure placed on women to endure violence in the home rather than seek external forms of justice. A gross under-reporting of incidents of gender violence[4] to authorities is said to have ensued because villages who declare themselves "violence free" are eager to maintain their positive profile with potentially punitive state authorites and have become fearful of unwanted police scrutiny.

In other contexts, government bureaucrats' efforts to educate the community on gender violence prevention have perpetuated strongly discriminatory messages that identify women as contributing the phenomenon of violence. This was made clearly evident when a high-ranking male representative from Fiji's Ministry of Health recently advised mothers that they were at fault if they chose to leave their female children alone with their fathers because of the sexual risk this kind of activity posed to their daughters![5] Meanwhile government publicity advocating the success of the program is contradicted by continued daily reports of extreme cases of sexualized and gendered violence perpetrated against women and children.[6] Such experiences indicate how highly authoritarian and masculinized governments can compound the insecurity of women, even when they seek to make the elimination of gender violence a key policy focus. Providing women with greater capacity to develop meaningful political roles at the national and local level may allow women to mobilise community and state resources in ways that ensure that formalsed responses to the problem of gendered insecurity are less inclined to reinforce gender discriminatory norms and become more effective as a result.

Gender security and economic empowerment

It also is no coincidence that these rates of violence occur in region where women's economic participation is concentrated in subsistence agricultural production or ghettoised in low-skilled, low-waged, and low-prestige cash employment sectors. Gender disaggregated economic data for

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the region shows that the majority of women continue to work in subsistence food cultivation, agriculture or fisheries; with levels averaging between 54% and 66% of women in most countries, but rising to 95% of women in Papua New Guinea. The result is that women have almost none of the necessary economic resources which would provide them with enough autonomy to escape violence in conjugal, family and village settings.

Preliminary results from my research with women in Fiji provide some texture to this generalized portrait. In general our interview responses demonstrated that women tended to view their relationships with men in terms of a protective bargain. This means that in return for their domestic and reproductive labour (unpaid) they expect their husbands and intimate partners to create a secure economic environment for them as material providers. Yet this apparent valuing of the patriarchal protection was also balanced with a tendency to recognize the risks faced by women who are economically dependent upon men. Many of our informants described how women's safety can be put in jeopardy when they request money from partners for unexpected expenses. A majority of our informants also felt that women's physical safety was at risk and that violent conflict might ensue if their husbands or intimate partners accused them of being wasteful with money. Where the patriarchal bargain was not being fulfilled and conjugal relationships might be generally described as violent, almost a third of the women interviewed as part of our cohort of Fiji-based study participants, recognized the importance of women having independent economic means in order to be able to extract themselves from violent relationships. For the majority of women in the region however, this type of economic independence also seemed unachievable. A small minority also felt that women who are more economically active in their husbands may be subject to forms of backlash violence from husbands and partners who resent their economic independence.

These perspectives on violence and power, or perhaps more accurately violence and gendered powerlessness, are vital to understanding the persistence of women's insecurity in the Pacific Islands region more generally. Gender violence persists because women, as a general rule, have few resources – political and material – which might assist their capacity to achieve physical security. What is even more serious is that this political and economic marginalization, like the violence it engenders, is accepted, tolerated and normalized in many contexts. While women have made many efforts to resist these influences, through their involvement in local and regional advocacy networks, they generally remain at the margins of the political and economic realm in their home countries. Here they are frequently accused of peddling imported ideas that are culturally inauthentic, and in extreme cases, themselves threatened with violent retaliation to remind them of 'their place'.

An important, but little known, contrast to this more generalized scenario can be found in the Francophone territory of New Caledonia. Here, indigenous women have gained an elevated level of political representation (roughly 50 per cent of parliamentary seats) thanks to electoral parity laws that were adopted in 2001. However, beyond a simple statistical increase in women's representation, these laws have also enabled women political representatives to mobilise state resources to fund a series of agencies specifically devoted to women's well-being. The existence of these state-funded agencies, operating at both the national and provincial level, and the explicit attention they pay to the issue of violence against women, is unique to the region. So is the social change they encourage. Recent research suggests that the public profile of the 'women's sector' has encouraged Kanak women to become more resistant to gendered

forms of violence and to renegotiate gender relations in ways which challenge male conjugal authority. The success of the parity provisions has also emboldened Kanak women to to demand a fuller role in economic production and even to demand parity provisions be extended to enable women's equal representation in the territory's customary senate!

The lessons to be taken from this example are instructive for a region where debates on women's exposure to violence and their political and economic participation are conducted in a cloistered fashion. We learn from this example that when there are mechanisms in place to assist women's participation in decision-making, the issue of women's physical security can become a national political priority. More importantly, this attention to women's institutional empowerment can also pay social dividends by encouraging women to resist their 'everyday' exposure to discrimination, disadvantage and the gendered violence these things encourage.

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