

IMPROVING THE POLICING OF SEXUAL AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN FIJI

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Research team

Chief Research Investigator:
Professor Kerry Carrington

Partner Research Investigator:
Dr. Melissa Jardine

Senior Research Officer: Carla Chan Unger
Master's Student: Helen Singh

Email contacts:
kcarrington@usc.edu.au
jardinem@unimelb.edu.au

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ACRONYMS AND GLOSSARY

CID	Criminal Investigations Department
DV	Domestic violence
DVRO	Domestic Violence Restraining Order
FWCC	Fiji Women's Crisis Centre
GBV	Gender-based violence
LGBTIQ+	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer+
MSP	Medical Services Pacific
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
SGBV	Sexual and Gender-based Violence
SOU	Sexual Offences Unit
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UN OHCHR	United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
UniSC	University of the Sunshine Coast



Gender-based violence refers to harmful acts directed at individuals based on their gender. It includes domestic violence, sexual violence, psychological harm, and other forms of harm. Women, girls and LGBTQI+ individuals are especially at risk.

Domestic violence refers to harmful behaviours within a family or household, often involving a partner or spouse. It includes physical, emotional, sexual, or financial harm, aimed at controlling or harming the victim.

Sexual violence involves any sexual act or attempt to obtain a sexual act through coercion, force, or without consent. It includes rape, sexual assault, and other unwanted sexual behaviours that violate an individual's dignity and autonomy.

Intimate partner violence occurs between current or former partners in a close relationship. It includes physical, sexual, emotional, and psychological harm, as well as controlling behaviours.

A victim-centred approach means police focus on the survivor's safety, needs, and rights. Police treat victims with respect and help them make decisions about their case.

A trauma-informed approach means police understand how trauma affects survivors. Police use kind and supportive communication to avoid causing more harm during investigations.

A human rights-based approach ensures that police uphold the fundamental rights and dignity of all individuals. Police treat victims of gender-based violence with fairness and equality, ensuring their access to justice and protection under the law.

A gender-sensitive approach ensures that police consider gender dynamics, address specific gender needs, and promote fairness and equality in their responses to crimes, especially those related to gender-based violence.

A note on terminology

In this report, we have chosen to use the term victim for consistency when referring to individuals affected by gender-based violence. However, some interviewee quotes use the term survivor. Both terms convey a similar meaning. We acknowledge that these terms can have different meanings, although in this report, we generally use victim to be consistent with legislation and terminology used in policing practice.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Fiji has some of the highest rates of gender-based violence (GBV) globally, with over 52% of Fijian women experiencing intimate partner violence in their lifetime—nearly double the global average. Fiji's geographic dispersion across over 300 islands creates significant barriers for victims in rural and remote areas to access justice and support services.

Previous studies have found that many police officers encourage victims to resolve cases within families and communities through traditional reconciliation practices rather than pursuing legal action through the courts. While Fiji's legislative and policy framework for addressing GBV is robust, including the 2023 launch of the National Action Plan for the Elimination of Violence Against Women and Girls (NAP), significant challenges remain. Broader police reforms under new leadership and the 'Restore Blue' initiative present opportunities to improve law enforcement's role in combating GBV. The addition of 41 Sexual Offence Units and significant increases in the recruitment of women into Fiji police are welcome reforms under the new police leadership. However, more prioritisation of resource allocation to respond to GBV and stronger inter-agency and multi-sector collaboration across sectors are needed to reduce the alarming rates of GBV in Fiji.

The research project, which involved a team from Australia and Fiji, examined current policing practices in handling cases of sexual and domestic violence, identifying systemic challenges and opportunities for reform. The recommendations aim to assist the Fiji Police Force in improving its response to GBV, ensuring better support for victims, which in turn will enhance perceptions of police legitimacy across all its diverse ethnic, cultural and religious communities. The University of the Sunshine Coast Human Research Ethics Committee approved the project (Number 2021000189).

Research Methodology

This report draws on interviews with 58 participants, including police officers from various ranks and units, government and UN officials, representatives from women's and human rights organisations, social welfare and medical service providers, and senior justice leaders. Participants were selected for their in-depth knowledge and experience of policing responses to sexual and domestic violence in Fiji. We have identified them with a unique signifier, P = Police; J = Justice Leader and C = Non-government or government agency. A draft report was distributed to all participants for their feedback. All of those who responded to the draft report were satisfied with the report's findings and recommendations. No critical feedback was received. No ethical issues were raised about the representation of participants' views.

The research ensured diverse geographic representation by including participants from four major urban centres—Suva, Nadi, Lautoka, and Labasa—and their surrounding areas. Many interviewees also worked in outreach roles, providing services to remote and island settlements, allowing the research to capture the unique challenges faced by these communities.



INTRODUCTION

Gender-based violence (GBV) remains a critical issue in Fiji, profoundly affecting the safety and well-being of women and girls. Over half of the women in Fiji have experienced intimate partner violence at some point in their lives—almost twice the global average.¹ LGBTIQ+ individuals are also disproportionately impacted by sexual and domestic violence.²

This moment in Fiji's history is transformative, marked by significant changes in both national leadership and the leadership of the Fiji Police Force. These shifts present a unique opportunity to rethink and reform police responses to GBV. The introduction of the Restore Blue Policy under the former Acting Commissioner Juki Fong Chew represents a significant step forward, as it aims to enhance transparency, accountability, and effectiveness within the force with renewed dedication.

This report presents the findings of an in-depth study conducted by a multidisciplinary team of researchers with expertise in criminology, gender and LGBTIQ+ studies, policing, and community development. The team included researchers from Australia and Fiji, including those with lived experience of GBV and LGBTIQ+ identity. Funded by the Australian Research Council, the research explores the complexities of responding to GBV in Fiji and examines how the police can better support victims. The study looks at how the police handle cases of sexual and domestic violence, examines the effectiveness of current practices, and identifies opportunities for making meaningful improvements.

Through extensive interviews with 58 diverse participants, including police officers, government and UN officials, civil society representatives, and senior justice leaders, this research offers a nuanced perspective on the challenges and opportunities in addressing sexual and domestic violence within the Fijian context.

The findings have the potential to shape policy and practice within Fiji and, more broadly, the Pacific region. By offering evidence-based recommendations, this research aims to inform the development of more effective policing strategies, legislative reforms, and service delivery to victims in line with a human-rights and victim-centred approach.

1 Fiji Women's Crisis Centre, 2013. Somebody's life, somebody's business! National research on women's health and life Experiences in Fiji. <https://www.fijiwomen.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/National-Survey-Summary.pdf>

2 Ibid.



BACKGROUND

Fiji – Country snapshot

Fiji, officially the Republic of Fiji, is a tropical archipelago of 330 islands, about 100 of which are permanently inhabited. Around 90% of the nation's 936,000 people live on its two largest islands, Viti Levu and Vanua Levu.³

According to World Bank estimates, approximately 25% of the population lived below the national poverty line prior to the global pandemic.⁴ In 2020, COVID-19 triggered a severe economic downturn, pushing the poverty rate up by 11 percentage points from pre-pandemic levels. While the economy has rebounded, households continue to be affected by the high cost of living, with the national minimum wage stagnating at \$4 an hour.⁵

Fiji's population consists primarily of Indigenous Fijians (iTaukei) and Indo-Fijians, descendants of indentured sugarcane workers brought over during the colonial period. Other smaller communities, such as the Chinese, Rotumans, Europeans, and Pacific Islanders, add to the island's diversity.⁶ This blend of cultures is reflected in Fiji's religious landscape, with around 65% of the population identifying as Christian (predominantly Methodist and Catholic), 25% as Hindu, and roughly 7% as Muslim. The country recognises three official languages—English, Fijian, and Fijian Hindi—though most Fijians are multilingual, speaking a mix of English and the language of their ethnic community.⁷

Fiji gained independence from British colonial rule in 1970, adopting a Westminster-style democracy. Following coups in 1987, 2000 and 2006, the country returned to regular democratic elections in 2014. Since 2022, Fiji has been led by a political coalition comprised of the People's Alliance Party, the National Federation Party and the Social Democratic Liberal Party.⁸

This shift in political leadership has also brought about changes in Fiji's security sector, including new leadership within the Fiji Police Force. With an emphasis on transparency and accountability, the new administration has articulated a commitment to enhancing transparency and accountability in law enforcement, with the objective of restoring the public's confidence.⁹

3 The latest census reports the permanent population of Fiji was 884,887 in 2017. Based on this figure, the World Bank predicted Fiji's population was going to be 936,375 in 2023. <https://data.worldbank.org/country/fiji>

4 World Bank, 2022.

<https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099848104222228228/pdf/IDU0ae2442f70929304eb5081df060806650d032.pdf>

5 Chaudhary, F., 2024. Chaudhry says poverty, pay priority areas. Fiji One News, 27 June, online.

<https://fijionenews.com.fj/budget-chaudhry-says-poverty-pay-priority-areas/>

6 Fijian Government, 2017. Census

<https://experience.arcgis.com/experience/fd6bb849099f46869125089fd13579ec/page/Population-by-Major-Ethnicity-Groups/>

7 Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), 2021. DFAT Country Information Report Fiji. <chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/country-information-report-fiji.pdf>

8 Needham, K., 2022. Fiji has a new government after three opposition parties form coalition. Reuters News, 20 December, online. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/fiji-has-new-government-after-three-opposition-parties-form-coalition-2022-12-20/>

9 Waqairadovu, A., 2023. Restore Blue symposium to shame Fiji Police Force. FBC News, 27 November, online.

<https://www.fbcnews.com.fj/news/restore-blue-symposium-to-shape-fiji-police-force/>; Movano, L., 2024. Fiji announces reset of Fiji Police Force. ABC News, 10 June, online. <https://www.abc.net.au/pacific/programs/pacificbeat/fijipolicereset/103958040>

Prevalence of gender-based violence in Fiji

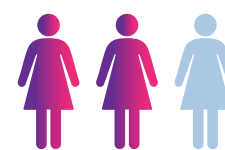
Fiji has one of the highest rates of gender-based violence (GBV) in the world, with intimate partner violence and sexual violence being the most prevalent forms of violence. According to a World Health Organisation study, 52% of women in Fiji had been subjected to intimate partner violence over the course of their lifetime, almost twice the global average of 27%.¹⁰

According to research by the Fiji Women's Crisis Centre (FWCC), overall:¹¹

- 2 in 3 of ever-partnered women in Fiji have experienced physical and/or sexual violence from a male intimate partner in their lifetime
- 1 in 3 ever-partnered women have experienced marital rape
- 1 in 3 women have experienced violence from a man who is not their partner
- Women and girls living with disabilities are particularly at risk of experiencing physical, economic, sexual, and emotional violence
- People from the LGBTIQ+ community experience higher rates and more severe forms of violence

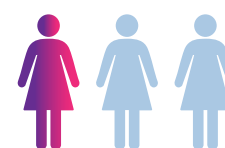
The rates of violence climb even higher during and in the aftermath of crises and natural disasters. For example, a year-long curfew imposed to address the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 compounded the dangers faced by women in abusive relationships. Phone calls to the FWCC's domestic violence helplines increased by 300% during the lockdown period.¹²

The exact prevalence rates of violence in Fiji are unknown and are likely to be much higher than police and NGO records show. It is common for violence and abuse to be vastly underreported for a variety of reasons, including stigma and fear of retaliation, fear of exacerbating the violence, inadequate responses from the police, and lack of knowledge or access to available services, including gender and disability-appropriate services, among other factors.¹³



Nearly
2 in 3

ever-partnered women in Fiji have experienced physical and/or sexual violence from a male intimate partner in their lifetime



1 in 3

ever-partnered women experienced marital rape⁶



1 in 3

women have experienced violence from a man who is not their partner⁶

Obstacles to accessing justice

There are several contributing factors specific to the Fijian context that increase the risk of GBV and prevent victims from accessing justice and appropriate support services. Based on a review of the existing literature, we have identified four main obstacles – gender inequality and patriarchal attitudes, cultural and religious barriers, inadequate police response to sexual and domestic violence cases, and geographical challenges of policing remote areas and island communities.

10 World Health Organisation, 2021. Violence against women prevalence estimates, 2018: Global, regional and national prevalence estimates for intimate partner violence against women and global and regional prevalence estimates for non-partner sexual violence against women. WHO, Geneva. <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/WHO-SRH-21.12>.

11 See Fiji National Action Plan to Prevent Violence Against All Women and Girls (2023-2028) p.16, which draws on data from FWCC's 2013 research report.

12 Chanel, S., 2021. 'Crisis within a crisis': Violence against women surges in Fiji. Al Jazeera, 24th February, online. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/2/24/crisis-within-a-crisis-violence-against-women-surges-in-fiji>

13 Fijian Government, 2023. Fiji NAP, p. 17.

Gender inequality and patriarchal attitudes

Deeply entrenched gender inequality and patriarchal attitudes are one of the driving forces behind GBV in Fiji.¹⁴ According to the current National Action Plan to Prevent Violence Against Women and Girls, men and boys hold more power and control in both public life and the family, creating a dynamic where women and girls are viewed as inferior. Patriarchal values not only marginalise women — they also harm LGBTIQ+ communities, who face widespread discrimination and violence rooted in deeply ingrained cultural and religious attitudes.



People of diverse sexual orientations, gender identities, and sex characteristics (including lesbian, bisexual and transgender women, gay men, transgender men and gender non-conforming people) experience higher rates, and more severe forms of violence from partners, family members and communities

Image source: Fiji NAP, 2023.

This male dominance permeates all areas of life, with men typically making decisions in the household while women are expected to adhere to traditional gender roles. This imbalance of power can fuel male violence against women and girls, particularly within the home, where domestic violence is often normalised. In such an environment, women have little autonomy or ability to leave or speak out against abusive relationships.¹⁵

Patriarchal attitudes also impact women's opportunities in the workforce, where women face significant barriers to employment. While 77% of men participate in the Fijian labour force, only 39% of women are employed.¹⁶ This gap limits women's economic opportunities, reinforcing their dependence on male partners or family members for financial stability, which in turn makes it even harder for them to leave abusive relationships.¹⁷

This broader issue of gender inequality is mirrored in the police force, which has embodied some of the patriarchal values that create challenges for victims of sexual and domestic violence. Although efforts have been made to increase the number of women in the force,¹⁸ simply adding more female officers is not likely to be sufficient to address the problem. While their presence can make women in the community feel more comfortable when reporting incidents, female officers often face pressure to conform to the same patriarchal culture as their male colleagues.¹⁹ Consequently, male-biased perspectives continue to dominate the handling of cases of GBV, resulting in inadequate support for victims and a lack of accountability for perpetrators.

Cultural and religious barriers

Patriarchal attitudes in Fiji are shaped by and closely intertwined with cultural and religious values. In both Indigenous iTaukei and Indo-Fijian cultures, traditional systems of reconciliation are commonly used to resolve domestic violence cases. In iTaukei communities, this involves holding a public forum called *Bulubulu*, while Indo-Fijians often rely on elderly members of their extended family to oversee the reconciliation process between the victim and perpetrator.²⁰ These practices are still widespread across Fiji today, particularly in rural areas and isolated island communities.²¹

14 Ibid, p. 15; Velit, D., Arboleda, L. & Singh, N., 2022.

15 Newland, L., 2016. Villages, violence and atonement in Fiji. In Biersack, A, Jolly, M. & Macintyre, M. (Eds.) Gender Violence & Human Rights: Seeking Justice in Fiji, Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu (pp. 47-80). ANU Press.

16 Fijian Government, 2016. Employment, Unemployment Survey.

<https://www.statsfiji.gov.fj/census-surveys/employment-and-unemployment-survey-eus/>

17 Fijian Government, 2023. Fiji NAP.

18 UNDP, 2023. Women on the front line: how the Fiji Police Force are working to further women's representation.

<https://www.undp.org/pacific/stories/women-front-line-how-fiji-police-force-are-working-further-womens-representation#:~:text=Ensuring%20greater%20gender%20balance%20in,that%20may%20hinder%20gender%20parity.>

19 Bull, M. George, N. & Curth-Bibb, J., 2019. The virtues of strangers? Policing gender violence in Pacific Island countries. Policing and Society, 29(2): 155-170.

20 Chand et al., 2023, p. 42.

21 Watson, D., Amin S. & Robinson, A., 2024. Responding to domestic and family violence in resource-constrained contexts: A case study on rural policing innovations in Melanesia. Policing, 47(3): 380-393.5.

In a typical iTaukei domestic violence scenario, the woman returns to her parents' home, and the perpetrator's family offers an apology in the form of a 'gift' to her family or village, seeking forgiveness or atonement.²² Offerings may include a tabua (whale's tooth) for significant matters, while items such as kerosene or cigarettes may be offered for violations regarded as less serious.²³

The *bulubulu* or *soro* reconciliation process is facilitated by the *Turanga ni Koro* (village headman) and other community leaders. Male family members represent and speak on behalf of women, who are expected to listen in silence.²⁴ Many women feel pressured to accept these apologies and forgive their offenders, even when it does not align with their personal wishes or needs. Reconciliation through these traditional ceremonies prioritises the maintenance of harmonious relationships between families and villages over justice and reparation for women who have been abused. The outcomes can vary widely depending on the knowledge and experience of community elders and leaders, typically older men.²⁵



Religious leaders also play a role in discouraging women from reporting domestic or sexual violence.²⁶ In iTaukei communities, Christianity shapes what is acceptable roles for men and women and can reinforce gender inequalities.²⁷ Biblical teachings tend to portray women as subservient helpers to their husbands and children, creating a strong moral obligation for women to remain in their marriages. Research shows that women who seek guidance from clergy or pastors may feel morally obligated to stay in abusive relationships to avoid church disapproval or to avoid bringing shame to their families or communities.²⁸ Additionally, religious doctrines can perpetuate homophobic and transphobic attitudes, contributing to violence against LGBTIQ+ individuals.²⁹

While traditional practices and religious beliefs can have positive impacts on the broader community, they can also deter victims of GBV from seeking legal recourse through the state justice system. Community leaders rarely call upon police to intervene in domestic violence cases. Where the victim does report directly to the police, it is common for police officers to advise victims to reconcile with their abusers. This practice, which contravenes the Fiji Police Force's No-Drop Policy (see Part A for policy details), discourages many women from seeking police assistance.³⁰

Fiji operates under a dual justice system, known as 'plural' or 'blended' policing, where the state policing system coexists with a traditional conflict resolution system.³¹ Cultural beliefs and values held by police officers heavily influence the ways they respond to GBV cases. Previous research has found that frontline

²² Ibid.

²³ Newland, L., 2016.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Stamatakis, N., 2024. Domestic violence, law enforcement, and traditional practices in Fiji islands: A comprehensive examination. In *Global trends in Law Enforcement – Theory and Practice*. InTechOpen, p.7.

²⁶ Bull et al, 2019.

²⁷ Tonsing, J. & Barn, R., 2021. Help-seeking behaviours and practices among Fijian women who experience domestic violence: An exploration of the role of religiosity as a copying mechanism. *International Social Work*, 64(6): 931-942.

²⁸ Ibid; Amin, S., Momoyalewa, S. & Peniamina, S.T., 2024. Culture, religion and domestic violence: Reflections on working with Fiji and Tuvalu communities. *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy*, 13(3): 23-32; Stamatakis, N., (2024).

²⁹ George, N., 2017. Policing "conjugal order": Gender hybridity and vernacular security in Fiji. *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 19(1): 55-80; Bull et al, (2019); Watson, D., Howes, L., Sinclair, D., Bull, M. & Amin, S., 2023. *Policing in the Pacific Islands*. Springer Nature. Doi: 10.1007/978-3-031-10635-4

³⁰ Ibid; Chand et al., 2024.

³¹ George, N., 2017; Bull et al, 2019; Watson et al, 2023. Ibid; Chand et al, 2024.

officers frequently prioritise the perspectives of the broader community over the safety and well-being of female victims, encouraging women to reconcile with their partners and return to the abusive environment.³²

The central challenge for law enforcement is finding a balanced way to respect cultural traditions while ensuring that they do not perpetuate or justify domestic violence.³³ Previous studies have emphasised the need for police training to help officers navigate the complexities of plural policing in a way that preserves cultural traditions while prioritising victims' safety and human rights.³⁴



Terms for traditional iTaukei practices

Bulubulu – a custom for reconciling differences where disputes are settled with gifts while asking for forgiveness. It is directed to the senior male family member but generally not the victim.

Soro – an offering of cultural or economic value made by the perpetrator's family to the victim's family as a goodwill gesture. In some regions of Fiji this term is used interchangeably with Bulubulu.

Turang Ni Koro – Village headman usually elected or appointed by the villagers. He plays a key role in the modern Fijian government structure and is paid a small government allowance to provide leadership and governance for the community or settlement.

Police responses to sexual and domestic violence cases

Despite the Fiji Police Force's No-Drop Policy, which mandates full investigation of domestic violence cases, many police officers continue to encourage traditional dispute resolution processes instead of pursuing legal action. A 2024 study carried out by researchers from Fiji National University and the University of the South Pacific found that while nearly 90% of the 365 police officers surveyed were aware of their legal duty to investigate domestic violence cases, only 30% actually did so.³⁵ Instead of implementing the No-Drop Policy, many police officers encouraged victims to resolve these cases within their families or communities, often suggesting that domestic violence was a private matter. A similar study found that in most villages on Kadavu Island, police commonly referred victims to traditional leaders, such as the *Turang Ni Koro*, to resolve cases through customary reconciliation.³⁶

The Fiji Women's Rights Movement has also found problems with the police handling of sexual and domestic violence cases.³⁷ Of 49 women interviewed about their experiences, 60% said the police had told them to resolve the issue within their family or village or were not taken seriously. The research further found:

- 40% of women said police acted as counsellors, trying to reconcile them with their partners, or delayed serving restraining orders
- Only 50% of women felt safe in police stations
- Nearly 20% of women reported being sexually harassed or threatened by police
- Just 40% were referred to essential services such as safe housing, medical care, or counselling

Consequently, nearly two-thirds of the women sought help from other individuals or organisations before contacting the police. On average, they endured 2.4 years of violence before approaching the police or courts for assistance.

32 Chand et al, 2024, p. 43.

33 Stamatakis, N., 2024.

34 Chand et al, 2024, p. 44; Stamatakis, N., 2024.

35 Chand et al, 2024, p. 40.

36 Newland, L., 2016, p. 57.

37 Fiji Women's Rights Movement (FWRM), 2017. Balancing the scales: Improving Fijian women's access to justice. FWRM, Suva, p.

71. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/352439939_Balancing_the_Scales_Improving_Fijian_Women's_Access_to_Justice

Geographical challenges in policing rural and remote areas

Like many Pacific Island countries, Fiji's police operate in a complex geographical setting, with a population spread across more than 100 islands. Transportation between these islands is limited, and air and sea travel can be costly, time-consuming, and challenging due to vast distances. In rural areas, traditional gender roles are particularly rigid, with women primarily responsible for domestic tasks, which further limits their ability to escape an abusive relationship or assert their rights.³⁸

Geographical isolation creates significant challenges for policing. Many remote islands have low numbers of police officers compared to the size of the population, and it is difficult to recruit adequately trained personnel in these areas.³⁹ This shortage makes day-to-day policing difficult, particularly when responding to reports of sexual and domestic violence. The lack of resources and limited access to social services in these isolated areas make it even harder to ensure that victims can access the support they need.

The Fiji Police Force

Established by the British colonial administration in 1874, Fiji's police force was initially created to maintain order and enforce colonial rule.⁴⁰ Since Fiji gained independence in 1970, the force has undergone significant changes. After a long period of military leadership, the force is currently transitioning to a police-led structure.



As part of this shift, the new government has pledged to “bring back the blue culture” by placing the responsibility for law enforcement, community safety and wellbeing back into the hands of police officers.⁴¹ In 2023, the Minister for Home Affairs and Immigration initiated consultations in developing its Restore Blue initiative, which aims to build community trust in the police's legitimacy. One of the key components of this initiative is the planned expansion of the *Duavata* Community Policing Program, initially launched in 2010, to foster partnerships between the police and local communities in addressing various issues and preventing crime.⁴²

In recent years, the Fiji Police Force has begun implementing measures to tackle GBV. While Fiji has not yet established specialised domestic violence units like some of its Pacific Island neighbours, 41 Sexual Offences Units led by women officers have been set up in police stations across the country, offering specialist support to victims of sexual violence.⁴³

As of the latest annual report from 2020, the Fiji Police Force employed 4,156, with women making up 22% of the force.⁴⁴ This low level of female representation raises some concerns about the ability of the police to meet the diverse needs of the community, especially for women and populations experiencing vulnerable circumstances. Data on the representation of LGBTIQ+ officers within the police force has not been collected.

³⁸ Bull et al, 2019, p. 164.

³⁹ Watson et al, 2024.

⁴⁰ Fiji Police Force. About Us. Accessed 23 September 2024:

<https://www.police.gov.fj/aboutus#:~:text=The%20Fiji%20Police%20Force%20as,was%20appointed%20Superintendent%20of%20police.>

⁴¹ Fiji Police Force, 2023. Back to Blue. Accessed 23 September 2024:

<https://www.police.gov.fj/view/2504#:~:text=%22Your%20allegiance%20must%20be%20to,organization's%20motto%20of%20salus%20populi.>

⁴² George, N., 2017, p. 65.

⁴³ Watson, 2024.

⁴⁴ Fiji Police Force, 2022. Fiji Police Force Annual Report August 2019 – July 2020.

<https://www.parliament.gov.fj/annual-reports-other-reports/fiji-police-force-annual-report-august-2019-july-2020/>

Relevant legislation and policy commitments

Fiji has officially committed to various national, regional, and international laws and conventions that embrace an accountability framework for addressing GBV and advancing gender equality (see Table 1). In 1995, Fiji ratified the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)⁴⁵ and, in 2015, aligned its national efforts with the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 5, which promotes gender equality, and SDG 16, which advocates for peace, justice, and strong institutions.⁴⁶

Regionally, Fiji is a signatory to significant initiatives such as the Pacific Platform for Action on Gender Equality and Women's Human Rights (2018-2030)⁴⁷ and the Pacific Leaders Gender Equality Declaration (2012, revitalised in 2023),⁴⁸ which urges the enactment and implementation of domestic violence legislation across member states. These commitments reflect Fiji's efforts to align with broader Pacific goals on gender equality and the protection of women's human rights.

Domestically, Fiji's legal framework addressing GBV is robust and includes key legislation such as the Family Law Act (2003), Domestic Violence Act (2009), Crimes Act (2009), and Criminal Procedure Act (2009).⁴⁹ Additionally, in 2013, the Government of Fiji launched the Elimination of Violence Against Women Task Force, which brings together government ministries, NGO partners, and development agencies.⁵⁰ This task force spearheaded the development of the National Action Plan for the Elimination of Violence Against Women and Girls (2023-2028) (NAP), a whole-of-government strategy coordinating the work of 13 sectors, including the justice sector.

The UN has played an integral role in developing numerous national-level initiatives. For instance, UN Women works closely with the Ministry of Women and Children to facilitate the NAP's implementation. At the same time, the UN Development Programme (UNDP) supports the Ministry of Home Affairs in developing policy for the Fiji Police Force, most recently through the Restore Blue initiative.⁵¹ These UN-supported efforts focus on promoting accountability, transparency, and a human rights-based approach within the police force as part of the broader goal of combating GBV.

In addition to these broader efforts, Fiji has introduced police-specific policies to address GBV directly. A key initiative is the No-Drop Policy, which mandates that police officers cannot, under any circumstances, attempt to reconcile perpetrators with victims in domestic violence cases.⁵² This policy stipulates that all domestic violence cases are processed through the legal system, regardless of the victim's preferences, as a measure to prevent impunity for offenders.

Despite these various efforts, however, GBV remains widespread in Fiji. Victims continue to face barriers in accessing justice, including inconsistent enforcement by the police and challenges with the full implementation of these legal protections and policy commitments.

45 United Nations, 1995. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women.

<https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/#:~:text=The%20Convention%20on%20the%20Elimination,bill%20of%20rights%20for%20women>

46 United Nations, 2015. Sustainable Development Goals. <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

47 Pacific Platform for Action on Gender Equality and Women's Human Rights (2018-2023). <https://www.spc.int/pacific-platform-for-action>

48 Pacific Leaders Gender Equality Declaration, 2023.

<https://forumsec.org/publications/revitalised-pacific-leaders-gender-equality-declaration>

49 Fiji Government, 2023, Fiji NAP.

50 Ibid.

51 Fijian Government, 2018, p. 39.

52 Chand, A., Karan, M., Mapuru, D. & Baba U., 2024. The Police Practice of Resolving Domestic Violence in Fiji, *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy*, 13(3): 35-46.

Table 1. Fiji's key international, regional, and national commitments on gender equality and ending gender-based violence ⁵³

International commitments	
UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (ratified 1995)	State Parties commit to take measures to suppress the sexual exploitation of women; General Recommendation No. 19 explicitly identifies gender-based violence as a form of discrimination of women, while General Recommendation No. 35 calls on State Parties to adopt measures to eradicate prejudices and stereotypes that constitutes the root causes of gender-based violence.
Beijing Platform for Action (ratified 1995)	The Platform is the most comprehensive global agenda for the achievement of gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. It calls for the prevention and elimination of all forms of gender-based violence.
UN Sustainable Development Goals (2015)	In the context of achieving gender equality SDG 5.2 sets a goal to eliminate all forms of violence against women in public and private spheres.
Regional commitments	
Pacific Platform for Action on Gender Equality and Women's Human Rights (2018-2030)	As a roadmap, the Platform identified priority areas for advancing gender equality in the Pacific Region, including the need to transform harmful social norms that perpetuate violence against women
Pacific Leaders Gender Equality Declaration (2012)	Ending violence against women is one of the key priorities of the Declaration, including the commitment of each country to enact and implement legislation to protect women from gender-based violence and impose appropriate penalties on perpetrators.
National commitments	
Legislation	
Constitution (2013)	Section 26(3) on Right to Equality and Freedom from Discrimination expands on the grounds of non-discrimination to include "gender sexual orientation, gender identity and expression".
Domestic Violence Act (2009)	Allows any person to apply for the Domestic Violence Restraining Order, mandates the police to ensure measures that promote the safety and wellbeing of domestic violence victims, especially women and children.
Crimes Act (2009)	Defines sexual offences, including expanding the definition of rape and increasing the maximum penalty to life imprisonment.
Criminal Procedures Act (2009)	Establishes that no corroboration is required in sexual offence cases, no evidence of past sexual history is permissible, and reconciliation does not apply to domestic violence offences.

⁵³ This table has been adapted from Annex 2 of the Fiji NAP.

Family Law Act (2003)	Establishes Family Division of the High Court and Magistrates Court, no fault divorce, counselling services, and maintenance protection orders.
Policies	
Fiji National Plan of Action to Prevent Violence Against All Women and Girls (2023-2028)	The NAP is the first of two five-year plans intended to advance the Government of Fiji's long-term commitment to prevent violence against all women and girls, through a whole-of-country approach.
Fiji National Service Delivery Protocol to Respond to Gender-Based Violence (2018)	Fiji's first national protocol on the principles, referrals and roles/responsibilities of key service providers to respond to cases of gender-based violence.
Women's Action Plan (2021-2026), Department of Women	Fiji's Department of Women sets out three strategic priorities in its work: i) eliminating violence against women, ii) promoting women's economic empowerment, iii) disaster preparedness to be guided by crosscutting gender issues.
Police-specific policies and initiatives	
No-Drop Policy (1995)	The Fiji Police is required by law to investigate complaints of domestic violence and bring the offenders to court.
Fiji Police Force (2018/2019) – Gender-Based Violence Policy	In 2021, the Fiji Police Force issued a new standard operating procedure aimed at improving police services to communities, including gender-based violence-related services and the plan for training of 2,500 officers across the four divisions.
Restore Blue Strategy (2023/2024)	Strategy championed by the new Minister for Home Affairs and Immigration to 'bring back the blue culture' and build the pillars of professionalism, capacity and community trust in the Fiji Police Force.





RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Purpose of this study

There is an urgent need to enhance our understanding of how the police force can more effectively prevent and respond to gender-based violence (GBV) in Fiji, where prevalence rates are alarmingly high. Addressing this issue requires a deep engagement with localised knowledge that considers the complex cultural, geographical, religious, and ethnic contexts of Fijian society, as well as the impacts and legacies of colonisation.

Much of the current literature on GBV originates from the Global North, with most policing models developed in English-speaking countries of the Northern Hemisphere.⁵⁴ As a result, the specific challenges of addressing the policing of GBV in a setting with a constrained financial capacity of the Global South remain underexplored. This study seeks to fill that gap by drawing on evidence from Fiji, providing context-sensitive insights that can inform the development of effective, feasible, and culturally appropriate strategies for addressing GBV in Fiji and similar Island settings.

The purpose of this research is to deepen our understanding of how the practices and approaches of the Fiji Police Force can be improved to better respond to GBV. In particular, this means developing an understanding of how police can improve their interactions with victims of sexual and domestic violence, and how police and other stakeholders (NGOs, women's organisations, government services, and community leaders) can better collaborate to support victims.

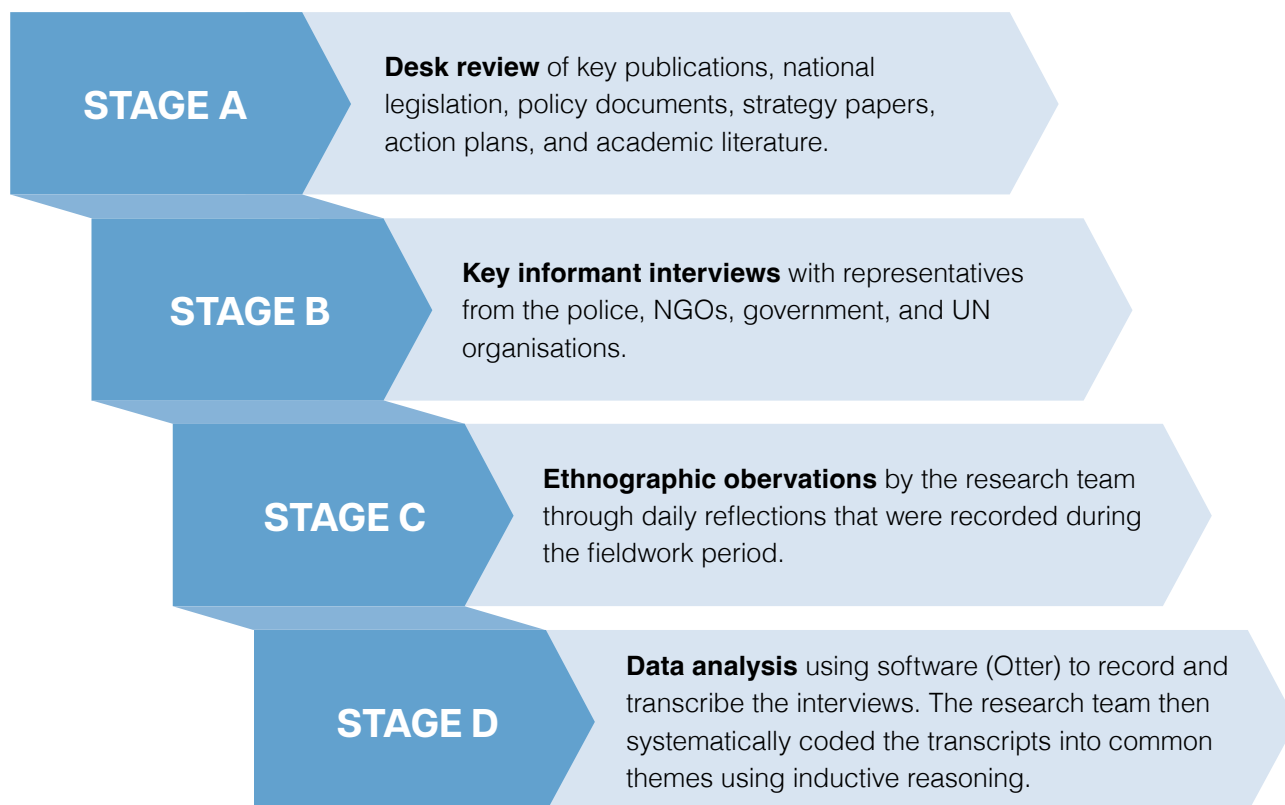
Accordingly, the aims of the research are to:

1. Explore how the Fiji Police Force currently handles sexual and domestic violence cases, drawing insights from police officers (across various ranks and units) and other key stakeholders;
2. Develop an understanding of the complex cultural issues and challenges of policing gender-based violence in Fiji;
3. Assess the extent of collaboration between police and key stakeholders in preventing and addressing gender-based violence, and identify ways to enhance multi-sectoral and community partnerships;
4. Identify effective practices currently being implemented by the police that improve the safety and well-being of victims of gender-based violence, as well as the main challenges they encounter.
5. Suggest ways to strengthen police responses to sexual and domestic violence, ensuring they align with a victim-centred and human rights-based approach.

⁵⁴ Carrington, K., Hogg, R., & Sozzo, M., 2019. Southern Criminology. *British Journal of Criminology* 15 (1) 1-20.

Research stages

The research study was carried out in four stages through an iterative process – desk review, key informant interviews, ethnographic observation, and data analysis.



Interview participants

Research interviews were conducted during two trips to Fiji, in September 2023 and August 2024.

A semi-structured interview format combined pre-determined and open-ended questions, allowing flexibility to explore unplanned topics as they arose.

On average, each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. During the interviews, participants were asked a series of questions across the following seven themes:

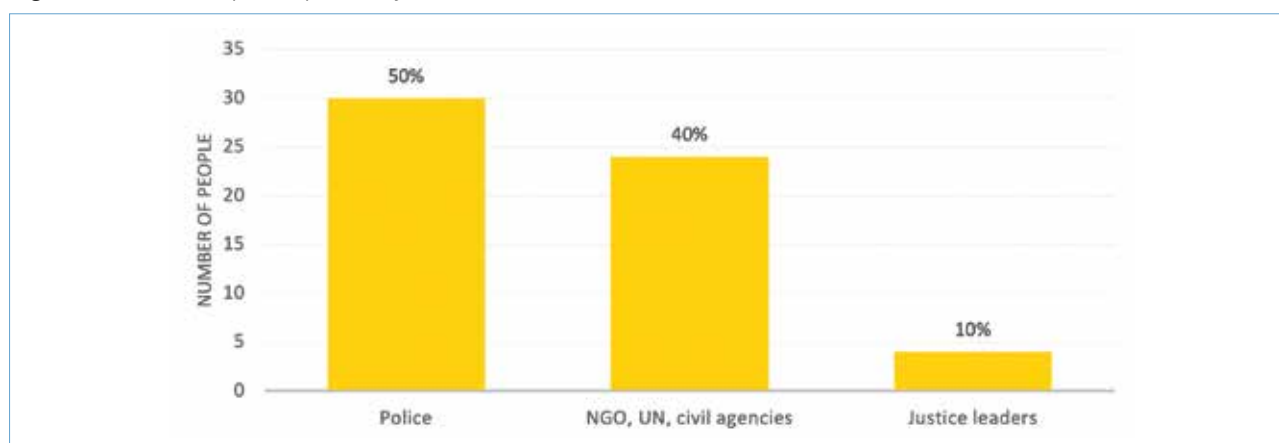
1. Socio-demographic background, including their gender, age, and other relevant details.
2. Job responsibilities and the role of their organisation
3. How they typically respond to victims of sexual and domestic violence
4. How they collaborate with other agencies in responding to gender-based violence
5. Experience and knowledge of effective practices in terms of police responses to gender-based violence
6. Perceptions of the challenges faced by police and other agencies in addressing gender-based violence
7. Suggestions for improving the policing of gender-based violence in Fiji in the short and long term

Using a mix of purposive and snowball sampling, the research team invited individuals from various organisations to participate in the study (see Table 2). Individuals were selected based on their in-depth knowledge and experience of policing responses to sexual and domestic violence offences.

A total of 58 people participated in the research interviews who can be categorised into three broad sectors (see Figure 1):

- 30 were police officers with varying junior to senior ranks across a range of units, including those working in charge rooms, frontline duties, Sexual Offences Units, Criminal Investigations Departments, Police Academy, and Community Police Posts.
- 24 were representatives from UN agencies, government offices, and civil society organisations, including women's and disability advocacy organisations, crisis support, counselling, social welfare, legal aid and medical services.
- 4 were 'justice leaders' occupying senior executive positions as international justice advisors, magistrates and prosecutors.

Figure 1. Interview participants by sector



As for the socio-demographic characteristics of those who took part in this research:

Gender – Over two-thirds (70%) identified as female (see Figure 2), which reflects the high proportion of women who typically work in the NGO sector, as well as the high proportion (57%) of female officers in police roles dedicated to supporting victims of GBV.

Age – The largest proportion of people (35%) were in their 40s (see Figure 3). The average age of UN and civil agency participants was 39 years, average age of police participants was 42 years, and average age of justice leaders was 55 years.

Number of years worked – The largest proportion of people (45%) had worked in their sector area for under 10 years (see Figure 4). This could be potentially attributed to the relatively high turnover of roles in the NGO sector due to funding constraints. UN and NGO participants had worked in their sector area for an average of four years. For police participants, this rose to an average of 18 years, and for justice leaders, it rose to 29 years.

Lived experience of sexual and gender-based violence – While the participant sample focused on professionals and representatives in their official capacity, in interviews with both police officers and NGOs/civil agencies, a number of participants revealed, of their own accord, their own lived experience of SGBV which contributed to more nuanced reflections on key issues.

Location – The research team visited four locations across two major islands (see Figure 5 and Map of Fiji). A slightly larger portion of the interviews took place in Suva (35%), as many police, NGO, and government headquarters are located in the capital. Significant efforts were made to interview participants based in Labasa, Nadi and Lautoka to ensure diverse geographic coverage, which accounted for 65% of the total interviews. Many of those we interviewed in these locations also conducted outreach services to remote and Island settlements.

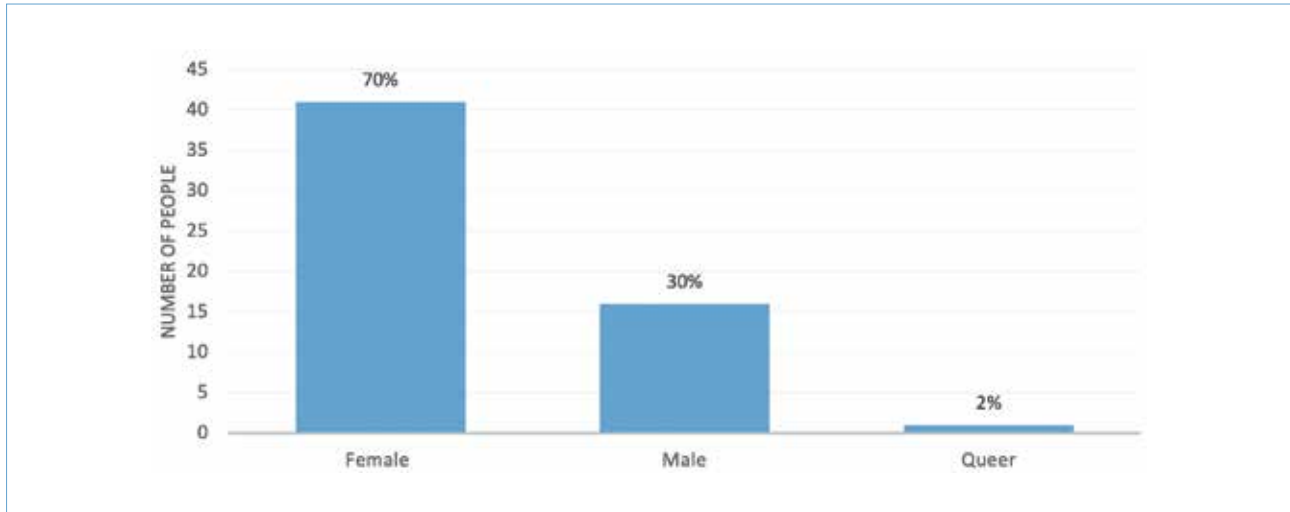
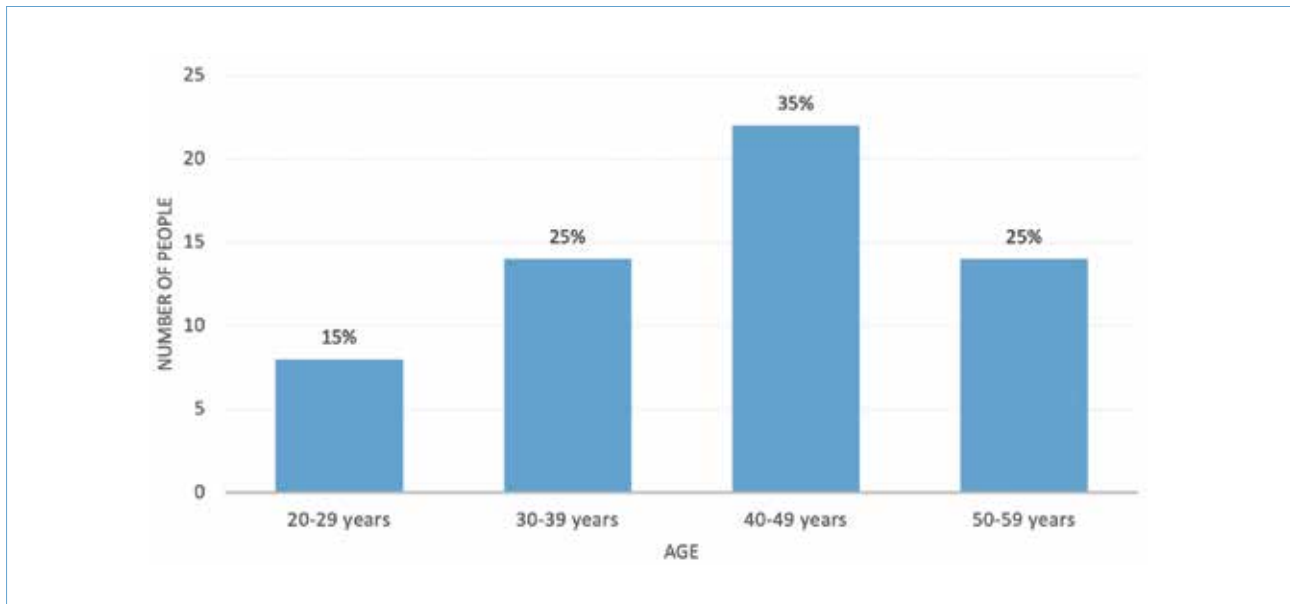
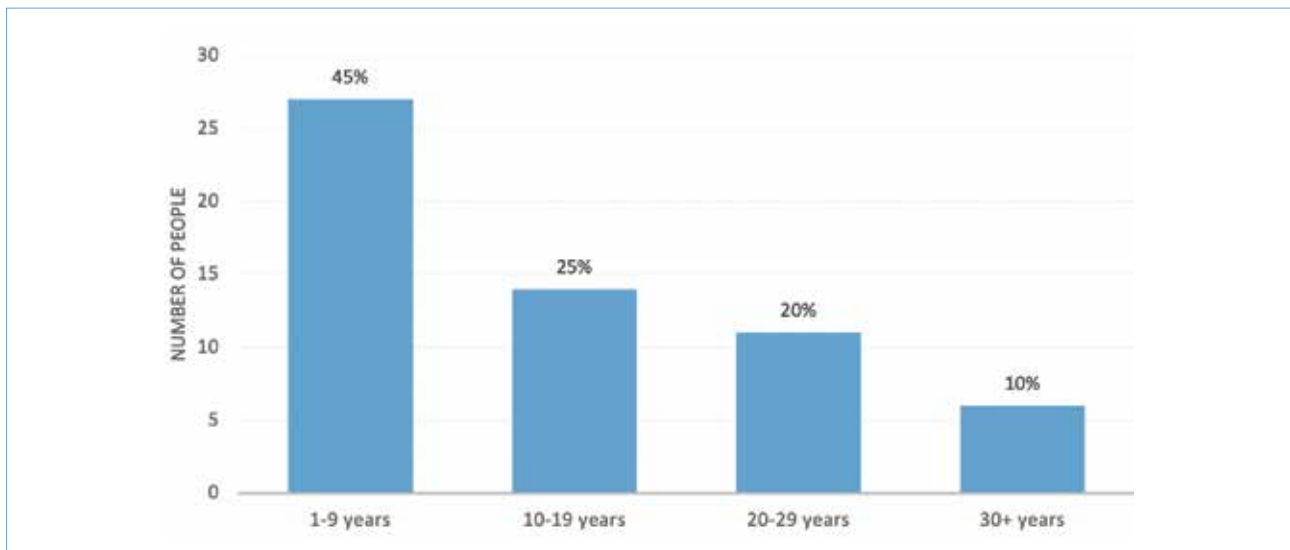
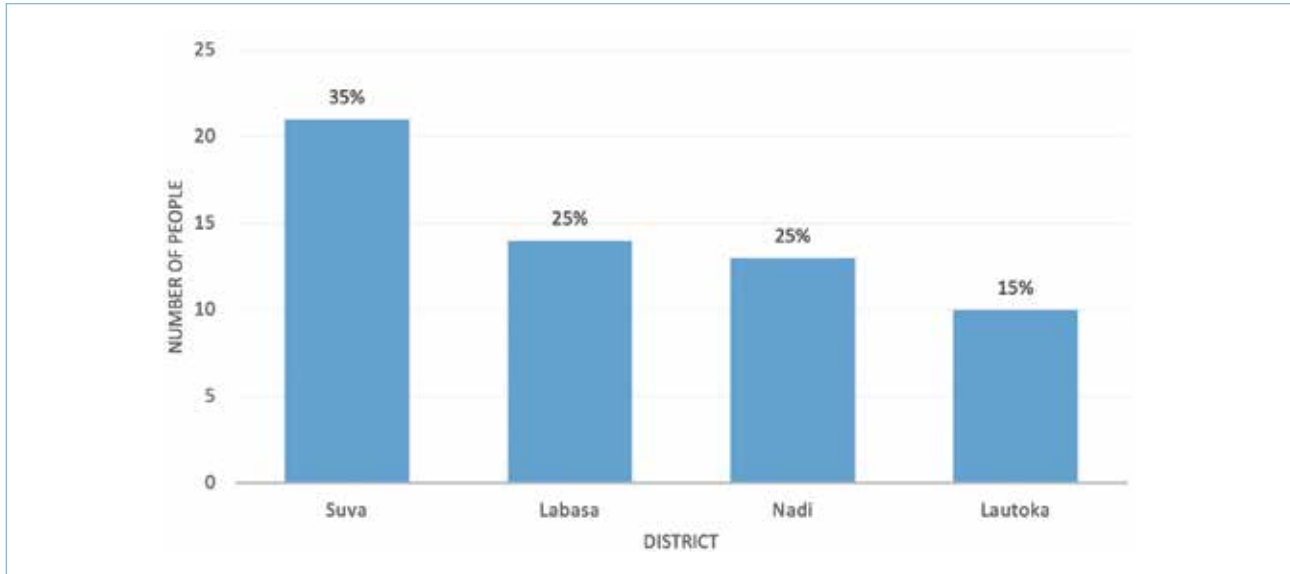
Figure 2. Gender of research participants*Figure 3. Age of research participants**Figure 4. Number of years participants have worked in their sector*

Figure 5. Interview locations



Map of Fiji – Interview locations



Table 2. Police, government, UN and civil society organisations from which interview participants were selected

Fiji Police Force	
Police officers	Police from varying junior to senior ranks, including those working in charge rooms, frontline duties, Sexual Offences Units, Domestic Violence Restraining Order roles, Criminal Investigations Departments, the Police Academy, and Community Police Posts.
Other government agencies	
Sexual Crimes Unit, Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions	The Sexual Crimes Division is a specialist unit within the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions responsible for prosecuting sexual and gender-based violence, and child sexual abuse.
Ministry of Home Affairs and Immigration	The Ministry provides strategic leadership and policy guidance on defence and security. The Ministry's Police Section plays a coordinating role on policies relevant to the Fiji Police Force.
UN agencies	
United Nations Development Programme	UNDP is the lead UN agency working with governments to end injustice of poverty and inequality. It supports the Fiji Police Force to prioritise a gender responsive and human rights-based approach.
United Nations Human Rights	UN OHCHR supports Fiji to strengthen its rule of law and accountability for human rights violations. The agency supports the Fiji Police Force with human rights capacity building and training.
UN Women	UN Women is the UN agency dedicated to gender equality and the empowerment of women. In Fiji, ending violence against women and girls is one of the organisation's focus areas.
United Nations Population Fund	UN Population Fund is the UN's sexual and reproductive health agency. It works to extend family planning, mobilises communities against violence, and supports services for victims of violence.
Civil society organisations	
Empower Pacific	Empower Pacific provides health and social development services to all those in need, including counselling, social work, and targeted interventions to reduce gender-based violence.
FemLink	FemLINK Pacific is a feminist media and broadcasting organisation that produces a range of media initiatives across Fiji, including community radio broadcasts.
Fiji Disabled People's Federation	The Federation promotes equalising opportunities for people with disabilities through programs that advocate for an inclusive, barrier-free society in Fiji.

Fiji Women's Crisis Centre	The Fiji Women's Crisis Centre provides crisis counselling, legal, medical and other practical support services for women and children who are victims of violence.
Fiji Women's Lawyers Association	The Fiji Women's Lawyers Association seeks to advance the rights of women in the legal profession, promotes the administration of justice, and promotes greater gender equality and social justice.
Fiji Women's Rights Movement	The Fiji Women's Rights Movement is a multiethnic and multicultural NGO committed to removing discrimination against women through institutional reform and attitudinal change.
Medical Services Pacific	Medical Services Pacific is an NGO providing women and children with healthcare and social services. It established the first integrated service in Fiji for victims of sexual violence, offering medical, counselling and legal aid services.
Pacific Community	Pacific Community supports member countries across the Pacific region to deliver on their commitments to international human rights treaties, including implementation of national domestic violence laws.

Data Analysis

The interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. The interviews were recorded using Otter recording software, which was also used to transcribe the recordings. After the completion of the field research, a total of 406,000 words recorded by Otter were painstakingly checked and corrected by two of the individual researchers, Carla Unger and Kerry Carrington. At the same time, the qualitative data was coded into head themes through a process of analytic induction (Punch, 1998:201). This process began in the field. At the end of the day's interviews, the three researchers recorded reflections on the key themes that emerged across the interviews. By the time we reached the end of the 58 interviews, the research team was confident that we had achieved data saturation across several key themes. These included: Police Culture, Police Leadership, Police Training, Police Structure, Police Processes, Bridging Customary Justice; Community Policing; Multi-sector Collaboration; Existing Laws, Challenges to Police Response; Enhancing Police Responses to Domestic and Sexual Violence.

Research ethics

The University of the Sunshine Coast's Human Research Ethics Committee approved the research methodology and process before any interviews were conducted.

Participants received an Information Sheet outlining the research's purpose and the potential risks and benefits of their involvement. At the beginning of each interview, the research team dedicated time to discussing confidentiality and answering any questions. Verbal consent was obtained before any interview questions were asked.

To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, the research team took careful measures to protect the identities of all participants. To prevent identification, the names and locations of informants were kept separate from the interview recordings and transcriptions. Instead of using names, each participant was assigned a unique number.

Before publication, a draft of the report was sent to all interview participants, allowing them to verify that their identities were adequately protected. No ethical issues were raised about the representation of participants' views. We also sought general feedback on the report from participants. All those who responded were satisfied with the report's findings and recommendations.

Limitations of the study

The research primarily focused on urban areas and did not extensively cover rural or remote locations. This limitation arose because most relevant organisations and services are based in urban centres, and reaching rural areas presented challenges due to our resource constraints and time limitations.

Similarly, the representation of police officers stationed at Community Police Posts was limited. Although approximately 15% of the officers interviewed were from these posts, we faced difficulties, including more due to the challenges of scheduling interviews within the project's timeframe. In any future research, more of these officers should be included.

Given the sensitive nature of their experiences, direct engagement with victims of GBV was avoided to ensure their safety and well-being. To avoid any risk of re-traumatising victims, we gathered insights from counselling, legal, and program staff at crisis centres and shelters who worked extensively with them on a day-to-day basis.

Efforts were also made to engage with LGBTIQ+ specific organisations, but their perspectives were not as fully represented in the research as we had hoped. However, we interviewed several individuals from the LGBTIQ+ community who have worked for other organisations.



RESEARCH FINDINGS

Here, we present the findings from our research interviews with police officers, women's and human rights organisations, medical services, legal professionals, and other experts. We highlight the key challenges and opportunities for addressing gender-based violence (GBV) in Fiji, with a focus on strengthening the police force's response. Together, these evidence-based findings offer ideas for improving the police force's ability to prevent and respond to GBV effectively. Our findings are organised into seven parts.

Part A. State and traditional justice systems for addressing gender-based violence

Part B. Multi-sectoral approaches and collaboration

Part C. Police leadership and organisational reform

Part D: Organisational structures for responding to sexual and domestic violence

Part E: Police processes, systems and infrastructure

Part F. Police capacity building and training

Part A. State and traditional justice systems for addressing gender-based violence

Like other Pacific Island states, Fiji has a 'blended' justice system, where the state policing system coexists with traditional justice responses.⁵⁵ This section explores how these complex systems intersect and how police navigate the legal and cultural demands associated with state and customary frameworks.

Legal frameworks of the state

Fiji has an extensive and robust legal framework for addressing GBV and is signatory to the UN Convention on the Elimination of Violence Against Women as well as a Pacific regional declaration on gender equality. Relevant legislation includes the Family Law Act (2003), Domestic Violence Act (2009), Crimes Act (2009), and Criminal Procedure Act (2009). Following interviews with participants, we categorised concerns raised and identified according to four main areas that were relevant for this research, they include: problems with the implementation of domestic violence laws, including issues relating to the suitability and implementation of the No-Drop Policy; the use of 'defilement' laws to criminalise underage consensual sex; and, a lack of legal protections for LGBTQI+ communities.

Problems with the implementation of domestic violence laws

There are laws and policies in place to address domestic violence, including the Domestic Violence Act 2009. A legal officer from a UN agency summarised the strength of Fiji's legislative framework in this regard:

"The laws are quite strong in Fiji when it comes to protection. There's been changes in the Crimes Act, the Domestic Violence Act, and the Family Law Act. These policies and directives have all included the Fiji Police....and then there's a Chief Magistrates Directive 2018 that opposes the use of a traditional practice called Bulubulu in determining sentences."

⁵⁵ George, N., 2017; Bull et al, 2019; Watson et al, 2023.

According to multiple lawyers we spoke to who specialise in women's rights the Domestic Violence Act 2009 is in need of review and amendment. One lawyer noted:

“It’s in need of a great review and possibly amendment. It started in 2009 as the Domestic Violence Decree – back then – now Domestic Violence Act. And it is in need of review, you know, to update it for what’s happening now. I’m not sure it suits the purposes of today.”

One of the key issues raised by participants was the lack of clear regulations and practices to guide police using the laws. A gender officer from the UN expressed concerns about this gap:

“You have the legal frameworks, but you don’t have, like, regulatory documents of the law. And that’s something that I’ve only found in the Pacific... that you have great laws, but you don’t have like, decrees or any regulatory documents that say how I need to implement the law. So, it just becomes like a loophole. Things are there, but people don’t know what to do with it.”

The No-Drop Policy of the Fiji police stipulates that police must take reports seriously and investigate all domestic violence complaints. A UN advisor who specialises in gender rights urged a review of the No-Drop Policy to understand its positive and negative impacts. This quote describes why such a review of the policy is timely:

“The policies and legal frameworks are outdated. I think we are in a good time in history in the Pacific to do full research on the positive outcomes of, for example, the No-Drop Policy or its negative outcomes... The No-Drop Policy started as a mandate to make sure that police actually investigated [cases] instead of dropping them, which was happening before. So, it made sense until then. But then you also have, on the other side, the saturation of the justice system. If you enact the No-Drop Policy... [sometimes you] don’t have enough evidence to actually become a case... and then on another side, it’s antagonistic with the survivor-centred approach.”

Another senior UN policy advisor described similar complexities with the policy.

“I’ve heard very mixed things [about the No-Drop Policy]. I’ve heard for some that’s a barrier, and others who think it’s a facilitator.”

According to several interviewees, the policy has resulted in police charging people without adequately investigating whether there is evidence of domestic violence, or whether the complaint may be false. A lawyer who regularly appears in court for GBV cases explained:

“There’s no room for nuance or investigation because there’s No-Drop. They [police officers] just take the statement, charge the person, and they deal with it in court.”

Participants’ perspectives on the effectiveness of the No-Drop Policy were mixed. Many highlighted the lack of other support services for victims of GBV as a reason why a strict policy is not necessarily suitable for the current Fijian context. Moreover, participants highlighted the necessity of strong multi-sectoral collaboration.



Lack of legal protections for LGBTQI+ communities

There are currently no specific legal protections in Fiji for the LGBTQI+ individuals. A gender rights explains why this is particularly problematic:

“I think one of the things that could change is around legal recognition... legal recognition would mean protection... because there’s a lot of very broad terms in the Constitution itself, and that specificity would then provide protection. Because if you look at trans and queer people, a lot of them are also sex workers and are, you know, being subject to police brutality. And so, first legal recognition [is needed] and the other is decriminalising things like sex work for people within the queer community.”

Another gender rights advocate reiterates the urgency in reforming Fijian laws to protect the safety and wellbeing of the LGBTQI+ community:

“It [the situation] is worse for the LGBTQI community. Like even their safety is not considered paramount, and the Fijian Law does not really have the capacity to protect them”.

These gaps in legal protections leave these communities vulnerable to discrimination and poor treatment by others in Fijian society, including by law enforcement officers.

Legislation criminalising all underage consensual sex

The Crimes Act 2009 criminalises sexual offences involving underage individuals in consensual sex (known locally as ‘defilement’). Although these sexual relationships are between two consenting young people, this can be considered rape under Fijian law.

A positive outcome – stemming from many years of advocacy efforts – is the strong emphasis on policing and prosecution of child sexual assault. Based on statistics collated by the Office of the Director of Prosecutions, between 2017 and 2023 children under 18 comprised two-thirds of victims of sexual assault and slightly over 10% of accused offenders.⁵⁶ However, a proportion of these cases are for consensual relationships among 15- to 17-year-olds, which divert precious police and court resources away from non-consenting sexual offences of rape.

An officer from a Sexual Offences Unit explained that most of the ‘defilement’ cases the Unit dealt with involved underage consensual sex – not rape – and these cases consumed more than half of their caseload:

“Most of the victims are consensual victims, yes ... Most of the time we receive reports from the doctors as well of teenage pregnancies...the age is just from 15, 16 and 17.”

An officer from a different Sexual Offences Unit raised similar concerns about the excessive amount of time that police spent on responding to parents’ complaints of ‘defilement’ when they discover that their daughters are either pregnant or having underage sex, which conflicts with the parents’ own religious and moral beliefs:

“It’s consensual sex. And later on, the parents knew that she was pregnant, so they came and report. So, for us, when the report goes like that, we still have to bring the suspect for interview, even for consensual sex.”

⁵⁶ Tally of the ODPP Rape and Sexual Offences Statistics for 6 years (2017-2023) as per information filed in the High Court only (2024) Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions, Fiji.

A former magistrate with three decades of experience presiding over GBV cases in court spoke about the need to reform outdated laws that criminalise consensual underage sex and consume enormous amounts of police and court time. She notes that false allegations are frequently made by parents who are concerned about protecting their family's honour:

“We’ve had to file numerous withdrawals, not only in relation to defilement cases, but rape cases. We find out that [she] had actually consented – [the victim will say] ‘but I only said he forced me or raped me because I was afraid’. It’s because of the parents you know, most of the times because of the parents.”

Often, these cases come to the attention of the police or courts by disgruntled parents, suspicious school teachers, or religious and community leaders with conservative views about pre-marital relationships. Participants said that even though both people were consenting to the sexual relationship, it is rarely girls, and nearly always boys, who are charged with ‘defilement’.

While it is important to have legal frameworks which protect young people, the current age limits could benefit from review to ensure police and court resources can be better aligned with crimes which inflict greater harms.

Caught between traditional and legal justice systems

While traditional systems, such as *Bulubulu*, promote reconciliation and community harmony, they often conflict with the State's legal frameworks that aim to prioritise victim protection and offender accountability. Under Fijian Law, *Bulubulu* is not supposed to be used for domestic or sexual violence. However, we were informed by police and women's rights advocates that, in practice, it is widely used for resolving GBV cases. Traditional justice practices are typically gendered and patriarchal and can contribute to sustaining inequities of power and unequal access to justice and resources.⁵⁷ This presents a challenge for respecting local customs while also seeking to shift cultural practices which ensure women and girls can exercise their rights.

A UN official who was born and raised in Fiji explained how this blended system operates:

“You almost have a parallel system. One is the formal justice system – police and everything you know, judiciary and so on, and one is the community system... Certainly, in the Indigenous communities, it doesn’t really matter what anybody says, as long as the Chief has said what he says... And oftentimes, you know, conflicts are solved by mediation. They’re not solved through ... the formal justice system.”

Stigma and shame in communities around GBV deters many victims from reporting abuse, not only to the police, but also health, justice and social services.⁵⁸ This gender specialist described the depth of the problem in Fiji and across the Pacific:

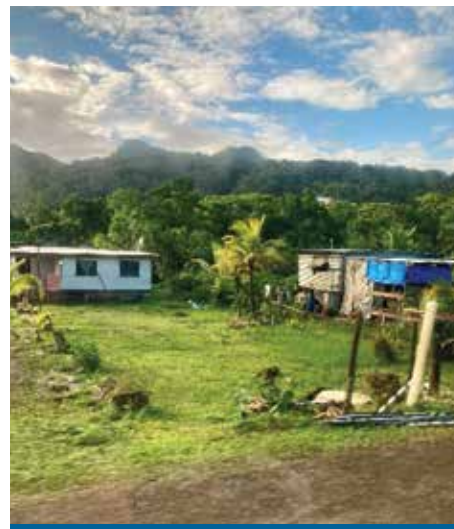
“There’s a very strong ‘hush hush’ culture all around the Pacific. It’s appropriate not to speak up, right? You don’t want to speak up because you don’t want to bring shame for yourself as a victim, but also shame to your partner, to your family, to your community, to your country... When someone actually wants to speak up, they still want it to be confidential, but when the police officer is the uncle, the cousin, the best friend, you know, part of the community, it makes it a little bit harder.”

57 Bull, N., George, N. & Curth-Bibb, J., 2019.; Fosu, R., & Gordon, E. 2025. The gendered politics of the ‘local turn’ in peacebuilding: Acholi traditional justice and gender in post-conflict Uganda. *Disasters*, 49(2), e12677, p. 13. <https://doi.org/10.1111/disa.12677>; Watson, D.V.C., Amin, S.N. & Robinson, A.L. 2024.

58 Fijian Government, 2023. Fiji NAP, p. 30.

While stigma and shame are deterrents to reporting GBV, there are diverse and sometimes competing implications associated with seeking justice through state or traditional means. For example, some interviewees said that families often agree to traditional reconciliation in rural and remote villages, especially where victims and suspects are related or live in the same communities. Relatives and community members do not want the perpetrator to face legal consequences and end up in prison, as this would leave the family without an income earner.

With limited financial assistance available to victims, police feel conflicted about what is an appropriate response in the context of the No-Drop Policy. According to a senior police officer, sometimes police are encouraged to or look the other way when reconciliations take place:



“If we take this guy in, if he’s the only sole breadwinner, who’s going to feed the children and the wife? So those are some of the things as police officers we want to sit and discuss and look for amicable solutions.”

Most officers we interviewed were acutely aware of this challenge. One CID inspector explained how he uses both the traditional and legal systems in responding to cases of GBV:

“We always advise them that it’s the Turang Ni Koro [village headman] who has the first say... That’s what I always advise people: ‘You go through the Turang Ni Koro. If you do not seek justice that way, okay, go to the head of the clan. If there is still no justice, then you come to us.’”

Another senior police officer explained how traditional reconciliation can be challenging for police who are not legally allowed to drop the case under the No-Drop Policy:

“When the victim’s family went to report and the suspect’s family knew that the case was reported and handled by the police, the suspect’s family will go to the victim’s family and do their traditional reconciliation. And they always come back to the station and mention that ‘these people have come and they did the reconciliation’. And that is a challenge for us.”

Some participants mentioned cases where the Turang Ni Koro or his relatives have been accused of committing sexual or domestic violence, withholding cooperation, or obstructing attempts to investigate by police. In one example, a participant described how a Turang Ni Koro obstructed a police investigation where the situation became very tense. One of the police officers with family ties to the village was described as critical in using his influence to calm the situation and avoid risk of a physical conflict.

Bridging customary and state justice approaches

As the village headmen, Turang Ni Koro are elected or appointed by their community and paid a small government stipend for their duties. Even if police – as agents of the State – do decide to pursue an investigation relating to domestic or sexual violence, they first need to gain permission from the Turang Ni Koro to be able to talk to victims. This quote from a former Director of a Sexual Offences Unit illustrates how the Turang Ni Koro are critical gatekeepers in accessing communities:

“In the villages, the Turang Ni Koro is the government... So when we always go to villages, that will be the first person that we will get to – the Turang Ni Koro - he will be the point of contact with the village and... if we have to arrange for awareness [training] or anything, it will be through him, and he will arrange it with the village and then they'll get back to us on what is the appropriate time or date for the functions.”

Similarly, an officer from a Sexual Offences Unit recounted what typically happens when she is called to a village to respond to an alleged incident:

“When we go to the island there will be few villages there... So, at first, we'll contact the Turang Ni Koro – the village headman... So, the village headman will make arrangements for which house to go to and sit to talk to the victim.”

We were told several stories about Turang Ni Koro who acted on behalf of victims by reporting abuse to the police. As a health service manager explained:

“There was this case where ... the Turang Ni Koro had done his role in having to report the matter to police. He had gone to let the police know, because the woman didn't want to go and report that the husband had physically abused her, but the Tarang Ni Koro knew his role well, and he went and approached police to report the matter.”

There is potential for Community Crime Prevention Committees to take on greater roles in relation to GBV. These Committees are linked to community police posts, are already running awareness campaigns on topics like drug use and other local issues. Many research participants spoke about the value of using these existing structures to improve the situation of GBV. According to a legal officer:

“Strengthening networks... between the police and the community, and using these existing systems to combat violence against women – working with Chiefs, for example – to monitor what's happening in the community...You know, part of the policing could be done in the community.”

The members of Crime Prevention Committees vary depending on the needs of each community. They often include a mix of community police officers, village elders, religious leaders, school teachers, and local nurses (Nasi Ni Koro), and connect with other local groups, such as youth groups. Community police can use these committees and existing community networks to improve how GBV is prevented and addressed.

Additionally, the Fiji Women's Crisis Centre has set up Ending Violence Against Women (EVAW) Committees in selected villages across the country where rates of GBV are particularly high. Since it can be very difficult to access police stations in rural and remote areas, EVAW committees provide an alternative way for local communities to assist victims. The NGO provides these committees with practical and legal advice on how to assist victims with accessing services and reporting to the police. This is a good example of a blended approach that addresses GBV, as it draws on community structures and can help to create pathways for victims to access the legal justice system.

A few people spoke about the need for creativity in bringing the State's legal system closer to rural and remote communities. A senior justice official with thirty years of courtroom experience described how this can be achieved in village settings with limited resources where both State judicial officers and village leaders are present:

“Sitting under a coconut tree you can do justice – Accused [sit] here, witnesses here, public gallery there – they’re all sitting on the grass. It’s an application of the principles, the law, and the room. It doesn’t matter where you sit.”

Rather than blaming culture and religion for the high levels of violence in communities, re-framing culture and religion was described as an essential and effective way to bring a wide range of stakeholders on board. A senior UN advisor described how international agencies had reflected on their previous strategies and had shifted their approaches to addressing GBV in a more culturally sensitive manner:

“I think with gender-based violence overall, and with violence against women and domestic violence, there has to be a very gentle approach...so we’re [not] insulting your values, your principles, your religion...most of the international organisations working on it have done a lot of, like, self-reflection, and we’re starting to change our approach... you know, like, how can we use a culture to protect, to respond? Instead of just seeing it as ‘oh, this is your culture, that is wrong’”

In this way, international agencies have learned to better understand how culture and religion can potentially be protective factors, highlighting the importance of local knowledge while striving for a vision of universal human rights.

Part B. Multi-sectoral approaches and collaboration

Women frequently remain in abusive relationships due to a lack of access to essential services such as safe housing, financial support, and childcare. Numerous interviewees spoke about the lack of safe housing as one of the most significant constraints that victims face. A female police corporal based in Suva explained:

“If a victim has been assaulted, where is she going to go after we have recorded her statement? She will go back to her place where the violence started. So, there is no support service for her. Sexual offence victims, similarly – where are they going to go? Where will the police keep them? Once we have recorded that she was raped, she will go back into that family where the violence cycle will continue.”

This officer further described how imprisoning an abuser could backfire without broader service provisions in place, as it takes away the breadwinner of the family:

“Although the law says we must report, we [police] must charge. Now suppose she [the victim] has six children. We can charge the husband and he goes for six months in prison. Who is going to feed them? Do you have any kind of legislation or social welfare benefit that can go to them? There’s nothing such as that”

Numerous interviewees highlighted the impacts of a lack of available childcare, including the way it limits women’s access to employment and thus remain financially dependent on male partners. Even though Fiji has well developed frameworks and legislation to support childcare, government supported services are limited.⁵⁹ Instead, childcare is typically employer-led or arranged privately.

One woman from an NGO also had personal experience of domestic violence, expressed the difficult choices faced by victims in the absence of viable alternatives:

⁵⁹ Chopra, D. 2023. Investments in childcare for gender equality in Asia and the Pacific, Report, International Labour Organization and Asian Development Bank.

“At the end of the day, you know, we need to feed our kids. We need to think about our kids. And that sort of binds us. Because if we leave right now, if my husband is jailed, who's going to feed my kids? Who's going to keep me with my five kids, where will I go?”

Therefore, support for victims through enhanced service provision is essential for the police force's No-Drop Policy to succeed if pursued in its current form. A gender rights specialist pointed out that the police's effectiveness in handling GBV cases is contingent on how well other services are functioning:

“If you are going to have a No-Drop Policy, you have to ensure you have all the services fully working in place... And I think there's a big gap between the two.”

A gender advisor from a key development agency highlighted the importance of inter-agency collaboration to effectively tackle violence:

“We need a holistic approach to it [GBV], because it really is a question of eradicating violence from societies that are quite violent in and of themselves. I mean, the police and the lack of attention to victims' rights is just a manifestation of that. And I think that's important because it does require investments from various parts of government, and of society, of course. And oftentimes we try to fix one area, and then it sort of doesn't work, because we haven't worked with the other stakeholders.”

Participants also described practices to pool resources where a traditional culture of working together was leveraged to respond to and deliver services to communities in remote areas despite significant challenges. A service provider we interviewed described this approach in the following way:

“Our community outreaches are in the settlements and in the villages...we look at how we can support each other [in committee meetings]. For example, if social welfare has [an outer island], we also take care of the outer islands... the police have a boat, we have money for fuel...We provide the medical services, [sexual & reproductive health rights information], counselling, legal and the fuel, and police provides the boat with a captain, so we go together. We go in a 9–10-member team, and then we invite other stakeholders that need to be in there, like Save the Children or Legal Aid... everybody brings awareness on their individual service provision....that's how we operate. We definitely don't normally operate alone.”



Good practice examples of inter-agency collaboration – Lautoka

Despite overarching challenges at the national level, there are examples of effective inter-agency collaboration in some locations. In Lautoka, an inter-agency group provides integrated support for children affected by violence, pooling resources from stakeholders such as police, social welfare, education and NGOs. Members meet regularly, coordinate activities through Viber, and travel together to outer islands when required, sharing scarce resources such as vehicles and boats. A member from one of the NGOs described the group's approach:

“Social welfare organises the communities. We provide the medical services and sexual and reproductive health and counselling and legal [services] and fuel. And police provide the boat with a captain and pay him, so we go together. Sometimes we go in a nine- or ten-member team, and then we invite other stakeholders”.

NGOs in Lautoka play a pivotal role in bridging service gaps. The significance of these relationships was described by a police officer from one of the Sexual Offences Units:

“So here in Lautoka, we have the strongest inter-agency throughout Fiji, really active. We work with social welfare, education, health, and MSP [Medical Services Pacific]... We really work together. So, when we hold our meetings, and whatever programs we go through or whatever case we attend, we attend it together. With most of the cases, the welfare [workers] call us in, we call them, and we go together”.

Instead of approaching the police directly, many victims feel more comfortable approaching NGOs. These organisations provide a range of services, including accompanying victims to the police station to file reports, helping them to apply for domestic violence restraining orders, and taking referrals from the police for counselling, medical care, and legal aid.

This example from Lautoka underscores the importance of strengthening partnerships and resource-sharing mechanisms to enhance service delivery for GBV victims.

Challenges in implementing existing multi-sectoral strategies

Even though Fiji has developed robust multi-sectoral strategies to address GBV which were widely praised by research participants, funding shortfalls and limited coordination hinder their implementation. A legal officer from a civil society organisation noted:

“The [National Action] Plan is drawn up. It’s not being implemented. It’s not actually in the communities yet... There’s multiple, like, Task Forces and committees and everything set up but there’s no actual outputs.”

Implementation challenges stem partly from piecemeal funding support and resourcing gaps, which have led to uneven prioritisation among sectors. A GBV specialist explained the difficulties in funding all sectors equally and simultaneously:

“Speaking about Fiji, the state has a responsibility where they’re working on the National Action Plan... They’re trying to resource it, to develop gender budgeting, and trying to roll out programs in each of the 13 sectors. So, it’s challenging. In an ideal world, it’d be great to have a lot of resources where they can simultaneously roll out 13 sectors, but it’s not an ideal world. They have to sieve through it – how much money do you have? Which sector do you want to finance first?”

Under the NAP, the Fiji Police Force has committed to participating in inter-agency groups, such as the Domestic Violence Task Force, as well as groups at divisional and district levels. However, in many locations we visited, these groups were inactive or met infrequently, undermining their potential to coordinate GBV responses. A representative from a non-profit service delivery organisation noted:

“This [Domestic Violence] Task Force is actually just lagging behind... I think this year we’ve just had one meeting so far... The Task Force is quite important because that’s when all the stakeholders come in and discuss cases they have attended and how we can strengthen and collaborate”

Beyond services such as social welfare, crisis housing, financial assistance, and childcare, education for children was frequently cited as a critical way of reforming harmful societal norms. A project officer with

experience in running GBV campaigns called for substantive changes in the Fijian school curriculum to instil values of gender equality and human rights:

“I genuinely think that we need to really target our school system. Like our curriculum is extremely outdated. They still do stereotypical gender roles, ‘Mummy’s cooking, Daddy’s at work,’ they still do that. I think a huge overhaul of that is really, really needed. Human rights should be a huge component of the curriculum, and gender equality”

In addition to embedding gender rights education across the school curriculum, interviewees identified several other stakeholder groups that they considered particularly important when targeting violence prevention activities. These include efforts that engage men through educational and counselling programs, involve community influencers such as religious and sports leaders, and sensitise legal professionals—including judges, lawyers, and prosecutors—to GBV issues.

Part C. Police leadership and organisational reform

The impact of police culture on addressing sexual and domestic violence

It was commonly explained to us by interviewees that the Fiji Police Force mirrors the same patriarchal values found in Fijian society, where strong gender stereotypes shape attitudes and behaviours that contribute to sexual and domestic violence.

A senior justice leader stressed the importance of leadership-driven change:

“Unless it’s driven by that level above, they [officers] just don’t do it. We can give them all the training in the world, but unless the next level up and the next level up go ‘you will do this,’ it just doesn’t happen.”

Another senior justice leader highlighted the importance of leaders explaining to officers why changes that are needed in a meaningful and persuasive manner:

“I see the policy stuck there on the wall of police stations ... It’s simply not you say, ‘okay, we are going to change culture’. But how are you going to do it? When we bring something new and there’s fear in people, you’ve got to be very smart about it... You’ve got to sell them the product properly by a lot of awareness and information, and assure them that in this transition, that they will be guided, and they will be trained, they’ll be given the skills...”

Observations from several key informants indicate there are promising signs of increased professionalism within the police force under new leadership, marking a shift away from its past.

“They [leadership] want a modern sort of type of policing, one that’s centred in human rights principles and one that is driven by community policing

-Human rights and governance specialist

The Restore Blue strategy is seen as an opportunity to build a human rights-centred and gender-sensitive police force, and as a potential chance to improve police responses to GBV. However, interviewees emphasised that the success of these efforts hinges on leadership’s



commitment to transforming the police culture into one that genuinely supports diversity among its workforce and human rights-centred interactions with victims.

Organisational incentives and priorities

The manner in which resources are allocated within organisations provides insights into the historic and current strategic priorities. In a context of competing priorities, allocating resources to address GBV was perceived as being overlooked compared to emerging issues such as drug trafficking and cybercrime, which can be both a product of the police culture and the priorities of donor countries or organisations. A senior female police officer expressed the imbalance of the allocation of resources in the following way:

“If there is a murder, or if there is a robbery with violence – oh! – the amount of resources and stuff that are injected into the that, to get the suspect overnight, is overwhelming. As opposed to, you know, sexual and domestic violence, I don’t know why.”

While there are special units set up to deal with sexual violence cases, these units are not well-resourced and tend to be smaller than other specialised teams. According to interviewees, domestic violence is given even less attention than sexual violence because there are no dedicated teams to handle these cases. Instead, domestic violence cases are dealt with by uniform branch officers, who often lack the training and knowledge to manage these sensitive issues properly.

The police force’s key performance indicators (KPIs) prioritise certain crimes, such as drug-related arrests, which significantly influence how resources are allocated. Official policies establish KPIs for physical and sexual crimes against women, such as rape, which aim to reduce registered crimes by 10% annually.⁶⁰ Even though official statistics reflect reported, rather than actual crimes, it is good practice for police organisations to aim for an increase in reported crimes, especially in the early stages of establishing and improving processes to record and respond to them. This facilitates establishing a better understanding of the prevalence of GBV and a baseline from which to then seek to reduce it. In bypassing these crucial phases, KPIs to reduce registered crimes can act as incentives that discourage officers from recording and investigating sexual and domestic violence cases. A high-ranking male officer explains that police sometimes mis-classify cases as not requiring further action to meet their KPI targets:

“They [officers] know that we have a key performance indicator, that we have 10% crime to be reduced... so what I can do [as an officer] is I can just write a report and have it classified as ‘no further action required’ because the complainant didn’t want any action for this, in fact, when it’s supposed to be investigated.”

Moreover, the crime-focused KPIs were linked to the overall police culture which reinforces patriarchal and masculine priorities, for example:

“The whole policing culture around that needs to change, and that’s basically the change of police mindset, that GBV is not a personal matter, and it’s not, you know, secondary to everything else. It should be a priority.”

-Gender specialist from a civil society organisation

⁶⁰ Fiji Police Force, 2020. Annual Report, p. 10.

<https://www.parliament.gov.fj/annual-reports-other-reports/fiji-police-force-annual-report-august-2019-july-2020/>

Several interviewees recommended revising crime-focused KPIs to instead focus on service delivery outcomes, whereby victims' safety and well-being become the main focus and priority. For example, registering the number of victims referred to support services whereby an increase in referrals is regarded as a measure of success.

Gender and ethnic diversity within the police force

Enhancing diversity within the police force can strengthen operational effectiveness by improving responses to GBV, fostering trust with victims, and ensuring a more inclusive and empathetic approach for all individuals seeking justice.

A gender rights advocate from a civil society organisation described how many women feel hesitant and fearful to approach the police:

“We always have a lot of the same responses from a lot of the women saying things like they fear going to the police station because of how unfriendly frontline police services can be... if they know that some police officers are perpetrators themselves of violence, they [victims] already know beforehand the cases are not going to be taken into account or be recorded.”

A female respondent shared her experience working with victims of sexual assault:

“Most of those victims are shy to talk with male officers. So, the male officers refer the victims to us – the female officers.”

“The thing I don’t like about my job is when this male person is here and I’m here – when comparing skills, experience, knowledge, exposure – I’m here, but I’m never recognised”

-Female police officer with over 20 years of experience

Expanding these dedicated units to cover both sexual and domestic violence cases, and ensuring there are enough trained female officers on each shift, would improve the quality of police responses and the experiences of victims.

The culture also affects other groups in vulnerable circumstances, particularly members of the LGBTIQ+ community and people with disabilities. Discrimination and lack of sensitivity from police officers toward these individuals can make it very difficult for them to access justice. Several interviewees spoke about the ongoing prejudice faced by LGBTIQ+ people when reporting GBV to the police. A senior legal professional shared:

“Anyone in the queer community going to make a complaint [to the police] of a violent nature or sexual assault does face an extra level of like a barrier because of people’s attitudes. They’re not taken seriously for the most part... they still face a lot of joking, ridicule, ribbing, you know, “you’re sure that you didn’t consent?”

Several stakeholders raised concerns about the limited number of female officers available to respond to sexual and domestic violence cases. Currently, the Sexual Offense Units are significantly under-resourced and unable to manage the high volume of sexual violence cases. In contrast, domestic violence cases are typically handled by uniformed officers, regardless of their gender.

The culture within the police force can put pressure on female officers to conform to a male-dominated environment. While hiring more women is a positive step, a few interviewees observed that some female officers adopt the same attitudes as their male colleagues or experience bullying and harassment, which

makes it harder for them to challenge harmful norms. A local gender specialist, who has worked closely with the police, explained the systemic nature of the issue:

“Sometimes having more women without being in a position of power doesn’t make a difference because they then get bullied, they get sexually harassed, they can’t do anything. They just stand helplessly in a station and watch male police officers who are senior saying “don’t do that, this is how things are done.” So, I think it’s more about making sure that even male police officers – this is where the culture needs to shift – male police officers need to understand it’s a crime, that gender-based violence is a crime, from the moment they get into the Academy until they retire.”

There were many police women among our participants who had served abroad in peacekeeping missions and despite being well-trained felt that they were still overlooked for senior leadership roles due to their gender. As one expert in GBV notes:

“We’ve seen that there’s an increase in police women, and unfortunately, they’re powerless. There are still no women in the middle management. There needs to be an increased opportunity for women to be promoted to leadership positions so they can make that [cultural] shift.”

The police force would benefit from greater ethnic diversity to address practical challenges, such as language barriers, especially when working with Fiji’s Hindi-speaking communities. As one iTaukei-speaking female officer who works with victims of sexual violence explained:

“With me, there was a big barrier in conversing with the Indo-Fijians, because I’m not that fluent. I can understand, but I’m not that very fluent in speaking in Hindi”

A significant number of participants emphasised the importance of a diverse workforce— encompassing both gender and ethnicity—at all levels of the police force, from frontline officers to leadership. Such diversity would help equip the force to respond effectively to the wide range of communities it serves.

“For sexual offences, there’s a sense of ‘oh maybe the victim is not too sure, she might withdraw [the charge] later on, maybe she’s lying. So that personal prejudice and bias is actually affecting service delivery. And unfortunately, it’s a very heavily male institution and some of the women that are working there have to be thinking like the men to fit in.”

-Legal rights officer from a civil society organisation

“[When Indo-Fijian] victims come in, I do not understand Hindi language, so I need to find one officer that is [Hindi-speaking] for the victim to open up to. That’s one of the difficulties I am having here right now.”

-Female police officer who works with victims of sexual offenses

Part D: Organisational structures for responding to sexual and domestic violence

The Fiji Police Force has a policing structure with larger, main stations (sometimes called ‘mother stations’ by participants). Around 4,100 police work across four police divisions – Central, Eastern, Northern and Western – with 356 main stations. There are now 41 Sexual Offence Units (SOU) and 8467 community posts.

We conducted interviews in six police stations across three area divisions that had established a SOU. One advantage of having dedicated units is that sexual offences are elevated in the policing structure, which sends a message that these offences should be addressed along with other serious crimes.

We interviewed eight police officers working in these units. All of these people had undertaken specialist GBV training and were devoted to their jobs and worked long hours. None, however, had received specialist training about GBV during their time at the Police Academy. The officers we interviewed said they were overburdened with the high workload, as they experienced a chronic shortage of personnel and resources. As this interviewee describes, NGOs collaborating with these SOUs were well aware of how overburdened these units were.

“They have a dedicated Sexual Offences Unit in the force, but that’s a very small unit, about what, three or four officers. I don’t think it’s any number above four, and that’s a continuous sort of challenge, to get that to a number that can actually cater for the large volume of cases that’s there. They have a very large drug unit, and a very large trafficking unit, but they don’t have a large Sexual Offences Unit. So, the Sexual Offences Unit are same officers who probably will look at juvenile cases and all of that, so they’re multitasking already.”

Senior officers who worked in Criminal Investigation Divisions (CID) were also aware of the critical shortage of police allocated to SOUs compared to other divisions, particularly as recent legislative and policy changes stipulate that sexual assault investigations have to be undertaken in 48 hours. While the emphasis on completing sexual assault investigations is a worthy priority, it puts excessive strain on already under-resourced SOUs, as few trained officers are available to handle the caseload. One SOU officer described her job as ‘stressful, very stressful’, while another explained the difficulties with travelling vast distances to respond to cases:

“I would say I’m really outnumbered with the number of cases received and the amount of distance that I have to cover, even when receiving a report, even if I have to go from here to [place name], that’s a community post, it covers kilometres and kilometres to reach there. As for me, especially there was a vehicle allocated for SOU, but since it has been returned, I have to request vehicles from my superiors.”

Consequently, the Sexual Offence Units have difficulty retaining dedicated staff due to the excessive demand on their workloads, and the lack of resources available to them to carry out their jobs effectively. The high turnover of staff is partly due to job stress as well as the lack of career progression pathways for officers to specialise in GBV. As a senior officer in an SOU described to us:

“You train one officer in the Sexual Offences Unit, and next thing you know, they get promoted and move to another station as a station officer. And then what happens here, they get somebody else, who then gets trained. And so, nobody stays with the victim because there’s no opportunities to grow from there or any other benefits that comes with being allocated to that division. So people just leave, and then new people come in and you have to train them again.”

Where a station does not have its own dedicated SOU, the station will appoint a female officer to look after victims of sexual assault. All victims will be referred to that single female officer when they come to a station. A significant disadvantage of this current structure is that police officers in other roles tend to regard sexual offences as outside of their responsibility. This places enormous stress on that female officer if she is the only one at the station who can handle the caseload. A legal rights officer describes her observations:

“Because resource-wise...it’s like six police officers in a station and one female officer gets deployed there. She’s got to handle all the sexual violence cases. They’re going to overload her. She’s going to burn out with vicarious trauma.”

For the most part in the current policing structure, victims of domestic violence are dealt with by uniformed officers – often male and untrained – who do not have the skills or knowledge to handle these sensitive cases. While sexual violence has been given priority through the establishment of dedicated Sexual Offence Units, there is no equivalent level of prioritisation for domestic violence, which creates the perception that domestic violence is not considered a crime of comparable gravity. According to a gender specialist who has worked closely with the police:

“There is no special unit responding to [domestic violence], there’s no specialised training, even by the Academy... When you talk [to the police], they say ‘everyone can do it. It’s everyone’s job. Everyone can do it’... Domestic violence, it’s of the same gravity of sexual violence, and needs to have specialised units and teams.”

In addition to this major structural challenge, the Police Force faces several other significant challenges in responding to domestic violence, including inadequate training and a lack of resources, such as cars and confidential spaces for victims.

Expanding the scope of the SOUs to cover both sexual and domestic violence cases and ensuring there are enough trained officers on each shift to respond to the caseload would significantly improve the quality of police responses and the experiences of GBV victims.

Achieving this would require a significant shift in police resourcing and renaming the current Sexual Offence Units to reflect a broader mandate. Several interviewees suggested names, including ‘Gender-Responsive Police Units’, ‘Gender Offences Units’, or ‘Sexual and Domestic Offences Units’.

Creating a single structure that encompasses both sexual and domestic violence, would have the additional benefit of creating opportunities for career progression, which would enable more female officers to be promoted to management and leadership positions.

The potential of community police posts in responding to gender-based violence

We conducted eight interviews with officers from two community posts in the Northern Division, each staffed with around 8 to 14 officers. While community posts are not new, having been established in 1986, a new emphasis under the Restore Blue strategy is on extending the scope, personnel, and number of community posts in the country, as explained by this justice leader with three decades of experience in policing.

“Justice leaders saw community policing as a crucial pillar in rebuilding trust, legitimacy, and sustainability in the Fiji police force, moving away from a regime-focused approach towards one that is more responsive to the needs and priorities of local communities.”

At both posts, we heard that raising awareness about crime prevention was a significant part of their work, however, they also told us they were not permitted to take statements, make arrests, or lay charges. Rather, their current primary functions were to enhance residents' trust in the police, become the police eyes and ears in the community, prevent crime from occurring, and notify the main stations of any serious crimes. Main stations can serve as regional headquarters or are larger stations in an urban area to which community posts currently refer victims of sexual assault.

Community police do not have the power to investigate a sexual or domestic violence incident, which a justice leader we interviewed regarded as a wasted opportunity and inefficient use of police resources:

“This is a wasted opportunity since community police officers have the ear of the community. But I think, yeah, absolute wasted opportunity, especially if the community officers are good and have the ear of their community.”



A senior officer from the Police Academy explained that all officers are trained to take statements. However, due to logistical challenges, such as the lack of transport for taking victims of sexual violence to the hospital for medical examinations, the community posts refer people to the main stations:

“The problem with the community posts is that when a person comes and reports domestic violence..., they don't have transport for the victim to be taken to hospital. That's why it's much easier for them to say, “Okay, you go to the mother station”, where you have a one-stop shop, and you get everything done....”

Despite these limitations of the community post roles, a senior officer at a Sexual Offense Unit said she was “lucky to have the community posts” because they were her way of reaching out to the community to encourage reluctant victims to come forward. She said the community officers often transported victims to the main station or a hospital for medical treatment. This highlights the importance of the community police in responding to GBV in Fiji. Another officer from a Sexual Offenses Unit spoke about her positive collaboration with the community post officers who helped to raise awareness of sexual and domestic violence and encouraged victims to report:

“I usually go out with them [the community police] to conduct awareness. Because especially us Fijians, we do have the taboo kind of things that people cannot talk about. But when we go out for awareness program to schools and to villages, and then the people tend to come to individual police officers and they can speak it out.”

Most of our respondents believed that community police posts play an essential role in maintaining law and order, raising awareness, building trust and preventing crime by working closely with the local leaders, youth groups, schools, and community members to address issues. Community police posts work closely with village and religious authorities and have established their own Community Crime Prevention Committees comprising members of their communities. The value of their close relationships with local communities was recognised by police officers based at the main stations, such as this senior crime officer:

“For now, the police force is mainly dependent on our community policing officers in this, bridging the gap between the Fiji Police and the community. They [community police] are the ones who are in-between to bridge those gaps.”

In rural and remote areas island settings, where access to justice can be especially challenging, community posts are critical for victims as a pathway to access justice. In some outer island posts, there is sometimes only one officer available to support victims of GBV. A policy officer working in the UN explained it to us this way:

“I think the community policing has to have a crucial role – especially here in Fiji – because you may have no other institutions, but you have at least one officer from community police. Sometimes that’s the only institutional presence that you have in Fiji. So definitely this person has to be fully trained to respond to this and, you know, the community police are the ones that build trust so we can get people to come in [to report].”

The planned expansion of community police posts in Fiji is a deliberate strategy to move away from reactive policing toward preventative policing, with the aim of building community trust. While, in many ways, this approach is working well, our research has identified a major issue. Community officers are not able to take statements from victims of GBV at the community police post, so the victim must travel a longer distance to make a report, which can be a deterrent. Given that larger stations are a hub for a wide range of policing services, they are often busier, and thus, victims often receive poor service and lack privacy.

Under the Restore Blue strategy, which plans to increase the number of personnel at community police posts, there is an opportunity to strengthen community policing responses to GBV in Fiji. In addition to upskilling community police officers to undertake awareness raising activities on sexual and domestic violence, the role of these officers could be expanded. Hence, they could be responsible for taking statements, filing reports, and conducting investigations of domestic violence incidents. Implementing changes to the roles of community police officers would require adequate resourcing, especially transportation to assist victims of violence to attend medical services and computers for taking electronic statements to share this information with the main stations and courts.

Officer deployments to villages and settlements

The interviewees expressed mixed perspectives about whether community police officers should be deployed to their communities or a different location. On the one hand, police officers with family or cultural ties to the villages can play a crucial role in influencing change. Their local knowledge and ability to communicate in the local language help them understand village dynamics and gain the trust of community leaders. As an officer from a Sexual Offences Unit explained:

“If we are going to any of the villages...for my cases, I make sure that I take a police officer from there because of their understanding and the [language] dialect. That is why it’s the best option, I think, because we are visitors to that place, we don’t know it.”



On the other hand, sending police officers to work in their own communities can create problems as close family and community ties can make it hard for them to stay impartial. In some situations, officers may have biases when conducting investigations of sexual and domestic violence. Several interviewees, such as this victim support councillor, were adamant that police officers should not be working in their own communities,

“There’s going to be the pressure, not just on you, but on your own family, from your community as well. So absolutely not, there shouldn’t be any...you shouldn’t be working in your own jurisdiction”

It appears to be standard practice for officers to work in areas where they have personal ties, even though this may lead to conflicts of interest. We were told that this was because many officers cannot afford to live outside their own communities as paying for accommodation is prohibitively expensive.

Part E: Police processes, systems and infrastructure

Effective responses to GBV depend on substantial reforms in police processes, systems, and infrastructure. There was a range of persistent challenges in addressing GBV raised by research participants, including resource shortages, such as a lack of suitable equipment, facilities and infrastructure. Moreover, some processes and practices contribute to delays in charging perpetrators and serving restraining orders, as well as hinder effective prosecutions.

Addressing resource shortages

Resource shortages severely limit police capacity to respond effectively to GBV incidents. Across all locations visited by the research team, the lack of vehicles and computers was repeatedly highlighted.

Police cars are essential for responding promptly to callouts, yet many stations face critical shortages. A senior justice leader explained:

“You’ve got stations that have 50 [officers] with one vehicle to get around a massive geographical area.”

Police officers report using their own cars for callouts or paying for taxis at personal expense. An officer from a Sexual Offences Unit described the lengths officers go to in securing transportation for victims:

“One of our lack of resources is a vehicle. But for us, we really need to do something for our victims. If there’s no vehicle here, we’ll call the crime officers from the nearest police stations to ask if they have a vehicle. It’s either by hook or by crook we’ll have a vehicle. Or, if not, we’ll just pay for a taxi out of our own pockets.”

Fuel shortages compound these challenges. A gender advisor from a key development agency noted:

“You hear every day of somebody going in to the police station to report a crime or domestic violence and then the police officers say to you ‘oh, I’m sorry, we don’t have fuel in the car.’ And so, what happens most of the time, is the person [victim] will pay for the fuel, and so the police will go. This is very common.”

Additionally, a shortage of licensed drivers limits how quickly police respond to callouts. A constable from a Sexual Offence Unit explained:

“There is no driver to drive the vehicle. Most of us, we have driving licences... but without a blue card from [the Director of Traffic] we cannot drive a police vehicle.”

Computers are similarly in short supply, with officers often relying on personal laptops. A senior justice leader remarked on the scarcity of computers available in Sexual Offenses Units:

“The computers, most of them [officers] have to pay for their own. So those laptops that you’ll see people with, it’s all their own personal laptops.”

There are significant overall shortfalls in resourcing and staff to handle GBV cases, yet improved allocation of existing resources could alleviate shortages. For example, in some interview locations, vehicles were assigned for personal use by senior officers rather than frontline work. A police inspector stated:

“The Commissioner is the only one who should have a vehicle and a driver. But here... most bosses, they have a driver and a vehicle, which should be operational vehicles they’re not entitled for.”

Prioritising sporting activities, particularly rugby, further diverts scarce resources and personnel. While sport is an important part of Fijian culture and social cohesion, there are times that some officers thought these resources could be better utilised to alleviate staffing shortages. A senior male officer explained this problem in the following way:

“...the officers are released for rugby. You cannot touch them. So, the manpower goes to work at the rugby – to play... now, some of my men are gone... we are mixing sports and our work.”

Standardising reporting, statement-taking, and filing procedures

Inconsistent reporting forms and filing processes hinder timely and standardised policing responses to GBV cases. A justice specialist reflected on his knowledge of victim statement-taking and reporting processes:

“If you ask five different people about the process, you might get, like, three people arriving at the same conclusion about the process, and then two with completely different sorts of answers.”

There is also a need for standardised guiding questions for interviewing victims to ensure statements are usable in court. A legal officer remarked on how much variation there is between police stations:

“Each police station functions so differently from each other... I’ve practiced in Nausori, Suva, Nadi and Ba, and will all the police officers it’s different. There’s no standardisation.”

Proper accountability measures are essential to ensure police officers follow Standard Operating Procedures and protocols when responding to GBV cases – where they exist – such as the No-Drop Policy. As this women’s rights specialist from an NGO noted:

“What we need are consequences for non-adherence. We need some oversight of the on-the-ground police officers – that’s what we don’t have.”



Victim privacy and safety

Confidentiality is critical to ensure victims of GBV do not face further harm. Efforts to provide a private and secure environment for victims are underway in some of the larger police stations, where specialised units have been established for handling sexual violence cases. A senior officer described the benefits of this approach:

“We have a ‘one stop shop’ kind of concept where a victim of sexual offence is brought to the station. He or she is not passed around, like asked the same question by 10 different people in the office – we have a specialised Sexual Offences Unit that deal with that victim.”

Despite these efforts, gaps remain. Victims of sexual violence are often required to sit in public areas while waiting to be seen by the Sexual Offences Unit. Similarly, domestic violence victims frequently give statements in public places, with minimal privacy. As a police constable observed:

“Most of the officers would come in, they look at them [victims]. You know, there’s no privacy. When even the interview is going on, their answers are heard by almost everybody that’s there.”

The lack of streamlined processes exacerbates victims’ distress. Repeatedly recounting their experiences to multiple officers can be re-traumatising, as shared by an NGO employee, formerly a victim of domestic violence:

“[In] my first two marriages I had abusive partners and I would go to the police. I’d call them, but they wouldn’t come. Then I would go to the station where I would have to tell my same story to almost six people.”

To address these issues, it is essential to ensure privacy and confidentiality for all GBV victims, whether they have experienced sexual or domestic violence. This can be achieved by creating separate entrances, waiting areas, and private interview spaces. While some larger stations have begun constructing private interview rooms, many facilities are not yet operational. In smaller stations, where space is limited, innovative solutions are needed to establish secure and private areas for victims.

Beyond privacy, several officers raised the need for temporary crisis accommodation for victims who fear returning home. A female constable emphasised the importance of this service:

“Some ladies, they’re really scared to go home or go to other relatives, and then they spend the night over here [in the station] ... there was one time when there was a room up here. It was empty so we used to take the mattress, leave it up there, so at least they could stay for the night because they are scared. It would be good if we had a temporary home for people like that who come in.”

Creating systems for timely analysis and publication of data

Efficient data management is crucial for informing GBV policies and practices. However, existing systems suffer from significant gaps. A gender advocate from a local civil society organisation observed a lack of community confidence in police record-keeping:

“I think the police also have some really bad data management issues... people don’t feel confident in their services because of their data management.”

The collected GBV data is often not analysed or used effectively, as noted by a service delivery manager:

“The data gets sent to the [police] headquarters... then it’s just there. It’s just sitting there, there’s no, like, analysis of that data.”

Notably, the Fiji Police has not published annual reports online since 2020 or crime statistics reports since 2021, restricting access to data needed for evidence-based decision-making.

Using audio and video recording facilities

Audio and video recording of victim interviews can improve the quality of evidence and prevent re-traumatisation, as victims only need to tell their story once. Currently, these facilities are used primarily for interviewing perpetrators. A police corporal explained:

“For us in Fiji, we have not yet reached that stage where you have videos set up for the victim... By the time she [the victim] will come to court, she’ll be like ‘I’ve talked to so many people’... right now, we have our video recording...but it’s only for the suspects.”

The quality of written statements taken by police is often not good enough to be used in court, as this legal officer who represents victims in court described:

“When we get files in court, you can barely read what’s written or what the words are, they are misspelled. We’re trying to push for video recording.”

Our findings indicate that many police officers lack confidence in using audio/video recording equipment or conducting victim-centred interviews, underscoring the need for training and standardised protocols.

Delays in charging perpetrators and serving restraining orders

Timely action is critical for ensuring victim safety and preventing further harm. However, delays in charging perpetrators and serving domestic violence restraining orders (DVROs) remain persistent issues.

Several interviewees expressed concern about delays in charging perpetrators, which can deter victims from reporting. A crisis counsellor [C21] emphasised how these delays compromise women’s safety:

“A problem is the delay in charging the perpetrators when women come to report... They usually come back to the counsellors and complain that, you know, ‘my report has been days or it’s been a week or a month, and the perpetrator is still running around here, he hasn’t been charged.’”

Police backlogs and slow court processes can result in cases taking several years to resolve. A detective from the CID unit has observed that in lengthy cases, victims struggle to stay optimistic:

“Some cases take five to six years running, some [victims] just lose hope within that period of time.”

To address these delays, the police policy requires crime investigations to be completed within 48 hours. However, officers report that meeting this target is challenging without sufficient staffing and resources. Enhanced resourcing is needed to achieve this goal realistically.

Another area that needs improvement are the delays in serving DVROs. Currently, victims are often instructed to go to the courts to apply for DVROs rather than being assisted directly at police stations. Given that the forms are available online, stations should have them printed and ready for victims to use.

It was further explained by an experienced women's rights lawyer that there is still a lot of misinformation about how domestic violence restraining orders (DVROs) should be used and issued by police officers, allowing offenders to evade the orders:

“Based on my understanding of when the [Domestic Violence] Act was first brought in, at any time of the day, a police officer could pick up the phone and get a DVRO from a magistrate, you know, in middle of the night. But I have never ever seen that happen personally, in the time that I've practiced and since the Act has been in place.”

Another lawyer from a local advocacy organisation explained that the practical application of DVROs do not work, especially in remote areas, where little can be done to protect a person when a restraining order is breached:

“A piece of paper is not going to stop them, you know, and especially if the person is situated remotely. If the offender finds out where they are, you know, the piece of paper is not going to prevent the person from still attacking them, and that person is not going to have any recourse because they're remote... it doesn't do anything in that situation.”

Serving DVROs in rural and remote areas is difficult given the long distances that police officers have to travel. Since the courts stipulate that orders must be served in-person, even to outer islands, orders are often delayed or not served at all. This arduous process is described by a DVRO officer:

“I cannot serve them through, like, taking a photo and sending it through email or something... I have to serve the order, like, face-to-face or physically give them the order.”

This problem could potentially be mitigated through electronic processes, such as mobile technology, to expedite the serving of orders in a timely manner.

Part F: Police capacity building and training

Basic and in-service training for police

Currently, recruits at the Fiji Police Academy take ten modules over four months, focusing mostly on general crime investigation. GBV is only briefly covered in one or two days as part of the law module.

Research participants from the Police Academy identified the need for greater expertise, internally or externally, to review the current curriculum and develop a dedicated module on sexual and domestic violence for basic recruit training. An instructor at the Police Academy highlighted the importance of developing a specific training program:

“We don't have a specific training; it's just general police training... We should have a specific program on how to deal with children, on how to deal with women, domestic violence, sexual offences.”



Several recent graduates from the Police Academy we spoke to also expressed a desire for in-depth GBV training. Here, a female general duties constable described her experience at the Academy:

“For domestic violence, it was not taught to us. We would have liked it if we were taught about that. Because most of the recruits going into the Fiji Academy just left high school or were just newly [graduated] university students, and we would have liked to learn more about domestic violence and sexual offences.”

Other participants, too, stressed that this training should be a core part of the curriculum, with dedicated modules focusing on how to work with victims of sexual and domestic violence in a trauma-informed way. According to a legal officer from a women's support service:

“They [basic training recruits] should have this as their main focus – gender-based violence and sexual offences training – so that when they come out from the Academy, they are equipped. Because if they're thrown out from there on the ground, that's going to be the first thing they come across at the charge room, at the uniform branch.”

A senior instructor at the Police Academy noted:

“If you look at our percentages in examinations, our students do better in practical [settings] than in theory. They remember the process and procedures of investigations very well when we run the scenarios, as opposed to when they sit the examination and write about the stages.”



There was also strong support for scenario-based training as a more effective learning method, such as using real-life case studies, an approach which has shown promise in improving understanding and retention, especially in practical exams.

Despite frontline officers often being the first point of contact for victims of GBV, many do not receive any specific training on these issues. This gap in training leaves officers ill-equipped to handle the sensitive and complex nature of GBV cases. A senior officer at a Sexual Offences Unit emphasised the importance of training for all officers who might encounter sexual and domestic assault incidents:

“I think the officers from the uniform branch, they must also be sent to the [training] course. Because most of the time, they are the ones handling the victims at first,”

Community police officers also need training on how to raise awareness in communities about GBV, as well as practical skills in reporting and investigating these cases. There is currently no standardised training on what information on GBV community police should include in their awareness activities. A crime officer who deals regularly with sexual offence cases described this gap:

“They [community police officers] should be taught on how to deliver GBV awareness to the members of the public: What are some of the issues you talk about? What are some of the things you should keep in mind when you're talking about members of the public?”

Another participant, a male police inspector, further noted this gap in training for all frontline and community police officers:

“The more training, the better it is. And not just the training at the supervisory level. Training for all the officers on the ground. The frontline officers, even the community-based police, they must know what they are doing. They must know what they have to go and speak about.”

Several participants raised concerns about the lack of local input in current training programs, which often rely heavily on international expertise. A victim-support counsellor who has attended a range of police training explained:

“Our concern is that a lot of the trainings that come in, especially from development agencies, are not contextualised.”

This interviewee further stressed the importance of involving local expertise in developing a training curriculum:

“If you want to do GBV training, who are the experts in GBV? Especially, look to your local counterparts because they understand the local context. They understand the situation. Not only that, they understand the resources available.”

At present, various UN agencies and NGOs offer training in an ad hoc manner, depending on available funding. The training is fragmented and often only reaches senior police management or a selection of basic recruits, leaving many officers untrained in how to respond to GBV. A manager of a family violence service who has been involved in running police workshops noted the challenge of fragmented training:

“It comes down to this: who will be delivering the trainings? Because there’s a lot of players, I mean, if you go now to the Police Academy, how many people will come in? It will be either UN Women, UNDP... I think every UN organisation is coming in every week. The question is, are they really making any impact?”

Numerous respondents, we spoke to emphasised the importance of training that covers both sexual and domestic violence, aiming to change police attitudes and equip officers with practical skills to handle such cases. Collectively, participants underscored the need for training content that is victim-centred, rights-based, and gender-sensitive, and teaches about patriarchal norms, the root causes of violence, and empathetic communication skills.

Currently, there is a heavy emphasis on legal frameworks but insufficient attention on how to engage with victims, take their statements and connect them with support services through a victim-centred trauma-informed approach. The absence of practical training that provides officers the skills to work with victims in a day-to-day setting is described by a local sociologist with expertise in the application of Fijian domestic violence law:

“A lot of things I feel need to be addressed in terms of the knowledge they [police] have about domestic violence laws – the kind of response that should be given when victims come up to you, how you should talk to them, how you should treat them, what is the necessary help that you would refer them to.”

A senior policing and governance specialist highlighted the importance of this change:

“You’ve got to really revamp the training for the police, you know, the training system.... One or two sessions in human rights and gender does not really serve a lot for the police. You’ve got to have a full curriculum, you know. It has to be threaded into the whole core structure of every course in the police like a golden thread.”

In discussing this need for systemic change through comprehensive police training, the manager of a family violence service observed:

“You can collaborate with ten different officers. What we need to know is, from that ten, how many are creating change in the police stations that they’re going to, and are there any changes? Because we don’t want a case-by-case change – we need a whole-of-systems change.”

Participants suggested that the Fiji Police Force needs to take ownership of a long-term, structured training plan, collaborating with local NGOs, subject-matter experts, and UN agencies to develop a locally relevant curriculum that avoids duplication of efforts. One participant, a Senior Police Advisor, stressed the importance of police ownership of training delivery to ensure sustainability:

“How are you going to be able to sustain it [training] when your funds run out? Because at the end of the day, you need the police to take ownership of it. And they are the ones to say ‘okay, even if the funds stop, we will continue to run it’.”

Specialised training for certain police roles

For officers dealing specifically with GBV cases, such as those in the Sexual Offences Units or the Criminal Investigation Department, specialised training is critical. However, the current offering is limited, with outdated curricula that do not adequately address the complexities of GBV or working with child assault victims.

A senior officer working in a Sexual Offences Unit, highlighted the limited access to specialised training for lower-ranking officers in the units:

“Myself, I attend plenty of the workshops. Only my officers, they hardly go to the workshops. It would be great if they can be picked and also attend a workshop like that.”

Similarly, a CID crime officer who investigates sexual violence cases noted the limited opportunities to attend gender-violence training, with only a small selection of field investigators invited to participate in a course:

“Field investigators receive training, but very few people are being selected, maybe one or two in one course. And that course is only run once or twice a year. So, if two people are only selected from each station, then it won’t make much difference,”

In addition, a lack of specialised training for supervisors significantly hampers their ability to oversee GBV case investigations effectively. Without a strong understanding of GBV, supervisors are unable to provide the necessary guidance and direction to their investigation teams. This gap leaves officers on the ground without the skills or knowledge to adopt a trauma-informed approach to handling sensitive cases. Consequently, critical investigation steps may be overlooked, resulting in poorer court outcomes. As a senior advisor to the Fiji Police explained:

“They [supervisors] are the ones giving them [uniform officers] actual directions... But if they’ve got no training in what needs to be done, the officers at the end just do what’s on their list.”

Professional development opportunities for trainers

Finally, investment in professional development opportunities for trainers is crucial. Currently, many police trainers lack the specific knowledge and skills necessary to deliver effective GBV training. If they want to up-skill, they often have to pay for development opportunities out of their own pockets. A Police Academy Instructor we spoke with underscored the need for further professional development opportunities for the staff who are responsible for delivering GBV education:

“We are not even exposed to trainings ourselves that are tailor-made to suit the Fijian context. You know, a lot of the stuff we incorporate [in trainings] are things that we have picked up along the way by experiencing,”

While some officers, particularly those in Sexual Offences Units, have received GBV training, most of the force lacks sufficient knowledge and skills to respond effectively. Interviews with stakeholders and service providers reveal a significant gap in knowledge and training, leading to misconceptions and inadequate responses when officers interact with victims of GBV.



DISCUSSION

The findings of this study highlight both systemic barriers and promising opportunities for strengthening police responses to GBV in Fiji. While the Fiji Police Force (FPF) has taken important steps, such as establishing Sexual Offences Units and increasing female recruitment, structural, cultural, and resource-related challenges continue to hamper effective law enforcement interventions. Drawing upon a broader range of academic literature on policing in Fiji, the Pacific Islands, and the Global South, this discussion contextualises the findings within broader academic scholarship.

Cultural and institutional barriers to improving policing gender-based violence

The persistence of patriarchal attitudes within the FPF mirrors broader gender inequalities entrenched in Fijian society and throughout the Pacific region.⁶¹ As studies on policing in other context have shown,⁶² police institutions often reflect prevailing social norms rather than challenge them. However, the interactions between police officers and institutions with changes in the environment, can result in shifts in social and occupational norms which have implications for improving responses to GBV.

While the 2009 Domestic Violence Act and the No-Drop Policy were designed to counteract such attitudes by mandating police intervention, their implementation has been inconsistent. Studies of policing in post-colonial contexts indicate that legal mandates alone are insufficient when police officers operate within deeply entrenched patriarchal structures.⁶³ Training programs need to go beyond procedural instruction and actively challenge the gender biases embedded in police culture to ensure sustained behavioural change.

Leadership plays a crucial role in shaping police culture and institutional priorities. The Restore Blue strategy, which aims to professionalise and restore public trust in the police, represents a significant opportunity for integrating GBV as a policing priority. However, as research in the Global South has demonstrated,⁶⁴ top-down reforms often fail unless internal cultural shifts and accountability mechanisms accompany them. Interviews with justice officials revealed that despite policy commitments, GBV is often deprioritised in favour of drug-related offenses and property crimes.

A critical issue identified was the structure of police performance indicators, which emphasise crime reduction rather than service delivery outcomes. Similar issues have been documented globally, where institutional metrics prioritise quantity over quality, leading officers to underreport or dismiss cases to meet targets. The need for revised KPIs that emphasise victim-centred justice and accountability is evident if the FPF is to align with international best practices in policing GBV.

61 Jalal, I. 2008. *Harmful Practices in the Pacific: A Comparative Analysis of Gender-Based Violence Laws in Pacific Island Countries*. UN Women; George, N. (2016). *Policing 'conjugal order': Gender, violence and the state in Fiji and Vanuatu*. Australian Journal of International Affairs, 70(3), 287-306.

62 Hills, A. 2012. *Policing Post-Conflict Cities*. Zed Books; Jardine, M. 2022. *Policing in a Changing Vietnam: Towards a Global Account of Policing*. Routledge.

63 Chan, J. 1997. *Changing Police Culture: Policing in a Multicultural Society*. Cambridge University Press; Steinberg, J. 2020. *Policing, Culture, and Colonial Legacies: A Comparative Analysis of Post-Colonial Policing in the Global South*. Crime, Law and Social Change, 74(3), 289-305.

64 Karim, S. 2019. *Women in Policing: Beyond Numbers and Representation*. Oxford University Press.

Structural barriers: Resourcing and capacity constraints

While the establishment of Sexual Offences Units is a step forward, these units remain under-resourced and primarily focus on sexual assault rather than the broader spectrum of domestic violence.⁶⁵ Research on policing in the Pacific suggests that specialised units are most effective when accompanied by robust training, adequate staffing, and inter-agency collaboration.⁶⁶ In Fiji, frontline officers in uniform branches—who are often ill-equipped to handle GBV cases—continue to be the primary responders to domestic violence, highlighting the need for expanded specialisation.

Fiji's dispersed geography, with populations spread across more than 300 islands, presents significant challenges for GBV policing. Similar obstacles have been documented in small island developing states, where police accessibility and transport limitations hinder law enforcement responses.⁶⁷ Community police posts offer an opportunity to bridge this gap; however, as observed in other Pacific nations, these posts are often limited in their operational scope and authority. Interviews revealed that officers stationed at community posts are unable to take formal victim statements, necessitating lengthy travel to main stations. Strengthening the capacity of these posts to handle GBV cases, including equipping officers with the necessary authority and training, is crucial to improving accessibility to justice in remote areas.

Multi-sectoral collaboration: The need for holistic approaches

Inter-agency collaboration was widely recognised as the best practice for addressing GBV.⁶⁸ While Fiji has established coordination mechanisms, such as the Domestic Violence Task Force, the study findings indicate that these bodies often lack sustained engagement and resources. This reflects broader trends in policing in the Global South, where well-intended policies frequently falter due to funding constraints and a lack of cross-sectoral integration.⁶⁹ Effective implementation of Fiji's National Action Plan for the Elimination of Violence Against Women and Girls requires improved coordination between the police, judiciary, healthcare providers, and civil society organizations.

A critical gap in Fiji's GBV response is the lack of comprehensive support services for survivors. Research from Africa, Asia, and the Pacific highlights that survivors often remain in abusive situations due to inadequate access to shelter, financial assistance, and legal support.⁷⁰ In Fiji, despite the police being mandated to enforce protective measures such as Domestic Violence Restraining Orders (DVROs), the absence of safe housing and economic empowerment programs undermines their effectiveness. Addressing these service gaps is essential to ensuring that survivors can safely leave abusive relationships.

Legislative and policy considerations

The No-Drop Policy, designed to ensure police intervention in all GBV cases, has had both positive and unintended negative consequences. While it aims to prevent case dismissal, its rigid application sometimes leads to prosecutions proceeding without sufficient evidence, overburdening the justice system. This phenomenon has been observed in other jurisdictions where mandatory prosecution policies have led

65 Jayaraman, J. 2018. Specialized Policing Units and Their Role in Addressing Gender-Based Violence: Lessons from the Pacific Region. *International Journal of Comparative and Applied Criminal Justice*, 42(4), 410-425.

66 Dinnen, S., & McLeod, A. 2017. *Policing and Security in the Pacific Islands: Legacies, Challenges and Reform*. ANU Press.

67 Henderson, S., & Sheptycki, J. 2021. Policing Small Island Developing States: Challenges of Crime and Law Enforcement in Remote Communities. *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism*, 16(1), 50-68.

68 Heidensohn, F. 2003. *Gender and Policing: Comparative Perspectives*. Palgrave Macmillan; Walklate, S. (2018). *Criminology and Gender-Based Violence*. Routledge.

69 Natarajan, M. 2016. *Women Police in a Changing Society: Back Door to Equality*. Ashgate Publishing.

70 Stern, R. 2018. *The Problem of Gender-Based Violence in the Global South: Structural Inequalities and Legal Responses*. World Development, 112(5), 189-202; Merry, S. (2009). *Human Rights and Gender Violence: Translating International Law into Local Justice*. University of Chicago Press.

to unintended victim disempowerment.⁷¹ To optimise the policy's impact, a more nuanced approach is necessary, balancing mandatory intervention with survivor-centred discretion.

Another legislative concern identified is the use of defilement laws to criminalise consensual relationships among underage individuals. Studies from the Pacific indicate that outdated sexual offense laws often fail to distinguish between consensual and non-consensual acts, resulting in disproportionate criminalisation of young men.⁷² Furthermore, the absence of legal protections for LGBTQI+ individuals in Fiji exacerbates their vulnerability to police discrimination and violence. Aligning national laws with human rights standards is crucial to fostering an inclusive and just legal system.

71 Goodmark, L. 2018. *Decriminalizing Domestic Violence: A Balanced Policy Approach to Intimate Partner Violence*. University of California Press.

72 Eves, R., & Crawford, J. 2014. *Do No Harm: The Relationship Between Violence Against Women and Women's Economic Empowerment in the Pacific*. Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

CONCLUSION AND A PATH FOWARD

The findings of this study underscore the urgent need for structural, cultural, and policy reforms within the Fiji Police Force to improve its responses to GBV. Drawing on broader academic literature on police culture in the Pacific and the Global South, this discussion has demonstrated that Fiji's challenges are not unique but reflect systemic issues in post-colonial policing, where state-based systems overlap with customary forms of justice. Our findings highlight the challenges faced by frontline police officers in navigating the complex nuances of these overlapping systems, as well as the importance of strengthening relationships between police and the community to help victims access justice.

Our research has identified challenges and opportunities for improving the structure of the Fiji Police Force to enhance its responses to sexual and domestic violence. In the appendix, we outline draft recommendations to initiate discussion among key stakeholders on how to improve the Fiji Police Force's response to sexual and domestic violence.

To build a more effective and survivor-centred policing response to GBV, Fiji must prioritise leadership-driven cultural change, expand specialised units, enhance multi-sectoral collaboration, and reform outdated laws. These actions will align Fiji's policing practices with the best international standards in gender-sensitive law enforcement.

While Fiji has made progress in developing multi-sectoral strategies, such as the National Action Plan to Prevent Violence Against Women and Girls (NAP), significant implementation gaps in the coordination, investment, and service provision need to be addressed to deliver a holistic response.

A whole-of-systems approach is vital to effectively addressing GBV in Fiji. Collaborative efforts between the police, government agencies, NGOs, and local communities are essential to create sustainable solutions that tackle the root causes of violence. Addressing GBV in Fiji requires a coordinated, multi-sectoral response that leverages the collective efforts of diverse stakeholders. As policing alone cannot address the deeply rooted factors contributing to GBV, police work depends significantly on collaboration with other sectors.

Our findings highlight the urgent need for organisational reform regarding the Fiji Police Force and its relationships with other stakeholders and service providers to improve responses to GBV. While recent leadership changes and initiatives have introduced some positive shifts, significant barriers persist. These include the low priority given to sexual and domestic violence, a deeply ingrained patriarchal culture, and insufficient gender and ethnic diversity within the force.

Senior leaders will need training and support to implement the significant changes required to make incremental, sustainable shifts in police strategies, cultures, and practices. Executive police leaders should be equipped to understand the underlying reasons why officers may be resistant to change to address this effectively. At the same time, promoting systems that are working well can be used as 'good practice' examples to motivate change and encourage officers to engage in new ways of doing things. Achieving this requires making sexual and domestic violence a core police priority and ensuring sufficient resources are allocated to support this focus.

Finally, the government has a vital role in ensuring the Fiji Police Force is allocated sufficient resources and provides leadership in supporting senior police leaders in transforming their priorities to include women's safety and security. An organisational strategy to drive this crucial cultural shift is essential to elevate GBV as a key police priority.

APPENDIX 1: RECOMMENDATIONS

The 18 recommendations below outline key areas arising from research interviews in Fiji and subsequent analysis for consideration toward strengthening the Fiji Police Force's response to GBV. They are offered to stimulate discussion and with acknowledgement of the challenges in implementing such substantial, but important changes. While many recommendations focus on internal police reforms, others encourage the police to collaborate with broader stakeholders – including lawmakers and policymakers, government ministries, and human rights and women's rights groups – to address systemic challenges and tackle the root causes of GBV.



A. State and traditional justice systems for addressing gender-based violence

- a. Review the Domestic Violence Act in consultation with key stakeholders, and develop clear and practical guidance for police to improve its implementation.
- b. Evaluate and review the No-Drop Policy in consultation with key stakeholders to align it with a victim-centred approach.
- c. Introduce specific legal protections for LGBTQI+ individuals to ensure non-discrimination and fair treatment by police and other authorities.
- d. Amend legislation on sexual assault to decriminalise consensual relationships between 15- to 17-year-olds, to focus police efforts on non-consensual cases.
- e. Build stronger partnerships between police and communities to address GBV more effectively to leverage existing networks and engage in discussions to navigate the intersection of state and traditional justice systems.

B. Multi-sectoral approaches and collaboration

- a. Strengthen inter-agency collaboration to expand victim support services and implement national GBV strategies – in particular, the National Action Plan (NAP) and National Service Delivery Protocol.

C. Police leadership and organisational reform

- a. Implement a victim-centred, trauma-informed, and human rights-based approach to GBV.
- b. Ensure addressing gender-based violence is a core policing priority across all levels, including reviewing key performance measures which influence officer behaviours and decision-making processes.
- c. Achieve greater gender and ethnic diversity within the police force to reflect and better serve all communities.
- d. Invest in and improve GBV data collection, analysis and transparency through timely publication of statistics.

D. Organisational structures for responding to sexual and domestic violence

- a. Establish a single unit that handles both sexual and domestic violence cases
- b. Expand the role and capacity of community police posts to include taking reports and investigating GBV cases to increase access to justice.

E. Police processes, systems and infrastructure

- a. Improve victim privacy, confidentiality, and safety at all stages of police interactions.
- b. Address resource shortages, especially police vehicles and computers, to improve GBV responses.
- c. Reduce delays in charging perpetrators and serving Domestic Violence Restraining Orders (DVROs)
- d. Increase the use of audio and video facilities for victim interviews to improve evidence quality and reduce victim re-traumatisation.

F. Police capacity building and training

- a. Provide comprehensive investigation and evidence-collection methods and culturally relevant GBV training to all police recruits and serving officers working in relevant operational or supervisory roles.
- b. Train recruits and serving officers in standardised GBV reporting, statement-taking and filing procedures to ensure consistency, accountability and collecting evidence to be tested in court to better support prosecutions.



