

Preventing Violence at Home, Allowing Violence in the Workplace: A Case Study of Security Guards in Papua New Guinea



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In this *In Brief* I ask: How do Papua New Guinean men living in violent contexts make sense of messages aimed at preventing violence against women? I explore this question through the views shared by security guards who participated in discussion groups as part of a larger research project that explores how men interpret and respond to primary prevention messaging addressing HIV and violence against women. Drawing on this research, I suggest that the efficacy of behaviour-change messaging aimed at primary prevention of violence against women in Papua New Guinea is challenged by the normalisation of men's experiences of violence, both as perpetrators and as targets of violent 'discipline' outside the home.

Research Context and Constructions of Masculinity among Security Guards

Being from an (un)privileged background or life context is not necessarily a determinant of whether or not one will suffer or enact gendered violence. Nonetheless, different experiences of class, gender, rural/urban location and sociocultural background change how gendered violence is interpreted, and also refract the meanings of prevention campaigns (Cornwall et al. 2011). Prevention messages are shaped by transnational communities of health and human rights professionals and are promulgated in various local contexts through national government bodies, international donors, non-government organisations and activist groups, and churches. They promote an idealised version of masculinity, portraying non-violent men who are secure in themselves, their relationships and their material circumstances. This is not necessarily easy for some Papua New Guinean men to relate to, as their relationship behaviours are shaped by experiences of precarious and insecure labour, living situations, and social identity. Moreover, security guards are required to use physical force as 'discipline' against criminals, or might be disciplined with violence themselves for infractions committed at work, making violence part of their everyday lives.

At the firm where I conducted research between April and November 2012, the majority of the male guards¹ had left school at Grade 8 or before, usually because of difficulties in finding school fees. The men had some access to land but struggled to make a living from it, and complained of land shortages. Life in the village was considered easier and better than life in town, but getting work in town was necessary to support families. Some of the guards had been disenfranchised from land and communities as a result of past misdeeds, such as antisocial behaviours while under the influence of drugs or alcohol, or illicit sexual affairs. Others said they had limited access to *kastam* fraternities because they did not have enough family resources or connections to sponsor their initiation, which limited their access to land and their ability to build social and economic power in communities. Guards said that this problem was exacerbated for children who had been adopted, who were of mixed ethnic parentage, or had divorced parents.

Guards reported being 'caught between' the village and town, *kastam* and state law. They felt that they imperfectly straddled ways of supporting themselves and their families, being on the periphery of land access, social support, and waged labour.

Although mostly pleased to be in work, the men had mixed feelings about being security guards. They were happy to have a wage, although said it was not enough. They enjoyed the camaraderie of being part of the company, and many said that they respected and admired their boss. Even so, guards reported that poor living conditions in the barracks, insufficient pay, long hours and risks to personal safety undermined staff morale.

Intersecting Forms of Violence

The company contrived a militaristic workplace culture designed to engender loyalty from employees in the face of workplace risk. Part of this was military-style discipline, evident in how physical fitness training was conducted, and in

punishments that evoked Hollywood army films, from push-ups to being beaten by a superior officer. Guards spoke of being frightened of being on duty at some client locations where there had previously been altercations between security and the public, as they might be targeted for a revenge attack because of a wrong committed by a guard in the same uniform. Although guards were taught martial arts by one of the operations managers, and how to use their radios as weapons, they were technically unarmed while on duty. These factors contributed to the guards' sense of vulnerability.

Guards anticipated needing to enact or encounter violence in their day-to-day work duties. Yet the guards were required to attend education workshops at the barracks that included anti-violence against women messaging. Further, at least one guard was fired during the research period because he was found to be beating his wife.

The firm's policy to terminate guards' employment because of reports of wife-beating is laudable. Making domestic assault a sackable offence made a powerful public statement about the unacceptability of violence against women. And yet, there was incongruity in the fact that the company would damn an act of violence committed by a guard, when violence, particularly violence couched as 'discipline,' was a normal part of security work and of the company culture.

Making Sense of Conflicting Messages

In order to make sense of physical discipline against men being acceptable, but unacceptable against women, some of the men employed sexist logic, such as that women were weak and fragile and needed protecting, or that, if one's wife was hurt, there would be no-one to cook, do laundry or look after the children, so it was better for everyone to 'say no to violence'.

Hitting or beating a woman without 'provocation' was considered reprehensible. However, wife-bashing in contexts of, for example, her infidelity was considered to be a disciplinary act and therefore difficult to condemn totally, although respondents acknowledged that it was illegal (McLeod and Macintyre 2010). Still, ill discipline in

the family was said to be a cause of broken homes, delinquent children, and 'social issues,' making maintaining discipline through whatever means necessary the lesser of two evils.

Conclusion

My research indicates that behaviour-change messaging aimed at primary prevention of violence against women in Papua New Guinea is challenged by dissonance between men's lived situation of everyday violence in the workplace, and awareness messaging about non-violence in the home. The tensions created in the overlap between the ideal of non-violent men who are secure in themselves and their circumstances, and men's experiences of insecurity and violence, can undermine the wider mission of gender equality and obfuscate the complexities of social and intimate relationships where violence occurs.

This highlights the complexities and paradoxes that inhere in prevention of violence against women messaging in Papua New Guinea. For this messaging to be more effective, there needs to be an increased focus on the different ways that class, economic insecurity and violence affect women and men, and their relationships.

Author Notes

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Endnote

- 1 There were between three and five women working as guards while I conducted my research, but they did not participate in discussion groups.

References

- Cornwall, A., J. Edström and A. Greig (eds) 2011. *Men and Development: Politicizing Masculinities*. London: Zed Books.
- McLeod, A. and M. Macintyre 2010. The Royal Papua New Guinea Constabulary. In V. Luker and S. Dinnen (eds). *Civic Insecurity: Law, Order and HIV in Papua New Guinea*. Canberra: ANU E Press, 167–78.

