

THE NEEDS OF PACIFIC WOMEN WHEN THEY ARE VICTIMS OF FAMILY VIOLENCE

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Abstract

A concern about the dearth of research data on the specific needs of Pacific victims of crime led to a study which explored the needs of Pacific people who have been victims of three types of crime: violence, family violence and property offences. The study was designed to provide qualitative information to complement the quantitative information provided by the second New Zealand National Survey of Crime Victims 2001. Various Pacific theoretical frameworks for research were utilised to inform the design and analysis used in this study. This paper focuses on the women in that sample, and considers the needs of Pacific women who are victims of family violence. The findings indicate that victims of family violence were at different stages of dealing with the impacts of the violence inflicted by other members of their families. The paper concludes by suggesting some implications for social policy.

INTRODUCTION

Pacific peoples have been identified as the most at-risk population group in New Zealand in terms of social and economic deprivation. There is a growing recognition of the need for more informed data and research on issues that have a significant impact on the lives of Pacific peoples. In the justice area, two key issues stand out: offending and victimisation. One of the few sources of information on the victimisation of Pacific peoples was the first New Zealand National Survey of Crime Victims 1996, which provided some insight into the prevalence of violent offences against Pacific peoples (Young et al. 1997:34–35). These findings were based on a small sample of Pacific participants and suggested that further research was warranted.

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The concern about the dearth of research data on the specific needs of Pacific victims of crime led to a study (Koloto 2003) that explored the needs of Pacific peoples who have been victims of three types of crime: violence, family violence and property offences. The study was commissioned by the Ministry of Justice and undertaken with funding support from the Health Research Council of New Zealand. It was designed to provide qualitative information to complement the quantitative information provided by the second New Zealand National Survey of Crime Victims 2001 (Ministry of Justice 2001). This paper focuses on the women in the Pacific sample. Specifically, the data obtained through individual interviews on the needs of Pacific women who are victims of family violence are considered. We shall briefly mention the theoretical framework and the research methodology before turning to the results.

PACIFIC THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

The study is an example of a Pacific governance research project. Based on the Māori advancement and Māori development research models proposed by Cunningham (2000), the Pacific Health Research Committee of the Health Research Council proposed a focus on Pacific governance research. In particular, Pacific governance research refers to Pacific research projects led by Pacific researchers using Pacific theoretical frameworks to inform the methodology of the research.

A combination of different theoretical frameworks proposed by Pacific researchers, such as Tamasese et al.'s (1997) concept of Fa'afaletui, Teremoana MaUa-Hodges's Tivaevae model (2000), Jean Mitaera's (1997) concept of the "researcher as the first paradigm", Konai Helu-Thaman's metaphor of "Kakala" (1992), and Koloto's (2001) Pacific Cultural Competency framework were utilised to inform the research design, data analysis and dissemination of results.

METHODOLOGY

Project Aims and Objectives

The lack of research data on the needs of Pacific peoples who have been victims of crime was a key rationale for the present study. The research aimed to:

- gather in-depth information to increase and enhance our knowledge of the needs of Pacific peoples who are victims of crime
- ascertain the appropriateness of victim support services and community-based services for Pacific peoples who have been victims of violence, family violence, and property offences
- identify related health needs of Pacific victims of crime and appropriate measures to meet those needs

- identify appropriate support mechanisms from criminal justice sector agencies, such as the police and victim support organisations.

Research Sample

The sample consisted of 100 Pacific peoples, aged 16–84 years. The sample size of 100 for this study was predetermined by the commissioning agency, the Ministry of Justice, and mainly comprised cases of violence (11 males and 2 females), family violence (34 females) and property offences (24 males and 17 females). The data reported in this paper come from the 34 Pacific women who were identified in the family violence category.

The Interviews

The interview team represented six Pacific groups. They were bilingual, and the interview schedule was translated into their respective languages. Individual interviews were conducted with each of the participants at a time and place acceptable to them. The purpose of and the significance of their contribution to this research was explained to each participant. Participants were given time to ask questions and have these questions answered, and the interviews lasted between one and two hours.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data analysis was conducted using the transcripts of the interviews. Common themes emerging from the data were identified and used to frame the presentation and discussion of the findings. Extracts from the interviews are used to illustrate the themes. Names have been changed to protect the identity of the participants. This section describes and discusses data on the 34 family violence cases.

Nature of the Crime

Table 1 summarises the distribution of the types of offence involving family violence.

Table 1 Distribution of the Types of Family Violent Offence

Offence type	Number	%
Husband or male partner assaulted female partner	29	85
Husband assaulted partner's son	1	3
Mother and brother assaulted daughter/sister	2	6
Sister assaulted by brother and his group of gang members	1	3
Verbal abuse by a minor's relatives	1	3
Total	34	100%

Most commonly, the incidents involved a husband or a male partner as the perpetrator. Thirty out of 34 family violence cases (88%) belong to this category, including one case where the husband abused his wife's son from a previous marriage. Of the 29 cases where the male partner assaulted the female partner, three were "one-off" cases involving a single incident, while 26 involved long-term ongoing abuse of the female participants. Moreover, it should be noted that all three female participants in the one-off incidents were able to deal with the situation by leaving the relationship.

The majority of family violence cases (see Table 1) were domestic violence where the husband or male partner assaulted his wife or female partner. It should be noted that while the interview focused on one incident, most participants reported that they experienced ongoing domestic violence. The violence lasted between six months and eight years. Of interest to the researchers were the reasons given for the violence, which were many and varied. These included, but were not limited to, the following motivations.

- The male partner was jealous of the female partner.
- The wife or female partner did not get up to warm up the food for the husband.
- Alcohol was involved and therefore the offender lost control.
- The wife threatened to leave with the children.

The extract below illustrates the extreme nature of some of the family violence cases. It is evident from the description that this act of violence was premeditated and planned by the offender and partner. Like the majority of the cases, this case involved long-term and ongoing acts of violence. The victim was subjected to physical, verbal and mental abuse as well as a near-death experience, as described below:

"I was beaten by my husband ... I was beaten before and he kept talking and making threats at me ... making me fear for myself and my life with what he would do to me and the places he was going to take me to kill me ... he was going to throw me somewhere ... Also take me somewhere he was going to put me to shame ... when he is satisfied with what he will do to me then he will kill me, throw my body into a deserted area where our car had been parking ... he would repeat his story all over again ... taking me to a deserted area, maybe to sea, kill me and leave me there, he would be contented wherever he may kill me and he will be taken to prison ... As the car was travelling I was thinking of my children and how I wanted to live because of them and I was crying about wanting to say goodbye to my children, but he would do only what he wanted. He said 'No, no.' As the car was travelling I kept thinking of ways to get out for my children ... I was whispering inside, saying my prayers ... Yeah ... Mary and her loving Son to give me strength. I was thinking like that, to give me encouragement to get out of the situation, because I wanted to live because of my children ... I kept praying and I could

feel this inner strength so strongly that I was overcome by it that I had to jump out of the car as it was travelling so fast ... That's why people were amazed, surprised that I could jump out of the car as it was travelling at 90 [km/hr]."

The victim was picked up by another driver who had seen her lying on the road. She was taken to hospital and the incident was reported to the police. Had the incident occurred in a secluded place it is unlikely that anyone would have come to the rescue.

Unlike the previous case, the following incident took place in the home. Viola's explanations clearly highlight that family relationships and communications between partners were an issue. Her partner had two boys from a previous relationship and discussions regarding the boys led to arguments and disagreements. According to her account, Viola herself believed that she contributed to the dysfunction of the family because of her jealousy. However, while it is possible that the way some participants dealt with situations may appear to have fuelled certain incidents, this does not in any way excuse or exonerate the acts of violence themselves.

"There was an ongoing problem between me and my partner. He had a partner before me and the two sons. There was a deep-seated jealousy in me and every little thing that he needed to do for them would start up the argument and disagreement ... The incident happened at our own house in the afternoon. It was during the discussions of our family planning which involved the two boys. Well, I was so angry and became very violent because my partner kept saying, 'Ssh! Keep your voice down' and he pushed me, then I threw a small bowl at him, then he punched me on the mouth and I yelled because the blood was coming from my mouth. Then we were fighting and I chased him out of the house. I was crying and didn't know where to turn to. The only thing that came to mind was to call the police. I don't want the partner to enter the house again."

Two cases involved the mother and a brother assaulting their daughter/sister. The first case involved a 21-year-old female participant who had been babysitting her niece when accidentally the niece jammed her fingers in the doorway. The participant's brother failed to listen to her part of the incident and continued to blame her. It is evident from the following extract that communication between brothers and sisters is clearly an issue.

"Well he started telling me off and I didn't like it amongst all other things he was saying. So I started telling him off too. He just kept on blaming me, yelling at me that I should have been more careful and I hadn't looked after my niece properly. I got all emotional and started crying and yelling at my brother. That's when he smacked me right in the mouth. I continued to cry even harder this time. He slapped me again in the cheek, telling me to shut up and be quiet. He continued to hit me some more because I wouldn't stop crying."

The participant's mother acted in a similar manner, verbally and physically assaulting the victim. It appears that the mother condoned the involvement of the brother in the physical punishment of the daughter. In some Pacific cultures (Tongan and Samoan) there is a sacred or taboo relationship between the sister and the brother. It is uncommon for a brother to assault a sister. However, the above case appears to suggest that it is acceptable to have a brother involved in punishing his sister. The extent to which it is acceptable for a brother to assault his sister in Pacific families can only be determined through further investigation. It is important to note that the brother in this example was older than the sister, and it is possible that he was seen as responsible for the household while the parents were away and thus accountable for his sister's behaviour and entitled to inflict such punishment as he saw fit.

Impact of Family Violence on Pacific Women Victims

The data from victims of domestic violence show that children appear to be the most affected members of the family. In some cases, children intervened to help their mothers because they did not accept the acts of violence. A 30-year-old mother, Vaine, was a victim of domestic violence. She chose to deal with the violence by herself and not inform members of her family or the police. She finally received help from the police because her son reported the matter to them. As Vaine explained the situation:

"I didn't actually seek help ... It was actually my oldest son who rang the police up for help because it was more like they have caught up with the situation. So somehow they had lessons from school during that week about emergencies like whatever is happening dial 111. But all I know is that my son was calling me to come on the phone, but I wasn't aware of it. But when I came on it, they said, 'This is the police'. I got freaked out because I didn't know they had the mind to phone the police. During some other years I have never received any help, it's like I didn't want anyone to know that I was going through that situation."

It is apparent that this participant had endured about eight years of domestic violence and abuse without seeking the support of her family or other support services. The action of her seven-year-old son appears to have triggered the beginning of Vaine using appropriate support services, such as the police and her lawyer, to deal with the impact of domestic violence.

It was common for female victims to report their children developing a sense of hatred or dislike of their fathers as a result of the domestic violence. In particular, children were distressed see the father help other women physically abuse the mother. For instance, one participant, Sitela, suggested:

"My children don't want anything to do with their father. They are still hurt about the way he left us and especially when my husband helped the woman beat me up. My daughter wants to tell him not to call her his daughter for the rest of his life."

Many of the families lived together as an extended family, so the crime had an impact on other members of the extended family. The impact on children was serious, particularly in families living daily with domestic violence. Some participants were reluctant to inform their families because of their fear that they might have to take the law into their own hands and deal with their partner's acts of violence.

Pacific Women Victims' Experiences of the Criminal Justice System

The data suggest that some women who experience repeated abuse and assaults from their male partner either live in fear of them or wish to protect their partner and/or family from the criminal justice system. In addition, some victims did not want their partners to be considered in a negative light by their own family, so they prioritised protection of their husbands and family over their own safety and wellbeing. A few victims believed such incidents would not occur again and therefore did not think it was necessary to report the crime to the police.

Luisa's experiences provide an example of cultural traditions being used as the reason for neither informing the police nor reaching out to support services outside of the family. It is apparent that in her family culture it is considered appropriate to keep knowledge of domestic violence within the family. The quote also suggests the victim having regard for others in a similar situation. As she explained:

"I had bruises to my face and body area ... My self-esteem goes out the window, self-worth is small. I pray that my partner will change. Because I am still with my partner, it still hurts, but maybe in time I may have the courage to leave him."

Despite the violence and the impact of the violent offences on herself, Luisa indicated that she would not use the support services if they were offered to her. Luisa's case suggests an acceptance of her situation. It appears that she has not acknowledged the need to obtain support and to address the violence that she endured in her relationship. Given that she and her family live in her mother-in-law's home, an extended family situation, she appears to have accepted her mother-in-law's counsel and advice on the strategies to cope with her partner's acts of violence. Thus, she has learnt to accept this type of relationship and therefore the services of the police would not be useful unless she saw a need to access them. This finding implies that the women need to examine their beliefs about violent abuse and the mechanisms that operate in their family life to

support abuse. They need to know their own rights rather than conform to the “cultural traditions” that they have come to accept. It is evident that Luisa is trying to manage the violence within this relationship.

Like Luisa, Suiti, a Pacific-born woman in her mid-40s who has lived in New Zealand for about 30 years, decided not to tell the police. At the time of the interview, Suiti was hiding from her partner, who had threatened to kill her with a gun. She feared not only for her own life but also for her daughter. She has been in this relationship for more than five years.

In the only case involving rape within a marriage, the participant simply did not know her legal rights and the assistance and help that were available to her. Moreover, her concern for her children and her wish that her children not be affected by a father that went to jail was also a reason for her decision not to report the matter to the police.

“It was not reported because it was between husband and wife. No one directed me to the law that it could’ve been reported. I mean how would they deal with the rape case in a marriage? Even now I’m not sure if I would because of my children – having their father behind bars would not be good for my children.”

The results imply that for some women who are victims of family violence, their priorities are not necessarily for their own safety. As mothers, one of their priorities is to avoid the disruption that might follow after police intervention. The needs of the children are a priority and hence they avoid the intervention of the police.

Of the 34 cases of family violence, 23 (68%) were reported to the police. An example of a reported case of family violence is that of Tilila, 30 years old and born in New Zealand, who was abused by her partner. In most cases the abuse was verbal rather than physical. Tilila reported one incident to the police. Extracts from the interview with Tilila show the services offered by the police and their effectiveness.

“I went to Women’s Refuge because that’s what the cops advised me to do, and my sister-in-law told me about them because the abuse was happening a lot of the time ... They were really good at the Women’s Refuge because I got to have a break from my partner, very homely and I got a good feeling. It was a good place to get away and think things over. I took my kids with me over there and that was another reason for going to the Women’s Refuge, because wherever I go my kids come with me. I am not like one of those mothers who burden our own mothers.”

When asked if she reported the incident to the police, Tilila responded:

"Yeah, I reported the incident to the police, that was just enough for me because I had had enough. The police were really accessible because they turned up straight away and they put me onto the Women's Refuge. They issued a Protection Order and it really helped me so I could have a break from my partner. They were good because they read my partner his rights, and I was very satisfied with how they explained things clearly."

This interview revealed that the police took their time to explain the services that were available to victims of family violence. They made the referral to the Women's Refuge and advised Tilila and her partner about Victim Support, restorative justice, counselling services and other programmes that offer services to deal with the needs of victims of family violence. However, the counselling services were not very helpful for Tilila, who felt that the counselling advisors asked a lot of irrelevant questions and some of the questions made the situation even worse.

One of the features of this support from the police involved assisting both the victim and the perpetrator. Tilila's partner was referred to a programme for men against violence while Tilila was referred to the Women's Refuge, which then provided the support that Tilila and her family needed.

Sometimes the information provided by the police regarding victim support options was not always followed up by the participants. For instance, one victim of family violence, Tino, had this to say about her experiences with the police referrals:

"I reported it myself because I had enough; I didn't want him [her partner] to keep on hitting me. I rang 111, then they put me to an operator, then to the police operator, and I was told to dial 128. It was hard because all I thought I had to do was ring 111. The police came in about 15 minutes. There were two cars, one male and one female [police officer] ... I was really happy when they arrested my partner ... I didn't get told about Victim Support. After the male police officer took my partner away, the female police officer stayed with me and was talking to me about going to Women's Refuge. She rang up the Women's Refuge for me. I felt more comfortable with her, maybe because she was a woman ... Women's Refuge, they offered transport, food, clothes and a shelter for me and my kids. They took me down ... to apply for the DPB.² They told me about the Protection Order and Child Custody, but I turned it down ... because I didn't really understand, plus I was scared.

Tino's experiences highlight the importance of having a female police officer attending a complaint of family violence. Her presence eased the situation for the victim and

2 Domestic Purposes Benefit, under which lone parents receive income support.

taking time to make the telephone call and referral to the Women's Refuge also helped. Tino accessed this service, which subsequently advised her on options available through the justice system. It is apparent that for Tino, because this was her first experience in accessing the police and other support services, it was critical that she was provided with clear information about the legal system to ensure that she fully understood the procedure.

The case reported below involved Nola, who has lived in New Zealand for 20 years and subjected to ongoing physical, mental and emotional abuse. Nola indicated that the police referred her to the Women's Refuge and Victim Support. However, it seems that neither of these services were able to cater for her needs at the time. For instance, the Women's Refuge focused on her as a victim, but did not take into account her whole family; that is, her son. A 15-year-old was not considered appropriate to go in with his mother to the Refuge centre. This case highlights the need to take all aspects of the victim's needs into consideration by support services. The safety of her son was a concern to the mother and therefore she did not access the formal support services because of this. Like the services provided by the Women's Refuge, the services of Victim Support were considered ineffective.

"To be very honest these women came and then they didn't exactly tell me where they were from and I was too upset to take a card or anything ... so they told me they were sent by the police from the Women's Refuge. The reason why I think it's the Women's Refuge was that they offered to take me to the Refuge ... They said that they could take you and keep you there but my son couldn't come. So I wasn't going to leave my son alone ... Yes, they must have referred me to the Victim Support group. And when they came they sat down. It was just a huge waste of time because the two ladies talked to me for so many hours, about three or four hours, and I just repeated my whole life story with my husband and they left and they said, "We will call you the next day or something and we will get the report and we'll help you." I have never seen them again, never heard from them. So there was no support at all."

It is possible that Nola was not able to express her needs to the Victim Support staff. On the other hand the Victim Support staff may have been inadequately trained in assisting Pacific victims of family violence. Talking about her life story for three hours did not appear to help Nola. It could be that she had to share her "whole life story" with her friend, with the police, with the medical centre for the X-ray and then with the women from the Women's Refuge, and by the time the Victim Support staff arrived she could have been tired of repeating the same story to all these support services. It later became evident that the support of family members and friends, in looking after her son and housing him while she was away with friends, helped Nola to cope with the situation.

Pacific Women Victims of Family Violence: A Broader Context

The data from the family violence interviews not only reveals information about the nature of the crime and the impact on the victims, but also provides some insight into the nature of the relationships within the families experiencing violence. For instance, yelling and verbal abuse appear to be features of the communication styles used by some families. Physical violence accompanied by verbal abuse also appear to be the norm in some families. Violent acts by a brother were followed by violence by the mother. Although the interviews only provide snapshots of the incidents reported by the participants, the nature of the relationships within the families was not fully explored and was not the focus of this study. In order to have a more holistic picture of the nature of family violence in Pacific families, a more in-depth study of the dynamics of family relationships is required.

Although the study focused on the needs of Pacific victims of crime, it is also important to consider who the perpetrators were. Only three out of 34 cases of family violence were committed by non-Pacific offenders. All but one case of "male partner assaulted female partner" were committed by Pacific males. The results support the findings of other small-scale studies reported by Asiasiga and Gray (1998). The majority of the incidents reported took place during the night or early hours of the morning. In order to design strategies to meet the needs of victims of family violence, who are mainly women and children, Pacific males (who are the main perpetrators) need to be taken into account. In other words, programmes aimed at behavioural changes for male perpetrators should be an integral part of programmes aimed at meeting the needs of Pacific women and children who are exposed to family violence.

It is apparent that in some cases the participant's family and other elders all acted to meet the needs of the perpetrator. The influence of the victim's mother and her family in reuniting them and, inadvertently, condoning the violence is a key feature of domestic violence. Similar results were reported in a recently released study of 45 victims of family violence in Auckland (Hand et al. 2002).

Although two cases involved the brother and the mother abusing the daughter, the majority of the cases involved the women being subjected to ongoing domestic violence by their male partners. The overwhelming majority of these cases (30 cases) involved Pacific males as the perpetrators. The findings indicate that victims of family violence were at different stages of dealing with the impacts of the violence inflicted by other members of their families. While a few women were still at a stage of accepting the violence as the norm and considered it to be "culturally appropriate", others were beginning to deal with the violence with the support of family members, police and other victim support services such as Victim Support, Women's Refuge and Pacific

social services. A few victims had dealt with the domestic violence by leaving the relationship and/or were seeking a divorce from their partners. One victim reconciled with her partner, and their communications and relationship improved.

Needs of Pacific Women Victims of Family Violence

Despite the limitations of the study (the small sample size), the results provide significant information and important insights into the needs of Pacific women who have experienced family violence, their experiences of support services and the criminal justice system, the effectiveness of these support systems in meeting their needs, and the impact of the crime on themselves as individuals and on their families. The following are the key areas of needs of Pacific women victims of family violence:

- safety and housing for victims and their children
- acknowledgement that family violence is unacceptable, although it might be considered by victims as culturally appropriate within their own families
- Pacific families' examination of cultural practices that may condone violence and act to discourage victims from seeking help outside of the family
- programmes aimed at eliminating domestic violence by involving the offenders (given that the majority of the offenders are Pacific men)
- financial support for themselves and their children once victims decide to leave abusive and violent relationships
- appropriate counselling services and support from Pacific social service organisations or Pacific staff in victim support agencies
- assistance with referrals to appropriate victim support agencies such as Women's Refuge, and the need for a Pacific Women's Refuge
- advice and appropriate information on victims' legal rights and the types of support systems and mechanisms offered by the criminal justice sector agencies.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

This paper focused on the data obtained through individual interviews with Pacific women who were the victims of family violence. The results and discussion presented have contributed to our knowledge and understanding of the nature of the crimes involved, their impact on the lives of Pacific women and their families, the help-seeking behaviours of Pacific victims of crime, and the effectiveness and appropriateness of support services in meeting their needs. It is our hope that this paper has presented the voices of Pacific women victims of family violence crime, while at the same time makes a significant contribution to the advancement of Pacific theoretical frameworks and methodologies for research.

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