



Enhancing the Policing of Gender Violence in the Global South

The Case of Fiji

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Abstract

Models of policing gender violence (GBV) are based primarily on approaches developed in English-speaking countries in the northern hemisphere (Carrington et al., *Theor Criminol.* <https://doi.org/10.1177/13624806221099631>, 2022). The unique challenges of policing gender violence in complex cultural settings of

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the Global South, where blended justice frameworks operate, are under-researched. This is especially so in the Pacific Islands, where women have continued to report lifetime prevalence rates of violence between 60% and 80% (World Health Organisation, 2021). The Pacific Island of Fiji has some of the highest rates of GBV globally, with over 52% of Fijian women experiencing intimate partner violence in their lifetime, nearly double the global average. Our project, framed by Southern Criminology, which involved a team drawn from Australia and Fiji, investigated current policing practices in handling cases of sexual and domestic violence to identify opportunities for making meaningful improvements based on local knowledge. We interviewed 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 officials and leaders. This chapter draws selectively on this field research to discuss some of the possibilities for enhancing police responses to gender violence, such as prioritising leadership-driven cultural change, expanding the Sexual Offence Units to include domestic violence, enhancing the role of Community Posts in investigating gender violence and reforming outdated laws and policies like the No-Drop Policy.

Keywords

Policing gender violence · Customary justice · Bulubulu: Sexual offence units · Community posts

Introduction

Models of policing gender violence (GBV) are based primarily on approaches developed in English-speaking countries in the northern hemisphere (Carrington et al, 2023). This is not the case in the Pacific Islands. Framed by Southern Criminology, our project investigated the way sexual and domestic violence is regulated in Fiji through a policing system blended with customary forms of justice. This chapter presents the findings of an in-depth study conducted by a team of researchers from Australia and Fiji. 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. We interviewed 58 participants, including police officers from various ranks and units, government and UN officials, representatives from women's and human rights organizations, social welfare and medical service providers, and senior justice officials and leaders. This chapter draws selectively on this field research to discuss the possibilities for enhancing police responses to gender violence.

Background

Fiji is a tropical archipelago comprising 330 islands in the Pacific Ocean, with approximately 100 of them permanently inhabited. Around 90% of the nation's 936,000 people live on its two largest islands, Viti Levu and Vanua Levu (World Bank, 2023). Transportation between these islands is limited, and air and sea travel can be costly, time-consuming, and challenging due to vast distances. Geographical isolation creates significant challenges for policing. Many remote islands have a low number of police officers compared to their population size, and it is challenging to recruit adequately trained personnel in these areas (Watson et al., 2024). This shortage makes day-to-day policing difficult, particularly when responding to reports of domestic and sexual 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.

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, including the Chinese, Rotumans, Europeans, and Pacific Islanders, contribute to the island's diversity (Fiji Bureau of Statistics, 2017). 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.

Established by the British colonial administration in 1874, Fiji's police force was initially created to maintain order and enforce colonial rule (Fiji Police Force, 2024). 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 comprising the People's Alliance Party, the National Federation Party, and the Social Democratic Liberal Party (Needham, 2022). 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 claims to be committed to enhancing transparency and accountability in law enforcement, aiming to restore public confidence (Waqairadovu, 2023).

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 (Fiji Police Force, 2023). The Fiji Police Force has a policing structure with larger, main stations (sometimes called "mother stations"). Approximately 4100 police officers are stationed across four police divisions—Central, Eastern, Northern, and Western—with 356 main stations. There are currently 467 community posts, many of which would only have one or two officers. As a recent initiative, the Fiji Police have established 41 Sexual Offence Units across the service.

Fiji's Blended Justice Approach to Responding to Gender Violence

Like other Pacific Island states, Fiji has a “blended” justice system, where the state policing system coexists with customary forms of justice (Chand et al., 2024; George, 2017; Bull et al., 2019; Watson et al., 2023). This section examines how police navigate the complex legal and cultural expectations that arise from working across both state and customary frameworks.

Fiji has an extensive and robust legal framework for addressing GBV. It is a signatory to the UN Convention on the Elimination of Violence Against Women and a Pacific regional declaration on gender equality (Pacific Leaders Gender Equality Declaration, 2023; Pacific Platform for Action on Gender Equality and Human Rights, 2018–2023). Relevant legislation includes the Family Law Act (2003), the Domestic Violence Act (2009), the Crimes Act (2009), and the Criminal Procedure Act (2009). In addition to this legislation, Fiji has introduced police-specific policies to address gender-based violence directly, such as the No-Drop Policy. However, the implementation of these state-based legal frameworks is challenged by their intersection with customary forms of justice.

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*. At the same time, Indo-Fijians often rely on elderly members of their extended family to oversee the reconciliation process between the victim and perpetrator (Chand et al., 2024, p. 42). These practices are still prevalent in Fiji today, particularly in rural areas and isolated island communities (Watson et al., 2024).

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 (Watson et al., 2023). 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 (Newland, 2016).

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 (Newland, 2016). Many women feel pressured to accept these apologies and forgive their offenders, even when it does not align with their wishes or needs. Reconciliation through these traditional ceremonies often prioritises the maintenance of harmonious relationships between families and villages over justice and reparation for women who have been abused (see Chand, Chapter ► “Customary Method of Resolving Domestic Violence in Fiji” in Handbook). The outcomes can vary widely depending on the knowledge and experience of community elders and leaders, typically older men (Stamatakis, 2024).

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% did so (Chand et al., 2024, p. 40). 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 (Newland, 2016, p. 57).

The Fiji Women's Rights Movement has also recorded instances of police reluctance to intervene in cases involving sexual and domestic violence (Fiji Women's Rights Movement, 2017). 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:

- Forty percent 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.

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 page X for policy details), discourages many women from seeking police assistance (Chand et al., 2024).

Research Framework and Methodology

Much of the current literature on gender-based violence originates from the Global North, with most policing models developed in English-speaking countries of the Northern Hemisphere (Carrington et al., 2023). As a result, the specific challenges of policing gender-based violence in the complex post-colonial contexts of the Global South remain underexplored (Carrington et al., 2016). This study seeks to fill that gap by drawing on evidence from Fiji, providing context-sensitive insights that can inform the development of practical, 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 gender-based violence. 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.

The research study was conducted in four stages, beginning with a desk review of the extant grey literature, followed by interviews with key informants, ethnographic observations, and data analysis. Research interviews were conducted during two

trips to Fiji, in September 2023 and August 2024. Participants were selected based on their in-depth knowledge and experience of policing responses to domestic and sexual violence offences. 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.

P = Thirty-four 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.

C = Twenty-four 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.

J = Four "justice leaders" occupying senior executive positions as international justice advisors, magistrates, and prosecutors.

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.

Socio-Demographics

Gender: Over two-thirds (70%) of interview participants identified as female, 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 gender-based violence.

Age: The most significant proportion of people (35%) was in their 40s. The average age of UN and civil agency participants was 39 years, the average age of police participants was 42 years, and the average age of justice leaders was 55 years.

Number of years worked: The most significant proportion of people (45%) had worked in their sector area for under 10 years.

Location: The research team visited four locations across two major islands. 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, accounting for 65% of the total interviews. Many of those we interviewed in these locations also conducted outreach services to remote and island settlements.

Data Analysis

The interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. The interviews were recorded using Otter 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 meticulously

checked and corrected by two researchers, Carla Chan Unger and Kerry Carrington. At the same time, the qualitative data were coded into head themes through a process of analytic induction (Punch, 2000, p. 201). The coding 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, and Enhancing Police Responses to Domestic and Sexual Violence.

Ethics and Confidentiality

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 participants who responded were satisfied with the report's findings and recommendations.

Discussion of Research Findings

Difficulties Policing Gender Violence under Parallel 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 gender-based violence cases. 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 are not solved through ... the formal justice system. (C19)

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. The village headmen, known as *Turang Ni Koro*,

are elected or appointed by their community and receive a small government stipend for their duties. This quote from a former Director of a Sexual Offences Unit in the Fiji Police illustrates how the headmen act as 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. 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. (P15)

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 a 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. (P14)

The central challenge for law enforcement in Fiji is finding a balanced way to respect the cultural traditions while ensuring that they do not perpetuate or justify domestic violence (Stamatakis, 2024). 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 (Chand et al., 2024, p. 44; Stamatakis, 2024).

Rather than blaming culture and religion for the high levels of violence in communities, re-framing culture and religion could be a more 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 shifted their approaches to addressing gender-based violence 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'. (C16)

International agencies and non-government organisations in Fiji have come to understand that culture and religion can be potential protective factors, highlighting the importance of local knowledge while striving for a vision of universal human rights.

The No-Drop Policy mandates that police officers cannot, under any circumstances, attempt to reconcile perpetrators with victims in domestic violence cases (Chand et al., 2024). 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. It overrules and outlaws a customary approach to responding to sexual or domestic violence. Nevertheless, we heard, as have other researchers, that it is common for police officers to advise victims to

reconcile with their abusers (Chand et al., 2024; Watson et al., 2023). If the No-Drop Policy is not being applied, or at best leads to mixed results, some of our interviewees felt it was timely to reform the policy.

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. (C12)

With limited financial assistance available to victims, police officers we interviewed felt conflicted about what was an appropriate response in the context of the No-Drop Policy. According to a senior police officer, sometimes police are encouraged to 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. (P33)

Most police officers we interviewed were acutely aware of the difficulty with applying the No-Drop Policy. One Criminal Investigations Division (CID) inspector explained how he uses both the customary and legal systems in responding to cases of gender-based violence:

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.' (P23)

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. (P13)

Most participants in our study raised numerous concerns about the No-Drop Policy, underscoring its need for reform. A senior advisor to the UN in Fiji, with decades of experience, explained why it is timely to reform the policy:

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. (C16)

Given the challenges in consistently implementing a No-Drop Policy where two parallel justice systems operate, it would be timely to review this policy in consultation with key stakeholders to align it with a human rights and victim-centred approach.

Enhancing Gender and Ethnic Diversity Within the Police Force

One of the main problems with policing is that it is a masculine profession that embodies a masculine culture ill-equipped to respond to instances of sexual or domestic violence (Carrington et al., 2020; Douglas, 2019; Nancarrow, 2019). The masculine culture of policing embeds a bias towards men, who are nearly always the perpetrators of GBV, while at the same time lacking empathy with survivors of gender violence, who are mainly women (Silvestri, 2017). According to the latest annual report from 2020, the Fiji Police Force employed 4156 officers, with women comprising 22% of the force (Fiji Police Force, 2022). This low level of female representation raises some concerns about the ability of the police to meet the diverse needs of the community. Enhancing diversity within the police force can strengthen operational effectiveness by improving responses to gender-based violence, fostering trust with victims, and ensuring a more inclusive and empathetic approach for all individuals seeking justice.

The maleness of policing also deters women from reporting. 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. (C3)

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. (P7)

Police culture also affects other groups in vulnerable circumstances, particularly members of the LGBTIQ+ community and people with disabilities. No data is collected about this population by the Fiji police. Discrimination and a 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 gender-based violence 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?" (C12)

Several female police officers among our participants, who had served abroad in peacekeeping missions, felt that despite being well-trained, they were still overlooked for senior leadership roles due to their gender. As one expert in gender-based violence 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. (C8)

Several stakeholders raised concerns about the limited number of female officers available to respond to sexual and domestic violence cases. The police force would benefit from greater ethnic and gender 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. (P22)

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. These participants felt that such diversity would help equip the force to respond effectively to gender-based violence across the wide range of communities it serves.

However, adding women to a male-dominated police force has not been successful in other countries in addressing the patriarchal culture of policing (Prenzler, 2023; Schuck, 2017). The culture of the police 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 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. (C8)

Extending the Scope of Sexual Offence Units to Respond to Domestic Violence

Over the past few years, the Fiji Police Force has established 41 Sexual Offences Units (SOU) led by women officers across the country, offering specialist support to victims of sexual violence (Watson et al., 2024). We conducted interviews in six police stations across three area divisions that had established an SOU. One advantage of having dedicated SOUs is that sexual offences are elevated in the policing structure, which sends a message that these offences are as important as other serious crimes.

We interviewed eight police officers working in these units, all of whom had undertaken specialist GBV training, were dedicated to their jobs and worked long hours. None, however, had received specialist training about gender-based violence during their time at the Police Academy. The SOU officers we interviewed stated that they were overburdened with a high workload, as the SOUs experienced a chronic shortage of personnel and resources. As this interviewee describes, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) collaborating with these SOUs were aware 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 is the same officers who probably will look at juvenile cases and all of that, so they're multitasking already. (C18)

Senior officers who worked in Criminal Investigation Divisions 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,” (P14) 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, there was a vehicle allocated for SOU, but since it has been returned, I have to request vehicles from my superiors. (P22)

Consequently, the Sexual Offence Units struggle to retain dedicated staff due to the excessive demand on their workloads and the limited 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 gender-based violence. 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. (P8)

Where a station does not have its dedicated Sexual Offence Unit, 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 the 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. (C11)

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. (C16)

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. They lack recording equipment, interview rooms, access to police vehicles, and many other essential resources. 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.

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.

Using Community Police Posts to Enhance the Policing of Gender-Based Violence

In 2023, the Minister for Home Affairs and Immigration initiated consultations to develop the Restore Blue initiative, which aims to build community trust in the Fiji Police (Movano, 2024). 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 (George, 2017, p. 65).

We conducted eight interviews with officers from two community posts in the Northern Division, each staffed with around 8–14 officers. While community posts are not new, having been established in 1986, a new emphasis under the Restore Blue strategy is on expanding the scope, personnel, and number of community posts nationwide, 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. (J2)

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. Instead, their primary functions were to enhance residents’ trust in the police, serve as the eyes and ears for police in the community, prevent crime from occurring, and notify the main stations of any serious crimes. Main stations can serve as regional headquarters or larger stations in an urban area to which community posts currently refer victims of sexual and domestic 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. (J2)

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 confidential filing systems and the lack of transport for taking victims 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.... (P32)

Despite these limitations of the community post roles, a senior officer at a Sexual Offence 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 gender-based violence in Fiji. Another officer from a Sexual Offences Unit spoke about her positive collaboration with the community, post officers who helped to raise awareness of domestic and sexual 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. (P4)

Most of our respondents believed that community police posts play a crucial role in maintaining law and order, raising awareness, building trust, and preventing crime by working closely with 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 proximity 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. (P36)

In rural and remote areas, as well as island settings, where access to justice can be particularly challenging, community posts are essential for victims as a means of accessing justice. In some outer island posts, there is sometimes only one officer available to support victims of gender-based violence. 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 the 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]. (C16)

The planned expansion of community police posts in Fiji is a deliberate strategy aimed at shifting from reactive to preventive policing and fostering community trust.

While larger stations serve as hubs for a wide range of policing services and have more resources, they are often busier, and therefore, victims frequently receive poor service and lack privacy.

Under the Restore Blue strategy, which aims to increase the number of personnel at community police posts, there is an opportunity to enhance community policing responses to gender-based violence in Fiji. Alongside upskilling community police officers to engage in awareness-raising activities on sexual and domestic violence, the role of these officers could be broadened. Thus, they could take statements, file reports, and conduct investigations into domestic violence incidents. Implementing changes to the roles of community police officers would require sufficient resources, particularly transport to assist victims of violence in accessing medical services and computers for recording electronic statements to share this information with the main stations and courts.

There is also potential for Community Posts to assume a more significant role in preventing gender violence through multi-sectoral collaboration and Crime Prevention Committees. These Committees, 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 address gender-based violence at a community level. 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. (C18)

The Fiji Women's Crisis Centre has established Ending Violence Against Women (EVAW) Committees in selected villages across the country where rates of gender-based violence are particularly high. Since it can be difficult to access police stations in rural and remote areas, EVAW committees provide an alternative way for local communities to assist victims. 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. The Fiji Women's Crisis Centre supports these committees with practical and legal advice on how to assist victims in accessing services and reporting to the police.

These Committees are a good example of a blended approach that addresses gender-based violence, as they draw on community structures and can help create pathways for victims to access the legal justice system. Community police can use these committees and existing community networks to improve how gender-based violence is prevented and addressed.

Enhancing Multi-sectoral Collaborations with the Fiji Police

Our research found that 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. (P33)

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. (P33)

Numerous interviewees highlighted how the lack of available childcare limits women's access to employment and keeps them financially dependent on their male partners. Even though Fiji has well-developed frameworks and legislation to support childcare, government-supported services are limited (Chopra, 2023). Instead, childcare is only accessible if arranged privately or led by the employer.

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

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? (C13)

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. (C16)

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

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. (C19)

Participants also described practices for pooling 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 the villages...we look at how we can support each other. 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, counselling, legal and fuel, and the police provide the boat with a captain, so we go together. We go in a 9–10-member team. Then we invite other stakeholders that need to be in there, like Save the Children or Legal Aid... that's how we operate. We definitely don't normally operate alone. (C5)

Conclusion

Our research has identified opportunities for improving the structure of the Fiji Police Force to enhance its responses to sexual and domestic violence by extending the use of community policing to include gender violence and by enlarging Sexual Offence Units to include cases of domestic violence. To build a more effective and survivor-centred policing response to gender-based violence, there is a need to prioritise leadership-driven cultural change, expand specialised units to include domestic violence, enhance multi-sectoral collaboration, and reform outdated laws and policies like the No-Drop Policy. These actions will strengthen the Fiji Police Force's capacity and align its policing practices with the best practice international standards in gender-sensitive law enforcement.

As policing alone cannot address the deeply rooted factors contributing to GBV, police work depends significantly on collaboration with other sectors. There are several examples of where this is already happening, and opportunities exist for collaborative efforts between the police, government agencies, NGOs, and local communities to be strengthened to tackle the root causes of violence. Senior leaders will require training and support to implement the significant changes necessary for making 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, enabling them 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.

While Fiji's legislative and policy framework for addressing gender-based violence is robust, (Fiji Government, 2023; UNDP, 2023) significant challenges remain. 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 gender-based violence. Drawing on broader academic literature on police culture in the Pacific and the Global South, this discussion has shown 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 (Amin, et.al., 2024; Chand, et. al, 2024; Watson et al., 2023; Bull et al., 2019; George, 2017). Our findings highlight the challenges faced by frontline police officers in navigating the complexities of overlapping systems, as well as the importance of strengthening relationships between police and the community to help victims access justice.

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