

*“We Are So Happy EPF Came”:
Transformations of Gender
in Port Moresby Schools*

*Ceridwen Spark
and Martha Macintyre*

For several decades, Papua New Guinea (PNG) has been viewed as a country where gender inequality is a major social problem. Fewer girls than boys go to school, fewer attend university, and even fewer enter the political domain (Misra 2017; Barry and others 2018). The extremely high incidence of violence against women and girls is often represented as a crisis in which women’s rights as citizens are denied and gender violence is normalized or generally accepted as justifiable (Chandler 2014; Macintyre 2012; see also Law Reform Commission of Papua New Guinea 1992; Banks 1993, 2000; Amnesty International 2006). There have been numerous campaigns by nongovernment and foreign aid agencies aimed at reducing gender violence and improving the status of women socially, economically, and politically. Many of these are directed at women with the intention of empowering them, such as through projects that inform them of their rights or enable them to earn money and gain economic independence. More recently, there has been a shift to providing services such as safe houses and counseling to victims of violence. But progress has been slow, and the need to find new forms of intervention that deal with prevention and generate changes in social values has led to initiatives directed at men and children.

Analyses of the social causes of gender violence have consistently found that there are fundamental ideologies of gender status that underpin discrimination and violence (Eves 2001). Often these are attributed to “culture” or “custom”—deeply held beliefs in gender differences, male authority over women, and the right of a husband or father to inflict physical punishment on women and children. The external interventions

are based, often explicitly, on the assumption of universal human rights, including gender equality and the rights of children, and on the rights of citizenship outlined in the PNG Constitution, which apply equally to men and women. They are also framed in ways that acknowledge that within Papua New Guinea there are many who either do not accept or are unaware of the concept of human rights as it is understood by aid donors or nongovernmental organizations.

Critiques of human rights discourses have emphasized the European origins of the concept, its basis in Western ideas of individuality and subjectivity, and its assumption of a natural opposition between the state and the person (Biersack and Macintyre 2016, 17). However, Sally Engle Merry has argued that the tendency to blame culture ignores many of the historical and structural forces that are factors in gender violence, stressing the need to “vernacularise” human rights in ways that render them intelligible in specific cultural contexts (2006). In this article, we examine the work of Equal Playing Field (EPF), an organization that introduces ideas of gender equity to students in schools in Port Moresby. We suggest that the problem with discourses of human rights is not intelligibility; the idea of human rights is both understandable and attractive to many young people in Port Moresby. The problem is rather that having human rights does not address the constraints of enacting and upholding these in families and communities shaped by poverty and other manifestations of insecurity.

EQUAL PLAYING FIELD

Since independence in 1975, the PNG government has become a member of the United Nations (UN) and ratified conventions on human rights, gender equity, and the rights of the child. These commitments reflect the desire to break with a colonial past and participate in international affairs as a modern state. But the implementation of policies that ensure human rights has been a slow process, and educational programs have often depended on external funding.

EPF also depends on external funding, the majority of which comes from the Australian government. The organization was founded by Adam Everill and Jacqui Joseph (who currently share the role of CEO). Everill and Joseph met at the Global Changemakers Asia Youth Summit in 2011. At the time, Everill (an Australian national) had an interest in the relationship between violence and the prevalence of HIV and sexually transmitted

infections, with a particular focus on PNG, and Joseph (from Bougainville) was working to support literacy development among young people in PNG. The program, established in 2012 as Rugby League Against Violence, was initially a sport for development program. At that stage, the program design included the provision of funds to local sporting clubs and training for local football club members on matters relating to violence against women and children and gender equity.

By 2014, the organization had shifted away from its original focus on rugby and changed its name to Equal Playing Field for Schools (EPF4S); its new aim was to deliver a program centered on developing respectful relationships. This was an eight-week course designed to teach Year 7 and 8 students in Port Moresby schools about gender equity, respect, and healthy relationships. The design and implementation of this project was unabashedly derived from Western liberal ideas of gender difference and the desirability of an educational environment that removes gender discrimination. Today, the EPF4S program implicitly endorses ideas about the rights of individuals to achieve their full human potential and to respect the rights of others in the process. Its aims might well be considered “social engineering,” as it seeks to change entrenched attitudes and behaviors by teaching children ways to conduct themselves that are, in many respects, novel and challenging. While the program takes account of the structural disadvantages the children encounter in their everyday lives, it cannot change their economic situation or relieve any of the opportunity constraints that they experience as a result of poverty. In short, the program upholds ideals of human rights as universally applicable and capable of being taught in ways that effect beneficial changes in gender relations.

In 2016, EPF sought an evaluation of their program. As part of this, a small team including Ceridwen Spark, Lauren Siegmann (an evaluation expert), and Dora Kuir-Ayius (a lecturer in social work at the University of Papua New Guinea) conducted two research visits. The first visit took place in September 2016 and the second in May 2017. On both occasions, we were supported by EPF staff, particularly Junior Muke, the organization’s monitoring and evaluation officer. We conducted interviews with sixty-seven students, twenty teachers, five EPF staff, and thirteen volunteers, as well as local stakeholders working in the field. This included staff from the PNG Gender Desk of the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, who funded the program at this time, as well as leaders from other nongovernmental organizations. On our second research visit,

we held two focus group discussions with EPF staff and volunteers and three focus group discussions with students in the Student Action Groups. This article draws on these interviews.

In order to describe some of the program’s impacts on the lives of those involved, we begin by highlighting some of the risks and challenges of introducing the ideas of the EPF course to students in an environment that is not equipped to support their actualization. We reflect particularly on what participants said about learning about rights, types of violence, and disclosing abuse. In the second half of the article, we explore the positive repercussions of introducing students to ideas about gender equity and respect. Finally, without discounting the challenges of upholding these ideas and practices in Port Moresby schools, we argue that the ideas have gained traction among students and teachers and that the potential long-term benefits of this outweigh the risks and challenges entailed.

THE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

The following discussions took place within a school considered the most challenging of those with which EPF works. In the interest of brevity, we focus on this school in order to stress two points: first, the openness of students to new ideas and, second, the absence of institutions that materially support them.

The school abuts a settlement in a low-income suburb, and one of the male teachers had the following to say about the problems faced in this environment: “The administration is not working well . . . and also the discipline of the students is not good. Students don’t respect their teachers. When you are in a certain classroom, they can go in and out. . . . They don’t sit inside their classroom. And at the same time, there is no vision for this school by the parents and also the surrounding community, other stakeholders. And also the board of governors or management, they don’t have any vision for this school. . . . There’s no control.” Students said that conflict between teachers and students was common and that sometimes teachers engaged in physical violence and verbal abuse. They reported being afraid of the school security guard, who chased them with a bush knife, and they were reluctant to spend time on the school oval, where they encountered drunks who harassed them and tried to steal their phones. Student attendance is irregular, with students turning up some weeks and not others (Walton and Swan 2014; see also Walton and

Davda 2019). Teachers spoke about students coming and going from the classroom during class time and their difficulty managing the challenges associated with these disruptions. Unsurprisingly, teacher absence is also a problem (Sherry and Schulenkorf 2016). An EPF staff member told us that disgruntled family members have sometimes attacked teachers in violent retaliation for the verbal or physical abuse of their children. In short, the school was not a safe or peaceful place for those who spent time there.

Despite these challenges, the students we interviewed were polite and quietly confident. They were also smart. Having taken part in the EPF4S program in Year 7, in Year 8 (and thus their last year of primary school), these young women and men made up the school's School Action Group. Such groups constitute the second stage of EPF's work in schools, reflecting the organization's commitment to ensuring the program is sustained beyond the eight-week course it runs for Year 7 students.

When asked what the action group did, one soft-spoken girl said, "We promote awareness about gender equity." The group indicated that their main activity was organizing debates, but they also participated in sporting activities. The school debates, focused on gender and gender-based violence, have covered such topics as whether women are as good as men as bosses, whether boys should also be involved in sweeping at school, and whether women should work when they have children.

As part of our exploration in this article, we consider how the students' embrace of the EPF program and its ideas, as well as their willingness to share these with others in and beyond their school, can be understood within the broader structural environment that, for some, limits the program's relevance.

THE STUDENTS

What are some of the impacts of the EPF program on students' lives? Are these ideas new for them? On only a short drive around Port Moresby, one sees multiple fading posters addressing gender violence and human rights issues. While these are clearly part of the cityscape, it is less obvious whether they inform students' perspectives about gender norms. Awareness is not necessarily something that is easy to measure, as different observers in any city may or may not have a direct, personal response to these posters and billboards.

Our conversations with both male and female students suggested that,

by and large, Port Moresby’s young people have limited, if any, exposure to ideas about gender equity. Most students indicated that they considered the information they learned through EPF to be new. Only one (a girl) said, “I learned about gender equality from my mum.” Select comments, which support the finding that these ideas are new for students, are included below:

EPF teach us some of the new skills in how to respect one another to be equal and loving.

[Relating to the session on setting boundaries:] I learned new things like all of us are equal, ask permission before you do things.

I like the shared talks. Every Thursday they take us, we learn something new. We learn a new thing, and then we start to put it in our head and we make actions. Every week they taught us different things. They are making a big difference in our attitudes and behaviors in our school.

[In response to the session on empathy:] We learnt new things, we came to know each other. We learnt a lot. How to put yourself in other people[’s] shoes—this is my favorite topic—and to feel how they feel; when I learned that, I was like, “Yeah, that’s true.” So now I try to put myself into other people’s shoes.

Overall, the enthusiasm with which students embraced EPF suggests that the new ideas promulgated by the team are being “locally appropriated” (Jolly 2012, 30). But the extent to which they are vernacularized, or translated into hybrid concepts that draw on familiar practices or behavior exclusive to that culture, is open to debate.

Conversations with boys and girls in eight schools showed that both groups had experienced positive changes within themselves and in their relationships with one another. Nearly all students discussed learning that boys and girls are equal, and boys and girls were just as likely to discuss learning about gender equality in the interviews. They also discussed the concept of equality in general and reported that “everyone should be treated the same.”

Information about violence and the threat it represents to human rights was also welcome and absorbed. However, sometimes categories of violence, such as “the five types of violence”—identified in the EPF4S program as financial, social, physical, sexual, and emotional—was confronting, as illustrated in the following student’s account of a topic covered in the fifth week: “I was really shocked when I heard about the five kinds of

violence. When I heard about that, I was like, ‘Wow, that’s like new information.’ I will take it with me and pass it from generation to generation.”

This student went on to describe her experience of being sold by her father to his home village at the age of three. She was there until the age of six, when she said her mother took her “back from the village” to live with her in Port Moresby. Similarly, Spark has written about Marie, a young woman who experienced great powerlessness after being taken from her home in Port Moresby to her father’s village (2011, 164–165). Like Marie, this student highlights the sense of powerlessness that “being sold” to the village engendered. “I felt how hard life . . . I felt it, it was really hard. And I couldn’t hold it anymore. I wish that I wasn’t born in this world. . . . Because it is really hard, because when these problems happen, you are finding yourself in these situations you don’t expect.”

This student connected learning about the five types of violence with her own experience, suggesting that the new ideas presented within the EPF program allowed her to reframe what had happened to her as a form of violence and a violation of her rights. This appears to have been taken as a liberating acknowledgment that what her father had done was wrong, as indicated by her desire to pass the information “from generation to generation.”

Another young woman had also gained the confidence to trust the EPF staff well enough to disclose her experience of abuse:

Equal Playing Field help us. A lot of students shared their problems with them. Problems like child abuse, problems they had in relationships. I did share one of my problems . . . with one of the EPF girls. . . . Some of the boys told me to share the problem with the girl. It was just with my uncle; he wasn’t treating me well. So I told EPF. They got his name and got some information . . . and they advise[d] me to call them if it happens again. I tell my uncle, . . . “If you continue this, I will ring these people.” He has not continued since. I feel happy about that. I am thankful to EPF for their help. At first when they came, I didn’t feel like telling them, but as the program went on, what they were teaching, and they were really open. . . . They helped me to be open.

In this instance, the student’s courageous self-assertion paid off. But while she reported a positive outcome in that her uncle had ceased his abusive behavior, things might not have turned out so well. Presumably he had changed his behavior because of the threat that she would “call these people,” but had he known that EPF staff and volunteers are not equipped

to provide ongoing case support to the students who disclose to them, her confrontation with him would have had less weight, potentially making her situation worse.

This story highlights the challenges associated with introducing students to new ideas about their rights and the failure to provide adequate support to attain these rights. Conversations with teachers also raised questions about the value of encouraging students to disclose abuse in a context in which adequate support is by no means guaranteed.

THE TEACHERS

Overall, the teachers were positive about the EPF4S program. All of them said that since taking part, the students had been more respectful to one another and to them and that boys and girls were much more likely to be friends and to have positive relationships with one another.

But two teachers (one male and one female) expressed doubts about the viability of using EPF4S methods to control their large classes, with the male teacher suggesting that while these ideas might work in a “developed nation,” they were unlikely to work in PNG because of a “different culture and attitude.” Indeed, he said it was sometimes necessary to chase students, yell at them, and threaten them with violence. Such actions are not uncommon. Although corporal punishment has been banned in PNG since the 1980s, during our research, we saw many teachers carrying sticks to threaten and discipline children. Discussing the challenges of controlling her class of forty-six students without the threat of violence, a female teacher said it was hard “now that we know the rights of a child and all that.” These responses reflect the normalization of disciplinary violence and raise important questions about what it means to problematize teachers’ attempts to manage their classes without simultaneously acknowledging and changing the conditions that produce and sustain their sense of powerlessness to control the children. The teachers’ responses to the EPF4S program reveal some of the sessions’ ripple effects on the five types of violence and identifying support networks.

Another teacher, Sylvie, works at a school that she described as “friendly and helpful” and one in which teachers collaborate to support the children. This particular school had embraced EPF’s work, and teachers were overwhelmingly positive about the program’s impact on children. Sylvie even spoke about the program’s effects in her own life, saying that as a

result of her participation in the teacher training, she had realized that her husband was engaged in financial abuse. She said that she had discussed this with him and that since then he had acknowledged her right to have a greater say about how they used the money she earned. In such cases, there is always the possibility that confronting those who are carrying out abuse will place those who challenge it at greater risk of violence. For instance, Martha Macintyre wrote about a woman she knew who went home and informed her husband about her newly discovered rights only to receive a beating for her “arrogance” (2012, 246). Fortunately, in Sylvie’s case, as in the situation with the student and her uncle, the outcome was positive.

Discussing the program’s impact on the children, Sylvie said, “We see a lot of integration now between the genders,” including on the oval, where girls play rugby alongside the boys at lunchtime. Noting that “in our culture, Papua New Guineans, we don’t have boys and girls sitting together, boys and girls playing together, touching each other,” she was “very proud” and pleased that the program had introduced students to this new way of relating.

Sylvie also emphasized that students were coming to teachers to talk about difficulties at home, including reporting abuse:

We see a lot of changes nowadays to do with [the] house as well, like they have issues in the house or abuses and all this stuff. They come and tell us, “Oh, teacher, I’ve been abused in the house. I’ve been touched inappropriately in the house.” Before, they were not like that, they were not open, and sometimes it’s very hard for us to get it out from them why they are so sad . . . why they are not cooperating. It was very hard, but when EPF came in to introduce the activities and . . . to know their rights, it made it easier for them to come out and let all their problems out, especially to their teachers.

This outcome is consistent with findings that programs that raise awareness about abuse increase the rate of disclosure. While Sylvie saw the students’ willingness to discuss their difficulties as a positive outcome of the EPF program, she was assuming that the EPF team members have the capacity to connect students with external support networks in Port Moresby that will help them as necessary. But when Sylvie was asked to expand on how and where this support would be accessed, she was vague, as evident in the following exchange:

Sylvie: If the children come and let us know about their problems . . . we tell them, “OK, if EPF came in and told you all about this, then this is that contact.

You go straight to these people, and they will help you.” So I believe the children have been . . .

CERIDWEN: Go straight to who?

SYLVIE: Huh?

CERIDWEN: Who do you tell them to go to?

SYLVIE: There are certain people they have assigned for abuses, abuse, what do they call them, something on abuse, abused, I just forgot. Those are the very people that we try to, they try to assist our children when they abuse them.

Demonstrating the various absences at the heart of the situation—of services, knowledge, and concrete options for support—this exchange is revealing and sad. While there are gaping holes in terms of local capacity to respond to and support students experiencing abuse, there may still be some value in learning that there is a wider world in which these things are seen as wrong. Moreover, having people who acknowledge the injustice of these experiences—namely, teachers and EPF staff and volunteers—appears to offer hope and support to students. Despite her vagueness, Sylvie reiterated her gratitude that EPF “truly helped the children to know their rights and abuses.”

Cathy, a teacher at another school, was also appreciative that EPF had taught her and the children about their rights and support networks. She said that she had previously known about a student who was being physically abused at home by being made to work all the time and prevented from attending school. When EPF came to her school, she encouraged the student to talk with the volunteers about it, and the student did so. Like Sylvie, Cathy had a high degree of confidence in the EPF team’s capacity to support the student: “So when they [EPF] came to the school, we talked to her privately, and then they told me that these people are here to help her. They’re here for this and that, and remember what you told us? These people will help you.” The teachers’ responses indicate a high degree of confidence in EPF’s ability to respond to student disclosures by either supporting students directly or connecting them to support services. However, the efficacy of these established external agencies in Port Moresby is still highly limited.

Confirming this view, some of the EPF volunteers reported that they do not believe support services have the capacity to assist students who are experiencing abuse. Although there have been developments in the

provision of family violence and sexual abuse services (such as the Family Support Centre at the Port Moresby General Hospital and the Family and Sexual Violence Units in the Police Department), these services are under-resourced and not yet able to serve everyone in the population (Human Rights Watch 2015). Moreover, there is a significant gap between the recommended response to violence and abuse as outlined in materials developed in the Global North and responses on the ground in Port Moresby. For instance, while protecting victims from further contact with perpetrators is prioritized in more economically developed contexts, in PNG, it is common for frontline response staff to recommend that victims try to reconcile with those who have perpetrated the abuse (see Human Rights Watch 2015; Hukula 2012; Zimmer-Tamakoshi 2012). This occurs for myriad reasons, including, for example, a lack of alternative accommodation and support and a more communal approach to addressing wrongs within a broadly restorative framework. Reading this approach simply as a “failure” to comply with the imported models for addressing and responding to violence is reductionist given the preexisting systems that are based in different values systems and that have specific challenges (see George 2016 on “capabilities” in Fiji; Hukula 2012).

In the next section, we explore an EPF team member’s perspective on trying to support a student who had reported abuse. This shows that despite the best efforts of those working with students, team members cannot yet rely on accessing the structural support necessary to provide a young person with a pathway to healing and recovery.

THE EPF TEAM: STAFF AND VOLUNTEERS

Aino is a twenty-five-year-old woman who first worked with EPF as a volunteer. Kind, empathetic, and smart, she quickly demonstrated her skills and capabilities and has since been appointed to a paid position in the organization. Aino is familiar with the UN laws and policies about children’s rights and is passionate about her role, not least because she experienced family violence as a young person.

When a young woman told her about the abuse she was experiencing, Aino encouraged her to go to the Family and Sexual Violence Unit (FSV) to report it and seek help. When Aino followed up with the student a week later, the young woman said that she had visited the unit and tried to speak with someone but no one was there. Together, Aino and Joseph,

who, as noted earlier, is one of EPF’s CEOs, then called the unit every day for two weeks, but still there was no answer. Thinking it might be a problem with the phone, Aino and Joseph decided to go there and try to speak with someone. They did so two days in a row and found that the door of the unit was locked. Aino said there were women lying outside who were visibly injured and waiting for someone to come and open the door so they could get help.

Unsurprisingly, this experience was very distressing for Aino. She has since concluded that the FSV units are not effective and that “the gap between the policies and legislation about rights and day-to-day life is huge.” Indeed, she says the only place she “really trusts” is the Family Support Centre located at the hospital. There, she says, “I feel like there is a good chance someone will listen to your story, provide medical aid, and connect you to other services in the support network.” The Family Support Centre is run by a locally well-known social worker who has established a reputation for her work with HIV/AIDS patients and those orphaned as a result of the disease.

But what of the other services in the support network? Aino said that while the safe house run by City Mission (Haus Ruth) is “OK,” they can only provide accommodation for two weeks, after which people must go elsewhere. Also, because everyone in Port Moresby knows the location of the safe house, those seeking to escape violence often continue to be threatened by perpetrators who wait outside. In summary, there are few places in the city where students, teachers, and EPF staff can access appropriate institutional and formal support. This places an immense burden on EPF staff and volunteers, who are not funded or equipped for case management but who, in their role as program facilitators, are on the front line in forging relationships with young people that lead to disclosures of abuse.

Interviews with other volunteers involved in the project confirmed these broader structural and sociocultural challenges. Gus, for example, mentioned that when a male student told him that he was being financially and physically abused, he intervened in the situation himself because the boy was a member of his community. He explained that he raised these matters with the boy’s brother because he was not comfortable speaking with the boy’s parents, and he mentioned that it can be difficult to engage in these discussions because in PNG people still tend to see family matters as their own business, something for them to manage rather than something

in which others will intervene. While Gus stated that the police were “not good,” he said he would refer “big matters” to them because it was “too hard” for him to respond. This suggests that even though he believes the police are unlikely to provide appropriate support, he is following the EPF model of connecting students with other “support networks” in part so he does not have to take on the responsibility himself. This was echoed by another male volunteer, who said that he directs students to police. Given that the EPF volunteers are not equipped or supported to offer case management, this is a reasonable response. But given the lack of resources—human and otherwise—within the police department, as well as the high rates of police violence against community members, it is difficult to see how suggesting that students go to police is helpful.

The inadequacy of existing services and the absence of established support networks suggests that it would be best for EPF to redesign its discussion about support networks to be more realistic for students living in Port Moresby. So, for example, Aino’s approach, which is to teach students to trust their own judgment about people and to only open up to people they are sure will support them, can be interpreted as a vernacular response. It recognizes the limitations of current service provision. The main problem, then, is not the alien nature of the ideas about rights but the capacity of local organizations to uphold and support people whose rights have been abused or denied.

So far, we have focused on the risks associated with teaching students about their rights when those rights are unlikely to be upheld. But EPF’s work with young people offers much promise and should not be abandoned because of the challenges of working in this environment. Rather, it seems possible that if the aspects of the program that are working are accentuated and expanded, this might contribute to the kind of long-term change that would eventually lead to the city becoming a safer and more respectful place for all of its inhabitants. We explore this further in the next section.

“WE ARE SO HAPPY EPF CAME”: TRANSFORMATIONS OF GENDER IN PORT MORESBY SCHOOLS

Surprisingly, despite the challenges, the accounts of both students and teachers show glimpses of hope. The student who rethought the meaning of her father’s selling her, the student who confronted her uncle about his

abuse, the teacher who spoke with her husband about financial abuse—these represent positive changes in the lives of Port Moresby’s inhabitants, most of whom indicated that the ways of seeing the world described by EPF were new and positively transformative.

Our analysis also indicates that these positive changes to individual experiences of relationships in the schoolyard and beyond were widespread. For instance, the 2017 survey we conducted with 123 students who had recently completed the program showed that because of EPF, the majority of students had “learnt that they are equal with others,” were more likely to be kind to each other, and had learned how to stand up for themselves at least some of the time (Spark and Siegmann 2017).

The skills, attitudes, and behaviors learned by students are consistent with the outcomes that could be expected from respectful relationships programming (see Cahill and others 2014; Durlak and others 2011; Meyer and Stein 2004; Stanley and others 2015; UNESCO 2018). The quantitative findings from the surveys with students are impressive. We augment these below with quotations from two students interviewed in 2016 to show the transformations of gender that are occurring in the schoolyard of Port Moresby as a result of EPF.

According to one male student:

When EPF came, I was playing and doing all sorts of things, like going with boys and doing not good things, but when EPF came—they changed me. They made a big change in me. They were giving topics and telling us about violence and the community around us and help[ing] us to do the right thing. Not to do bad thing. So I tried to put that into practice, and I saw the fruit of it. It was very good to see them telling us about that. I learnt about gender, mixing up with boys and girls—that’s the very good thing that I learnt from it, I can remember all my life. Before I was not getting close to girls; like boys will say if you are going to be with girls, then you are a girl, so I never go across to girls, I used to stay far away from them. But when EPF came, they talked to me to be close to girls, I didn’t worry about the boys talking to me—I now say “they are my sisters.” I have many friends who are girls.

The boy’s reflection that he had learned “about gender, mixing up with boys and girls” and that he would “remember this all my life” was repeated by most students, many of whom also described this as the most significant change they had experienced. For example, a female student explained:

EPF is teaching us how to be a builder in our community and in the school. Not break people down but build them up to stop violence. I got to learn a lot of new things. . . . The kids from EPF are helping the ones who did not do the program. We talk to them about violence, so every time we see something wrong, we go and help. That is what we are doing now. We just walk around, get students, and talk to them about violence. Most of the time we talk to boys about violence and women. Girls talk to boys and boys talk to girls, so boys can see how girls feel about violence. . . . EPF is a very good program—it teaches kids who grew up from a violent background, like me myself; I watched my mother get beaten up by my dad. So it has really helped me and taught me a lot. I have brothers, and I talked to them about what EPF said to me. They said, “Where do you get this from; you are only fifteen?” Otherwise, they agree; they turned out to be really good men.

This young woman described the effects of the program as giving her greater confidence and willingness to engage with and support others. Her observations indicate that she has developed a sense that gender roles should be equal and that girls have the right to be included in schoolyard spaces and games often designated for boys (see Spark, Porter, and DeKleyn 2019). Her participation in the program has motivated her to engage in peer education at school and at home and has contributed to her belief that women and men can relate in positive and nonviolent ways. This is an important first step in protecting her against the life of violence to which her mother has been subjected.

Another change reflected in the development of more equitable ideas about gender roles occurred in relation to the division of labor. In Port Moresby schools, while boys and girls are required to assist with cleaning to help maintain their environment, a number of the students said that girls used to do this alone. However, since the introduction of EPF, girls and boys have been working together to sweep the yard. This was confirmed by the teachers, one of whom noted that “when I give them any work, both boys and girls, they’re participating in doing the work. They’re not leaving the work for only the girls to do. But in the past, they normally do that.”

Students and teachers commented that boys and girls were interacting more positively both in and out of class. That this reflects the development of new ideas about gender relationships as well as about masculinity is indicated in the following comments made by one young woman: “Boys are getting along with girls, and boys help the girls sweep. It has changed

a lot. Boys and girls sit together and buy food and buddy talk. They share stories. We help each other. It has changed a lot of fighting; boys are not fighting as much.”

Similarly, the students’ ideas about respecting girls, their assumptions about girls’ capacities, and their sense of girls as “others” had also changed. This was evident in girls’ willingness to be on the rugby pitch as well as in boys’ attitudes to girls, including in relation to violence. As one male student said, “[EPF staff and volunteers] teach us about good things, about attitudes. They encourage us to don’t do bad things. I used to hit girls, but then they said, ‘Don’t do that.’ Change my attitude to a good attitude. I do good things to other girls. I like them.” Many boys described this change as moving from thinking about girls as “girlfriends” to thinking about and caring for them as “sisters.”

One final story, shared by a teacher, illustrates some of the new ways in which students are thinking differently about gender and relating to one another as a result of EPF:

I had one experience last week. One of the girls had a menstruation, and she did spoil her trousers. So the boy was sitting with her, had to stand up and come forward and let me know, “Teacher, my friend there had a menstruation, and she’s not comfortable. I think she spoiled her trousers as well.” So I told him, “Were you comfortable when you came to tell me this?” And he said, “Well, EPF came and told us something different, so I regard this girl as a sister, so I take responsibility for . . .” I was a bit surprised about that. OK, with PNG culture, it is not all, mm, when girls are having their menstruation, boys are—they [girls] will be away from the boys. This time it really changed, so the boy came forward, and then I asked, “OK, she’s in this situation, she has to go home,” and the boy said, “Teacher, it’s okay, I’ll take her home. It’s much safer if I take her home. There’s nobody on the roadside much. She might be attacked on the roadside.”

In an ideal world, young women would not need to be accompanied home by boys in order to be or feel safe. But Port Moresby, like most cities, is not an ideal world. Moreover, while the EPF team, teachers, and students have a degree of control over the spaces at school and can work to change gender and gendered relationships on the rugby pitch and in their classrooms, they have limited capacity to influence the spaces beyond the school—whether they be public spaces such as roads, “private” spaces such as their homes, or institutional spaces such as the family violence centers where they might wish to seek support. But as

the above story shows, students' engagement with new ways of thinking about gendered identity and roles means that in a small but significant way, EPF reaches beyond the school spaces—into the streets between school and home.

On one hand, a boy walking a girl home is hardly a radical shift and indeed can be problematized on the grounds that it reflects enduring notions of girls and women as “in need of male protection.” On the other hand, *in this context*, such stories indicate a rethinking of masculinity in relation to female “others” as necessary for change in PNG. As Macintyre has argued, “For women to gain equality in PNG, men are going to have to relinquish privileges that are currently maintained by the threat of violence”; further, “programs have to challenge some of the social values and cultural norms that are currently central to power relations in PNG” (Macintyre 2012, 250). The project demonstrated that changing some values is relatively simple because people (in this case the students) reject the values that discriminate or cause harm in favor of the positive values associated with personal safety and mutual respect. Thus, despite the myriad difficulties in Port Moresby, the EPF4S program has significant potential to encourage respectful relationships, which have been shown to underpin a reduction in the incidence and rate of gender-based violence (Flood, Fergus, and Heenan 2009; see also DET 2018a, 2018b).

CONCLUSION

Programs such as those run by EPF are no longer instances of external donors imposing foreign agendas for social change on uninformed or unwilling recipients. Taking this as a starting point, we have placed under scrutiny notions that the appeal to universal human rights is inappropriate, irrelevant, or necessarily alien in the context of urban life in PNG.

The arguments between those who hold human rights as universal and those who call for radical cultural relativism in determining equitable relations within a population recede as individuals and groups recognize the injustices in their communities. In PNG, the rapid pace of social change and urbanization and the emergence of class differences mean that children in school are already exposed to social inequities within their environments. As the testimonies of children illustrate, while the values and ideologies of gender equity and individual rights were novel to many, the

students were immediately able to identify personal experiences in which rights were abused, or inequalities were manifest. Educational programs that generate awareness are most successful when the lessons are themselves translatable into experiences that are recognizable and the values are beneficial.

The issue, then, is not the extent to which gender equity is “foreign” or “culturally unacceptable.” It already has currency in PNG. EPF’s CEO, Joseph, is one of many young professionals who embrace the concept as necessary and attainable, as do the male and female staff and volunteers who work with EPF. The students who participated in the project indicated that it was not only an idea they could embrace but also one that improved their lives. The problem for such educational projects, as with others that promote human rights awareness in PNG, is that they assume support services and practical solutions that simply do not exist. In a country where schools are overcrowded and teachers underpaid and where social welfare services are minimal and the justice system inadequate, the material conditions for children to seek help, justice, or redress are absent. While Aino’s pragmatic response is the most realistic and practicable in the circumstances, it highlights the problems of social engineering through changing values and attitudes when the material circumstances do not enable people to act on these ideas.

* * *

WE ARE GRATEFUL to the teachers and students who spoke with us for the research. We acknowledge the support provided to Ceridwen Spark by RMIT University for travel and other costs associated with this research.

References

Amnesty International

2006 *Papua New Guinea: Violence against Women: Not Inevitable, Never Acceptable*. Port Moresby: Amnesty International.

Banks, Cyndi

1993 *Women in Transition: Social Control in Papua New Guinea*. Canberra: Australian Institute of Criminology.

2000 Contextualising Sexual Violence: Rape and Carnal Knowledge in Papua New Guinea. In *Reflections on Violence in Melanesia*, edited by Sinclair Dinnen and Allison Ley, 83–104. Leichhardt and Canberra: Hawkins Press and Asia Pacific Press.

- Barry, Madeleine, Nicole Bella, Anna D'Addio, Priyadarshani Joshi, Katarzyna Kubacka, Leila Loupis, Kassiani Lythrangomitis, and others
 2018 *Gender Education Monitoring Report Gender Review*. Paris: UNESCO.
- Biersack, Aletta, and Martha Macintyre
 2016 Introduction: Gender Violence and Human Rights in the Western Pacific. In *Gender Violence and Human Rights: Seeking Justice in Fiji, Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu*, edited by Aletta Biersack, Margaret Jolly, and Martha Macintyre, 1–46. Canberra: ANU Press.
- Cahill, Helen, Sally Beadle, Anne Farrelly, Ruth Forster, and Kylie Smith
 2014 *Building Resilience in Children and Young People: A Literature Review for the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development*. Melbourne: University of Melbourne. <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/documents/about/departments/resiliencelitreview.pdf> [accessed 4 Oct 2019]
- Chandler, Jo
 2014 *Violence against Women in PNG: How Men Are Getting Away with Murder*. Sydney: Lowy Institute.
- DET, Department of Education and Training, Victoria
 2018a *Building Respectful Relationships: Stepping Out against Gender-Based Violence*. Melbourne: Department of Education and Training, Victoria. <http://fuse.education.vic.gov.au/ResourcePackage/ByPin?pin=H9WQYK> [accessed 9 Oct 2019]
 2018b *Resilience, Rights and Respectful Relationships*. Melbourne: Department of Education and Training, Victoria. <http://fuse.education.vic.gov.au/ResourcePackage/ByPin?pin=2JZX4R> [accessed 9 Oct 2019]
- Durlak, Joseph A, Roger P Weissberg, Allison B Dymnicki, Rebecca D Taylor, and Kriston B Schellinger
 2011 The Impact of Enhancing Students' Social and Emotional Learning: A Meta-Analysis of School-Based Universal Interventions. *Child Development* 82 (1): 405–432.
- Eves, Richard
 2001 Masculinity Matters: Men, Gender-Based Violence and the AIDS Epidemic in PNG. In *Civic Insecurity: Law, Order and HIV in Papua New Guinea*, edited by Vicki Luker and Sinclair Dinnen. Canberra: ANU E Press.
- Flood, Michael, Lara Fergus, and Melanie Heenan
 2009 *Respectful Relationships Education: Violence Prevention and Respectful Relationships Education in Victorian Secondary Schools*. Melbourne: State of Victoria Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. https://eprints.qut.edu.au/103414/1/_qut

- .edu.au_Documents_StaffHome_staffgroupB%24_bozzetto_Documents_2017000497.pdf [accessed 27 Oct 2019]
- George, Nicole
 2016 “Lost in Translation”: Gender Violence, Human Rights and Women’s Capabilities in Fiji. In *Engendering Violence in Papua New Guinea*, edited by Margaret Jolly, Christine Stewart, and Carolyn Brewer, 81–125. Canberra: ANU E Press.
- Hukula, Fiona
 2012 Ways of Being: Ideas of Maleness and Femaleness in a Port Moresby Settlement. *Durham Anthropology Journal* 18 (2): 89–96.
- Human Rights Watch
 2015 *Bashed Up: Family Violence in Papua New Guinea*. Human Rights Watch. https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/png1115_4up.pdf [accessed 4 Oct 2019]
- Jolly, Margaret
 2012 Introduction—Engendering Violence in Papua New Guinea: Persons, Power and Perilous Transformations. In *Engendering Violence in Papua New Guinea*, edited by Margaret Jolly, Christine Stewart, and Carolyn Brewer, 1–45. Canberra: ANU E Press.
- Law Reform Commission of Papua New Guinea
 1992 *Final Report on Domestic Violence: Report No. 14*. Boroko: Papua New Guinea Law Reform Commission.
- Macintyre, Martha
 2012 Gender Violence in Melanesia and the Problem of Millennium Development Goal No. 3. In *Engendering Violence in Papua New Guinea*, edited by Margaret Jolly, Christine Stewart, and Carolyn Brewer, 239–266. Canberra: ANU E Press.
- Merry, Sally Engle
 2006 *Human Rights and Gender Violence: Translating International Law into Local Justice*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.
- Meyer, Heather, and Nan Stein
 2004 Relationship Violence Prevention Education in Schools: What’s Working, What’s Getting in the Way, and What Are Some Future Directions. *American Journal of Health Education* 35 (4): 198–204.
- Misra, Jagriti
 2017 Facts About the State of the Papua New Guinea Education System. The Borgen Project, 16 July. <https://borgenproject.org/education-in-papua-new-guinea/> [accessed 4 Oct 2019]
- Sherry, Emma, and Nico Schulenkorf
 2016 League Bilong Laif: Rugby, Education and Sport-for-Development

- Partnerships in Papua New Guinea. *Sport, Education and Society* 21 (4): 513–530.
- Spark, Ceridwen
 2011 Gender Trouble in Town: Educated Women Eluding Male Domination, Gender Violence and Marriage in PNG. *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 12 (2): 164–179.
- Spark, Ceridwen, Libby Porter, and Lisa de Kleyn
 2019 “We’re Not Very Good at Soccer”: Gender, Space and Competence in a Victorian Primary School. *Children’s Geographies* 17 (2): 190–203.
- Spark, Ceridwen, and Lauren Siegmann
 2017 *Equal Playing Field Final Evaluation Report*. Port Moresby: Equal Playing Field.
- Stanley, Nicky, Jane Ellis, Nicola Farrelly, Sandra Hollinghurst, and Soo Downe
 2015 Preventing Domestic Abuse for Children and Young People: A Review of School-Based Interventions. *Children and Youth Services Review* 59:120–131.
- UNESCO, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
 2018 Connect with Respect: Preventing Gender-Based Violence in Schools. Bangkok: UNESCO. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000243252> [accessed 4 Oct 2019]
- Walton, Grant, and Tara Davda
 2019 School-Community Relations and Free Education Policy in Papua New Guinea. *Pacific Affairs* 92 (1).
- Walton, Grant, and Anthony Swan
 2014 Fourth Time’s the Charm: A Brief History of “Free Education” Policies in PNG. Devpolicy Blog, 9 December. <https://devpolicy.org/fourth-times-the-charm-a-brief-history-of-free-education-policies-in-png-20141209/> [accessed 2 April 2018]
- Zimmer-Tamakoshi, Laura
 2012 Troubled Masculinities and Gender Violence in Melanesia. In *Engendering Violence in Papua New Guinea*, edited by Margaret Jolly, Christine Stewart, and Carolyn Brewer, 73–106. Canberra: ANU E Press.

Abstract

In this article, we examine the work of Equal Playing Field (EPF), an organization that introduces ideas of gender equity to students in schools in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea (PNG). Drawing on interviews with students, teachers, and EPF staff and volunteers, we demonstrate that the design and implementation of

the EPF program is derived from Western liberal ideas of gender difference and the desirability of an educational environment that removes gender discrimination. Without discounting the challenges of upholding these ideas and practices in Port Moresby schools, we argue that they have gained traction among students and teachers and that the potential long-term benefits of this arguably outweigh the risks and challenges entailed. Demonstrating that programs such as those run by EPF are no longer instances of external donors imposing foreign agendas for social change on uninformed or unwilling recipients, we place under scrutiny notions that the appeal to human rights is inappropriate, irrelevant, or necessarily alien in the context of urban life in PNG. Instead, we suggest that, as with other programs that promote human rights awareness in PNG, the problem for such educational projects is that they assume support services and practical solutions that simply do not exist.

KEYWORDS: Papua New Guinea, respectful relationships education, gender equity, social change