

Do No Harm: Understanding interactions between women's economic security and violence against women in the Pacific to inform policy and practice that advances human security¹

In a context where prevalence rates of violence against women and girls in the Pacific are among the highest in the world² and the importance of women's economic inclusion and empowerment is increasingly being acknowledged and acted upon by the Australian Government's aid program in the Pacific³ understanding the impact of economic inclusion and empowerment initiatives on women's security is crucial.

Within a human security framework, it is often assumed that improving women's economic security will benefit their human security overall. For example, by improving their financial autonomy and enabling them to leave violent relationships. However, much of the broader development literature demonstrates that women's economic empowerment can have positive and negative outcomes for them, including both increases and decreases in the levels of violence.⁴ Increasing women's command over financial resources can expose women to domestic conflict and violence when it is perceived to threaten established gender roles or ideas of masculinity and self-respect.⁵ Yet, few studies have addressed this issue comprehensively in the Pacific,⁶ and in the absence of contextual evidence, women's economic empowerment and financial inclusion is typically embraced as an unalloyed good with little or no acknowledgement of the potential for harm.

With support from the Australian Government, the State, Society and Governance in Melanesia program at the Australian National University and International Women's Development Agency are working with local researchers in Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea⁷ to understand whether, and in what ways, economic inclusion and empowerment initiatives affect women's experience of violence.⁸ Although research is continuing,⁹ initial findings in the Solomon Islands include:

- Mechanisms such as women-led savings clubs can increase cooperation between women, provide increased security for women's savings and can potentially lead to women having greater confidence and becoming more active in their communities.
- Increased economic empowerment for women does not necessarily lead to a change in power dynamics within the household, and, in fact, can result in 'feminisation of responsibility and/or obligation'¹⁰ such that women are increasingly responsible for income earning without any reduction in unpaid caring work.
- Time spent by women fulfilling their savings club duties and other community obligations can be a source of conflict within the household, particularly if this is viewed as impacting on women's time for household and family responsibilities.
- Relationship counselling was identified as a strategy by participants that decreased intra-household conflict and violence, particularly in the early years of marriage.
- The perception of women's increased community participation and leadership skills as a result of economic empowerment programs can differ between female and male community members.
- In the Solomon Islands context, financial literacy training that combined broader community learning around gender equality was identified as key to the success of women's economic empowerment programming.

Implications for programming:

The broader development literature and the emerging research findings in the Solomon Islands, highlight the importance of understanding the interconnectedness between women's economic empowerment programming and violence against women. Significantly, there is a growing evidence base that dominant ideals of manhood that support violence and control over women affect the overall level of violence against women including its economic dimensions.¹¹ The practical implications are two-fold. Firstly, efforts to prevent violence against women must consider the economic security of women and the ways in which economic inequality is a cause and a consequence of violence (see Figure 1). Secondly, economic empowerment programming must acknowledge the impact of violence against women on women's economic security and integrate efforts to prevent violence against women.

Figure 1: The relationship between economic empowerment & violence against women



Initial findings suggest a number of emerging strategies that are important in order to minimise the risks to women's security as a result of women's economic empowerment programming including:

- Identifying and challenging gender roles and expectations within the household and community must be part of economic empowerment programming to also advance human security.
- Understanding intra-household dynamics matters when assessing risks to women's security and the impact of economic programming on women's relative power in the household.
- Adopting a community-wide approach to transforming power relations, which also engages men and boys and community institutions, is crucial.

In practical terms, a 'do no harm' approach therefore requires an understanding of each specific context and the location of initiatives within this. This will require actors and institutions engaged in programming aimed at women's economic advancement on the one hand, and women's safety and security on the other, to come together to develop a shared framework for assessing and mitigating risks which should:

Assessment of risk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incorporate gender analysis at the community and household level in order to understand the power dynamics at play and to ensure that interventions are responsive to the multi-dimensional needs of women and girls. • Be directly informed through consultation with women and girls. Tools such as a safety audit or focus groups may be useful during the program design phase to understand potential risks for women. • Consult local women's rights organisations and networks who can also provide essential contextual knowledge including the most effective ways to navigate local power structures. • Take into account existing efforts to address gender inequality in the community which can mitigate potential risks, utilise existing investments and support a multi-dimensional approach to women's empowerment programming. • Assess risks to women's safety as a component of program design including factors which may increase the risk of women's economic empowerment programming impacting negatively on women's safety and security.
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Mitigation to reduce the risk of violence against women should routinely form part of any economic empowerment program and donor agencies and development practitioners should be aware of the possible harm that may result if there is a backlash against efforts to empower women economically. This is particularly important in contexts where the prevalence of violence against women is high and normalised by women and men. To mitigate risk, programs aimed at women's economic empowerment should:

Mitigation of risk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Train staff on the potential security implications for women as a result of women's economic empowerment programming combined with knowledge and tool development which incorporates gender analysis in both design and implementation. • Provide safe spaces for women to discuss their experiences throughout the program, to assist in identifying emerging risks and challenges and to enable women to articulate what is needed to transform their lives in the long term. • Provide participants at the outset of the program with information as to support services or referral mechanisms which are available for women who have experienced violence. • Work with organisations and networks in the community to improve the access, affordability and quality of support services for women and girl survivors of violence. • Use economic empowerment programming as a mechanism for engaging men and boys to identify and transform the attitudes, beliefs and practices that lead to violence against women and girls.
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Enabling cooperation

The inter-relationship between economic empowerment programming and women's security has wider implications for security architecture in the Pacific:

- Any approach to security in the region must prioritise the women, peace and security agenda, as set out in United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 and subsequent resolutions, and recognise the importance of women's full and equal participation as actors for peace and security.
- Framing security in this way creates a shared, gender-responsive space for integrated working between security actors and institutions and those engaged in economic empowerment and financial inclusion work.
- Frameworks, such as the Regional Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security and national action plans on UNSCR 1325 being developed by countries in the region, provide a space for diplomatic, development and defence actors and institutions to integrate plans to address women's security

priorities into their national agendas and actively consult with women's rights organisations working on ending violence against women.

- d) Human security approaches should integrate efforts to end violence against women with women's economic empowerment initiatives. There are opportunities to develop shared frameworks and to build on existing connections between these strands, which can then be adapted in each local context.
- e) Actions associated with women's economic empowerment should be incorporated into national action plans and donor strategies on violence against women to support this integrated approach.
- f) Regional mechanisms, such as the Pacific Islands Forum Reference Group to Address Sexual and Gender Based Violence, can provide a space to frame this inter-connection together with women, peace and security civil society coalitions at the national and international levels.

Recognition by donors and development actors of their minimum ethical responsibility to do no harm brings with it a duty not only to identify and mitigate the security risks for women within economic programming, but also to use economic empowerment programming as a space to identify and transform the attitudes, beliefs and practices that lead to violence against women and gender inequality. This requires an integrated approach to human security which challenges existing discriminatory gender norms through increasing women's economic and social power while at the same time, identifying and mitigating any possible backlash against women. Understanding this interconnectedness will inform approaches to empower women economically and improve their livelihood security without compromising their safety.



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¹ Sharon Smee, with Joanne Crawford and Amanda Scothern, International Women's Development Agency

² For example, in some Pacific Island countries, more than 60% of ever-married women 15–49 years have experienced physical or sexual violence from an intimate partner at some time in their lives - World Bank. 2012. *Toward Gender Equality in East Asia and the Pacific: A Companion to the World Development Report*, available at: <http://hdl.handle.net/10986/12598>

³ Bishop, J. Hon. and M. Cash 2013. Announcement of Australia's Ambassador for Women and Girls. Transcript of Press conference 16 December, available at: http://foreignminister.gov.au/transcripts/2013/jb_tr_131216.html; AusAID (2011) Gender Thematic Strategy. Canberra: Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, p.30.

⁴ For a summary of this literature see Eves, R. & and J. Crawford 2014. 'Do No Harm: The Relationship between Violence against Women and Women's Economic Empowerment in the Pacific,' *In Brief 2014/3*, Canberra: Australian National University; Hughes, C., M. Bolis, R. Fries & S. Finigan, S. 2015. Women's economic inequality and domestic violence: exploring the links and empowering women, *Gender & Development*, 23:2, 279-297.

⁵ Eves and Crawford op cit; Bradley, C. 2011. Ending Violence against Women and Achieving MDG3: A Think Piece. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia; Carnegie, M., C. Rowland & J. Crawford 2013. Rivers and Coconuts: Conceptualizing and Measuring Gender Equality in Semi-Subsistence Communities in Melanesia. *Gender Matters* Issue 2.

⁶ Research that is available includes: Carnegie et al op cit, Bradley op cit. The Australian Government report, *Violence against Women in Melanesia and East Timor* AusAID/ODE 2008: 17.

⁷ The Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC) and the Pacific Regional Rights Resource Team (RRRT)

⁸ Research is focused on a range of economic inclusion and empowerment initiatives in various settings – in the informal and formal economies, including community-based microfinance and savings initiatives, women's business enterprises, donor-funded market projects, and women's employment in the public sector and donor agencies.

⁹ The research team will shortly commence distribution of a survey through Solomon Islands businesses, organisations and relevant associations. Those interested in being part of the survey in Solomon Islands or Papua New Guinea (PNG) or distributing it through their organisations should contact IWDA research and policy team members, Sharon Smee ssmee@iwda.org.au, or Joanne Crawford, jcrawford@iwda.org.au. Field research has begun in PNG, with qualitative research completed in Bougainville. Research in the PNG Highlands has been postponed due to practical and security implications associated with the current drought.

¹⁰ Chant, S. 2006. Re-thinking the 'Feminization of Poverty' in Relation to Aggregate Gender Indices. *Journal of Human Development* 7(2): 201-220, p.333.

¹¹ Fulu, E. et al. (2013) *Why do some Men use Violence against Women and how can we Prevent it? Quantitative findings from the United Nations multi country study on Men and Violence in Asia and the Pacific*. Bangkok: UNDP; UNFPA; UN Women and UNV, available at: <http://www.partners4prevention.org/node/515>