



Culture, Religion and Domestic Violence: Reflections on Working with Fiji and Tuvalu Communities

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Abstract

While domestic violence (DV) has been understood as a form of gendered violence linked to patriarchal power, postcolonial and indigenous feminist criminologies have underscored that DV needs to be understood also in relation to the interactions and entanglements between colonialism, class, race, nation, gender and religion. Moreover, such interventions require questioning Western and secular assumptions and reductions of culture, tradition and non-modern (read 'non-Western') epistemologies and faith as reserves of mainly patriarchal power. This paper reflects within three practitioner spaces on efforts against DV in Fiji and Tuvalu and how these critiques and interventions are mobilised in practice and with community interactions. We draw on the varied experiences of the three of us (educator, counsellor and police officer) to explore how we are embedded in various forms of translation and border-crossing work, especially in relation to assumptions, practices and knowledge linked to culture, religion and rights in relation to DV.

Keywords: Domestic violence; culture; religion; rights; translation; decolonisation.

Introduction

Based on different prevalence studies of domestic, intimate-partner and family violence in Pacific Island countries, the Pacific region is cited to have some of the highest rates of violence against women in the world (knowVAWdata 2020; Pacific Women 2023; World Health Organisation (WHO) 2018).¹ A range of research and reports points to how domestic violence (DV), intimate partner violence (IPV) and gender-based violence (GBV) in the region are normalised and rationalised (Amin, Trussler and Johnson 2020; Fulu et al. 2013; Fiji Women's Crisis Centre (FWCC) 2013; Ma'a Fafine mo e Famili 2012; Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC) 2009, 2010; Vanuatu Women's Centre (VWC) 2011) and produced through gendered inequalities that subordinate women in political, economic and socio-religio-cultural spaces (Crichton-Hill and Olul 2019; George 2016; Heard et al. 2018; Siu-Maliko 2016; Underhill-Sem et al. 2016). Pacific Island women's movements and organisations, Pacific Island communities, civil society actors and governments have been responding to the problem of DV/IPV in multiple ways, including awareness raising, (re)training of frontline responders, establishing and expanding services to support victims and survivors of DV/IPV, and legal reform (Biersack and Macintyre 2016). Local, national and regional level efforts have often leveraged and/or been drawn into the international human rights regime linked to DV/IPV, including the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and its supplementary Declaration on the Elimination



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of Violence, which has been ratified by 13 out of 14 Pacific Island nations and which has been integrated into the Pacific Platform for Action for Gender Equality and Women's Human Rights (2018-2023) (SPC, 2022).

Biersack and Macintyre (2016) suggest that the field of action² against DV in Pacific Island societies is characterised by a 'top-down' effort (transnational and post-colonial women's movements/organisations allied through a politics of human rights) and a 'bottom-up' effort in which local cultural leaders and/or rural/village-based actors see a need for cultural revitalisation to reassert cultural principles (e.g., of reciprocity, respect, care) that would prevent DV.³ While these top-down and bottom-up efforts can align, they can also cause friction and tensions linked not only to goals, but also to what (power) relations are (un)targeted through these different approaches. In addition to cultural principles, in the Pacific Islands, where religious institutions, communities and beliefs are present and important for how people relate to each other and see themselves, the work of some churches and/or some religious actors within churches has also been significant—as agents pushing change in the struggle against DV, and drawing on faith and Christian principles of marriage, gender and responsibility (see, for example, Davis 2020; Gibbs 2016; Uniting World 2016a, 2016b; Vaai 2022). Moreover, post-colonial and indigenous feminist work,⁴ as well as cultural and political decolonisation efforts, decentre both the apparent neutrality (or universality) of rights and essentialist tendencies in understandings of culture and faith. These latter efforts highlight how contemporary dynamics of GBV, including DV, in Global South communities are linked to multiple forms of violence and harm produced through historical colonialism and contemporary coloniality that work(ed) to effectively disrupt, alienate and break customary and cultural ways of preventing and responding to violence in the family (Biersack and Macintyre 2016). They also underscore how colonialism, market-integration, racial capitalism and unequal globalisation have restructured and reconstituted gender relations in ways that created or amplified power inequalities between men and women in the family (and beyond) and gendered violence (Underhill-Sem 2020).

The field of practice in which struggles and work against DV occurs is thus characterised by entanglements and interweaving of multiple discourses (feminist, human rights, cultural, religious, decolonial) that may seem contradictory or disparate in the context of dominant Western liberal feminist ideologies and practices against DV. The impact of these multiple interconnected discourses for practice is that work in the struggle against DV is characterised by different forms of translations between rights and culture (and/or faith). It further involves border-crossing work—borders that are ideological, political, disciplinary, sectoral, gendered.

In this article, we each draw on our varied experiences (educator, counsellor and police officer) to explore how we are embedded in various forms of translation and border-crossing work, especially in relation to assumptions, practices and knowledge linked to culture, religion and rights in the context of DV. This article was produced through several conversations (written and oral) about our experiences and practices and the ways that culture and religion keep surfacing in our work. Some of these conversations started much earlier than the Pacific Criminology Symposium—one of us (Selina) worked on a research project about how policing of DV faces challenges from cultural institutions in Kiribati; under Sara's supervision, two of us (Sepola and Sara) researched the interactions between policing, religion and culture in Tuvalu; and two of us (Selina and Sepola) were students in Sara's crime and deviance course. Through these conversations, we each recognised how specific cultural practices and religious discourses and beliefs are mobilised by perpetrators, victims and their communities and how our work responds to these mobilisations. Through critical reflective dialogue with each other, our practices and the responses we have received from our communities, we conclude with final thoughts on what this may mean for Pacific criminology in relation to DV.

Reflections on Being a Counsellor-Advocate and Community Educator in Fiji (Selina)

I am an indigenous Fijian woman and a Christian, who was born and raised in the remote Ra province on the western side of Viti Levu. In 2011, I joined the Fiji Women's Crisis Centre (FWCC), a well-renowned activist organisation that works towards eliminating all forms of violence against women and children in Fiji and the Pacific region. I also worked for a year with the Medical Services Pacific (MSP), which aims to increase access for women, youth and children to reproductive healthcare for successful family planning, and to support vulnerable populations. My principal professional practices to prevent DV and GBV are: crisis intervention, ensuring confidentiality and follow-up counselling and support services, community education (CE), networking for proper DV and GBV referral pathways and training partnerships with civil society organisations, faith-based organisations and service providers (police, judiciary, prosecutions, social welfare and legal aid). Currently, I have taken a break from my profession, managing our family business and continuing studies at the University of the South Pacific (USP).

The 10 years of experience I gained in the DV prevention space are credited to FWCC, where I have worked the greatest number of years. FWCC provides counselling and legal, medical and other practical support services for women and children who are sufferers and survivors of violence committed against them by men. FWCC counsellor advocates gain extensive expertise in DV from providing these services, including on women's experiences of DV, as well as the strengths and challenges

that may exist when working with other service providers, such as the police or the court systems. This valuable practice-based knowledge informs how we conduct CE, research and legal advocacy work.

FWCC's work aligns with human rights principles, democracy and the rule of law. FWCC has existed for 39 years since its establishment in 1984 and, as noted, is a respected advocacy-based organisation. It has succeeded in shaping public policy, practice and discourse on DV and GBV in Fiji and the region, including creating widespread acceptance for the need for emergency services and ongoing support for women subjected to any form of violence; providing training for police and workplaces on being responsive to survivors and victims of DV; and modelling and supporting DV responses in other Pacific region countries (Fiji Women's Crisis Centre 2023).

While an academic qualification in a field such as social work, counselling, psychology or sociology is desirable for a GBV/DV counselling career, it is not comparable to the depth and wealth of knowledge gained when learning from the experiences of DV survivors. To be a fully-fledged counsellor and community educator with FWCC, individuals must undergo a series of trainings and assessments to qualify for working in a space deeply rooted in social norms and practices. I am grateful to FWCC for having had the opportunity to learn quickly, enabling me to begin practising early in the same year I began my career in 2011. In this profession, learning never stops; it is an ongoing process because DV remains highly contested, both socially and epistemologically.

For the communities across the country, whether concerning Fijians of Indian descent, indigenous Fijians or multi-racial communities, many perceive DV to be culturally and religiously supported. While FWCC (2013) documented this perception through a national representative sample, I also concur, based on my 10 years of counselling and Community Education (CE). My understanding has been enriched from the history of FWCC's work and from FWCC counsellor advocates who have dedicated two to three decades to addressing the issues of GBV and DV. Specifically for this article, I reflect on indigenous Fijians' experiences in both counselling and CE.

Adherence to marriage vows, family reputation, fear of reprisals, low self-esteem and financial dependency, as well as concerns 'for the sake of the children' and normalising violence as a part of an intimate relationship and love for the husband or partner, are common reasons given by women and community members that may prevent a battered woman from leaving a violent relationship. Counselling and CE with FWCC are designed to help people recognise that DV is a human rights violation, it is not normal, and it is against the law, with detrimental impacts on the couple, their children, family, community and the nation as a whole. These main practices aim to equip women with knowledge about their rights, responsibilities and other relevant information to empower them to make well informed life decisions. George (2016) states that women activists in Fiji creatively incorporate religious and cultural references to help people understand how human rights principles resonate with existing values systems and Pacific ways of thinking.

This translation work is done within a highly politicised environment; however, it has opened up lobbying possibilities and even achieved success at the level of state policy and lawmaking (Prasad and Lata 2008; Watson, Amin and Robinson 2024). For example, some of the achievements that resulted from FWCC's continuous advocacy with other activist organisations and working closely with Fiji's Ministry of Women, Children and Social Protection include: the Fiji National Service Delivery Protocol for Responding to Cases of GBV 2018 (standard operating procedures for inter-agency response amongst social services, police, health and legal/justice providers); the *Domestic Violence (Fiji) Act 2009*; the Fijian government's 2012 legal reforms to provide the same legal standing to de-facto couples as those of married couples (such as de-facto partners' rights to property and spousal maintenance when relationships ceased); the law's recognition of spousal or marital rape as a criminal offence; the launch of the National Domestic Violence helpline 1560; and the Fiji National Action Plan to Prevent Violence Against All Women and Girls 2023–2028.

Crichton-Hill and Olul (2019) suggest that responses to DV in the Pacific should acknowledge protective factors in Pacific culture and integrate traditional and formal approaches. The authors add that the context within which violence occurs will influence solutions. Therefore, women's organisations such as FWCC work very closely with communities by providing training based on requests, with the aim of ensuring sensitive, immediate and proper responses to cases of DV. Indigenous Fijian communities are formally governed through a structure that starts from the village (koro), then the districts (tikina), then the province (yasana), which then comes under the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs in the Fiji government. Under each province, several villages are categorised in each district. Organisations such as FWCC work within these structures and follow cultural and religious protocols at the start and end of each training session. These traditional protocols included the i-sevusevu, i-tatau, lotu and prayers.⁵ In respecting and abiding by these traditional protocols, trust is established and maintained between FWCC and the indigenous Fijian communities. This results in good relationships, especially with leaders who are influential in decision making, that impact the lives of community members. This does not mean that only leaders go through CE, because training

requests can come from different groups within the community, including a women's, men's, or youth group, church groups and schools.

In translation work, making the connections between similar cultural, religious and human rights values to help indigenous Fijians recognise that DV is wrong, normally takes a lot of time. Hence, while counsellor advocates can address these issues in counselling, CE provides a more extensive space with enough time, typically ranging from one to two weeks, to thoroughly cover such topics. Follow-up training is then conducted to monitor the impacts of previous sessions on the community concerned.

To properly help people recognise and understand how culture and religion does not necessarily or inevitably support DV, addressing the myths surrounding this problem is crucial in CE. These myths reflect popular, yet often false, views people hold about DV. One common DV myth I can elaborate on within the constraints of this article is that 'if a woman does not like being hit, she can always leave'. Based on my counselling and CE experience, the history and current work of FWCC and research on DV (in Fiji and globally), the truth is that while women could leave a violent relationship, doing so is never easy. In some cases, it may feel impossible (and without the right support it may, for all practical purposes, be impossible). In indigenous Fijian communities, a battered woman may not be able to easily leave a violent relationship due to certain norms rooted in unequal power relations between genders. For example, there is a perception that when a woman marries, she now belongs to her husband and his family. She does not have anything to do with her original family anymore and has nothing in her name to return to, such as a house or land, the ownership of which is often passed down to her brothers. She is expected to take the husband's surname, bear children and increase the husband's lineage. Whether or not she is a career woman, the expectation persists that she is responsible for all the household needs and she is expected to be a good daughter and daughter-in-law by not bringing shame on both families through revealing herself as a battered woman or by leaving the marriage due to ongoing violence. All these societal expectations lead to DV being normalised in marriages or intimate partner relationships since, when women fail to conform to societal expectations, men feel the pressure to align women to these roles by using violence as a form of discipline and women will force themselves (and will be pushed by others) to stay.

Community members' expectations around the roles of women and men in indigenous Fijian communities are often unequal and justified through their religious and cultural beliefs. This is where translation work comes into help community members to understand that religion and culture do not support the unequal treatment of men and women that leads to DV, and that cultural and religious values also resonate with human rights principles.

Marriage vows are a good example of the reason women do not easily leave a violent relationship, due to the complex entanglement of their religious and cultural beliefs. It is important to note that in indigenous Fijian communities, religion and culture are intertwined with the *vanua*. This literally refers to land but also importantly refers to the people, their resources and their way of life. Marriage vows in indigenous Fijian communities are viewed as sacred, promises a couple make to each other in the presence of God, the church, the congregation, families and friends. Hence, marriage vows are made in front of a new alliance between two families, their clans and villages, all of whom contributed to making the wedding a success.

The part identified most specifically by women in counselling and participants of workshops when speaking about marriage vows is the 'for better or worse' and that the couple 'will love and cherish each other until death do they part'. Training participants commonly interpret this as meaning that, regardless of the form of violence experienced, whether emotional, physical or sexual, and even if one partner, usually the woman, suffers serious, or debilitating injuries from DV, they are expected to remain together. Thus, women do not easily leave the violent relationship because they not only want to maintain the sanctity and dignity of their marriage but also the dignity of the two families concerned. Cultural justifications to further support adherence to sacred marriage vows include avoiding damaging the reputation of the woman's family, especially after all the traditional protocols of connecting two families through marriage have been thoroughly completed. The woman may feel ashamed to reveal she is being beaten, and the fear of being viewed as a disobedient and disrespectful woman for not being submissive can contribute to her reluctance to disregard both families by leaving the violent relationship.

To help people understand that DV is wrong, counsellor advocates identify similarities in cultural, religious and human rights values that do not support DV. For example, in indigenous Fijian communities, after connecting the couple's families through a traditional marriage, the ceremony of *i-tataunaki* is performed by the bride's family for the bridegroom's family. During this ceremony, the bride's family asks the bridegroom and his family to cherish, protect and love their daughter as their own. This tradition is thoroughly explained in counselling and CE to help people recognise that DV violates these cultural principles and fundamental human rights values of peace, respect, equality and freedom from torture and cruel treatment.

As an example of religious translation, in the context of marriage vows, CE participants are encouraged to fully read and find the true values in biblical extracts. Through this exploration, they identify the societal expectations of submissiveness,

obedience and women's obligation to respect men, even in situations where the marital relationship becomes violent, or worse. The counsellor advocates then thoroughly examine the biblical extracts identified by the participants with them, and the participants realise they have not fully read or paid attention to the full extract. Through dialogue, we help them to see how they may have instead focused on the interpretations that foster inequality. It is important to note here that in indigenous Fijian communities, and in the context of DV, the meanings of the marriage vow statements: 'for better or worse' and 'until death do us part' are still contested. Further research may be needed to understand how couples and others interpret these vow statements. However, in our translation work, the part of the vows involving promises to love and cherish each other is emphasised through biblical extracts that talk about love, equality, respect and obedience between the wife and husband.

Examples of biblical extracts that resonate with the cultural and human rights values of respect, equality, love and protection between wives and husbands plus others include Ephesians Chapter 5, Verses 21–32⁶ and 1 Corinthians Chapter 13.⁷ Community responses that support societal expectations of how women and men are supposed to behave are often justified in Ephesians Chapter 5, 21–24, while Verses 25–31 (The Holy Bible, New International Version, 2011), are ignored. These two biblical extracts are examined in CE work with the participants because gender inequality is often justified using Ephesians without considering the extract's full meaning. Also, the different forms of DV, including emotional/verbal, physical and sexual abuse, are all against the full meaning of these two biblical extracts. This discrepancy challenges the claims made by community participants that DV is religiously and culturally supported. The aim of discussing these two biblical extracts is to help the audience understand that societal expectations of unequal roles for men and women can create tension and contribute to DV. A more holistic reading of the Bible and Christianity does not support these unequal expectations.

A comprehensive training, involving thorough translation connecting human rights, cultural and religious values aimed at combatting DV, typically spans one week. During this time, many related concepts, such as gender relations and violence against women and children, are also discussed. This training approach is extended to service providers who work closely with counsellor advocates on a daily basis in providing emergency and legal support services for those affected by DV. These service providers, including the police, social welfare, shelter providers, court staff and legal aid, also belong to communities. Hence, the translation work of connecting human rights, religious and cultural values enables them to respond immediately, appropriately and sensitively to reported cases.

Translation work is a challenge when trying to help indigenous Fijian communities and others recognise that DV is a human rights violation—it breaks the law, breaks bones, breaks families, breaks the community and even breaks the nation's fabric. Adopting a human rights, survivor-centred, feminist approach⁸ is not always easily accepted. However, through proper translation that considers the context in which it operates, there has been progressive success that deserves to be celebrated.⁹

Cultural and religious perceptions on DV often favour the inequality of men and women in ways that are internalised, institutionalised and inter-generational. In our work, we are aware that changing these forms of internalisation of patriarchal structures will not happen quickly. Our work, in both CE and counselling, tries to combine both practices of reflective evaluation of what guides our social relations, as well as how social relations can be organised in ways that challenge patriarchal systems.

Therefore, the CE work and these efforts to shift interpretations and practices are combined with the creation of EAW (Elimination of Violence Against Women) committees within communities across the country. The women, men and youths on EAW committees have undergone full trainings and are reviewed by FWCC. EAW committees are then able to support women to report DV, seek counselling and access other relevant support services. The combination of CE with the creation of these committees can renew relationships of care in the community, as well as empower communities to hold state officials accountable. Additionally, these committees campaign and advocate against DV. This can include encouraging others to join the cause within their communities during different local, national and global awareness events, such as International Women's Day (8 March), 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence (International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women on 25 November to Human Rights Day on 10 December) and World Human Rights Day (10 December). These events highlight that violence against women is a fundamental violation of human rights. Some EAW committee members who are identified by FWCC community educators as having good potential for counselling, are also provided with basic counselling skills training to prepare them for providing the right support when encountering DV victims or survivors in their communities. As such, in the process of training these communities, accountability and responsibility are re-ordered, where committees serve to hold the community and the state (including the police) accountable to and responsible for women victims.

Overall, when working in the space of DV or GBV in Fiji, a human rights-based approach to advocacy can be problematic if it is not in the right hands or it is translated inappropriately. Translation work can hold power in transforming the mindsets of people to either support efforts to prevent and reduce DV, or it could do further harm if not delivered properly. Therefore, ongoing monitoring and review of communities after full training is also necessary to determine the impact of the translation

work. Considering the pervasiveness of DV and how it is embedded in multiple meaning structures, it is important to involve more ‘border-crossing’ professionals in translation work. FWCC could serve as the main monitoring and training agent, given their 30+ years of practice-based knowledge and expertise. Activist organisations such as FWCC continue to grow in their work because they operate along feminist principles that are developed independently, rather than being modelled on those of the Global North. When focusing on elevating women’s human rights to prevent and reduce DV, based on how I have seen women and communities respond during my own work, FWCC has developed approaches that are best suited within the cultural and religious context of Fiji.

Reflections on Being a Police Officer and Coordinator for Domestic Violence in Tuvalu (Sepola)

My name is Sepola Taata Peniamina and I am currently working as an Office Manager at the Tuvalu Judiciary. For the past 25 years, I worked as a Police Officer (Sergeant). During these 25 years, I have worked in various roles, including as Staff Officer, Special Project Officer and Coordinator of the Domestic Violence Unit (the latter for four years).

During the four years of being a Coordinator of the Domestic Violence Unit, I worked closely with all stakeholders, providing an equal emphasis on preventing and responding to GBV. Our work involved delivering of awareness in primary and secondary schools, training of perpetrators (mainly those with repeated offence of DV) and victims, and counselling of victims. Whatever cases we dealt with, confidentiality was emphasised and cases could only be discussed with another counsellor, without using names.

We first began the training with our stakeholders (including gender services, social welfare services, Tuvalu Family Health Association, women’s councils, Ekalesia Kelisiano Tuvalu Church, Tuvalu National Youth Council and Tuvalu non-government organisations). The training was facilitated by the Regional Rights Resource Team. It emphasised that professionalism in the field always begins at home. This includes teaching the kids how to behave and know their roles and reminding them that human rights come with concomitant responsibilities. The training also placed emphasis on the importance of educating children with cultural and religious values that will lead them to a respectful and disciplined life. This approach aims to change the mindset of the new generation and instill new perceptions of treating all people equally. In the training, a key message focused on helping one another in addressing cases of DV, highlighting that it is everyone’s duty to avoid and eliminate violence within society.

In my work, I have found that dealing with DV is very difficult. People believe strongly in cultural practices that support or rationalise DV, especially the idea that men are the head of the family. These cultural beliefs can lead men to take advantage of their status, and that of others, to excuse men’s behaviour. Changing people’s perceptions from cultural practices to human rights and law has been a challenge. The training programs undertaken with our stakeholders (noted above) were delivered to all communities, and included explaining the importance of working together as a community when it comes to combatting violence against women and children. In my experience, the majority of citizens had the opinion that it was not their business to be involved in DV cases because such a matter is between the husband and a wife. Moreover, even though it is clearly explained in the Bible that ‘a man should love the wife as Christ loves the church’, violence against wives persists because of patriarchal practices that women (as helpers) must always submit to men (as heads of family). Religious values are readily and robustly adapted and practised as traditional values. When it comes to DV cases, the common narrative remains that it is the right of a husband to teach or to discipline his wife if she fails to submit. The people of Tuvalu hold this perception towards DV based on religious beliefs, which, although not codified as law, have been passed from generation to generation with the understanding that they carry the weight of written laws. These biblical beliefs make it more difficult for women to report matters to the police. As a police officer, I can only work on reported cases. However, being an active member of the religious and cultural life in Tuvalu, I am aware of numerous cases over the past 10 years that were unreported due to cultural practices and religious beliefs. My knowledge of this has informed my advocacy in the police space about what our work should include.

In recent decades, since only men are allowed to speak and make decisions, women’s voices have remained constrained or are often underrepresented or marginalised in the spaces in which they are present (Kofe and Taomia 2006). This is reflected in many ways. For example, women are expected to remain silent in any community gatherings, including church. It is difficult for girls and women to be selected for jobs because of the prevailing mentality that women will take maternity leave and that breastfeeding babies after birth will result in less time spent in the office. The labour force is dominated by men and men dominate leadership positions. Through gradual shifts, women now hold 29% of board chair positions and 29% of director positions (UN Women 2022). Women remain underrepresented in political leadership positions (UN Women 2022); there have been only three women elected to parliament between 1978–2022 in Tuvalu. In the local government system (the *Falekaupule*), legal reforms have seen a gradual increase in women being elected to the *Kaupule* positions, going from 6% in 2016 to 10% in 2018 (UN Women 2022).

Despite many efforts to change the status of women and efforts to prevent DV and increase reporting of DV, gender inequality still exists in Tuvalu. Surveys and reports from the past three years show a persistently high prevalence of DV (Central Statistics Division 2021). Working in a DV unit for four years and dealing with both victims and perpetrators, I have seen that a majority of men do not want their problems to be reported but instead want to resolve the matter in a traditional way, which involves counselling by a pastor or an elder. However, the police developed a 'No Drop' prosecution policy in terms of violence against women. It was developed following the introduction of the *Family Protection and Domestic Violence Act Bill 2009* (which was legislated and passed in 2014) and the passing of the *Police Powers and Duties (Tuvalu) Act 2009*. Most cases are reported by women, and when the wife has settled with the husband, the women request a withdrawal of the case. If the case is taken to court, the husband will not be happy with the wife and there will be conflict between the two parties. However, the police then explain that they are not authorised to withdraw cases and this can happen only in court. Some men do understand the wrongness of their actions when they appear in court but most of them do not want to be convicted. The wife, on the other hand, is often fearful of what consequences she will face (from family and community) if the case is taken to court. So, part of my work as Coordinator of the DV Unit involved delivering trainings to repeat offenders that included their wives, during which I would explain the purpose of the 'No Drop' policy.

The challenges extended beyond perpetrators and victims not understanding. I observed instances where women faced discrimination from police officers because they initially decided to report a DV incident but later wanted to withdraw their reports. Based on my experience, it appears that the Tuvalu Police Service, being male dominated, tends to treat women victims of DV differently, particularly repeat victims, in how they serve them. They used to place the blame on these repeat victims, suggesting that they provoked the men to abuse or beat them. In response to this discrimination, as a Domestic Violence Coordinator, I also did training with police officers, to teach them how to serve victims of family violence. For example, sometimes when there is a call for disturbance by a drunkard husband from repeat victims, police officers assume that the husband is right. Changing the perception of police officers towards how they respond to violence against women has taken both time and training.

However, awareness training and guidance on how to manage actual cases do not always translate easily to practice. Amin et al. document that in Tuvalu:

many frontline officers felt inadequately prepared for this kind of work Traditions, customary and religious authorities are often called upon (by those involved and related to the case and sometimes even police) to resolve these issues outside of police jurisdiction. In such situations, case officers often have to find ways to assert the law and legal processes through interactions that are sensitive to the status of these institutional actors given that future work can be impacted by the lack of cooperation from community and religious leaders. This can get even more difficult when victims and perpetrators call upon different actors (e.g. the victim reaching out to a community leader and the perpetrator to the religious leader) ... (2022: 102)

Police and court officials have to negotiate all these different actors' approaches, interests and interventions. Often officers, like myself, draw on our relationships with the community, not only as police officers, but also as church members, as community members, as members of islands to do this work. For example, as a member of my church, I have been a Women's Advisor and, in that role, I have worked to discuss what the Bible says and how it emphasises ideas about love and respect. I am always present in my church and take an active role. This gives me legitimacy when I come in as a police officer or as the police Domestic Violence Coordinator—because they know I am not only coming in to enforce the law but also as a member of the church. Amin et al. (2022) also highlight how some of our police leaderships have emphasised that we have to know our cultural and religious practices well to be able to serve our communities well in enforcing the law. It is not only the knowledge of law, but also of the full meanings of our cultural and religious practices that is needed in our officers.

Reflections on Teaching on Domestic Violence as Part of a Course on Crime and Deviance (Sara)

I am of Bangladeshi Muslim heritage and have been living and working in Fiji as part of the Sociology faculty at the University of the South Pacific since 2015. My teaching and research have focused on questions of how identities are produced, contested, negotiated and lived. I have focused especially on how religious and cultural actors are involved in shaping efforts to change inequalities (of gender, sexuality, class and political belonging). Through research and teaching in South Asia and the Pacific Islands, I have also looked at how formal educational institutions continue to discipline difference in modernist/colonial ways that can alienate students from either/both education and their diverse and multiple identities (Amin 2018; Amin and Girard, 2024). Thaman (2008b) shows how formal education, inherited through European missionaries and colonial administration and continued through dominance of international organisations, has continued to produce distance between indigenous cultures (and ways of being and knowing in the home, family and community) and Western-dominated formal education in schools and universities. In such a context, as an educator in the formal education space, it is important to reflect on what practices may reinforce that alienation and how we may change that.

One important mechanism for educators to counter this involves gaining cultural literacy (-ies), according to Thaman (2008a,b). I reflect here specifically on the dynamics of this in the context of teaching crime and deviance between 2018–2023, which is placed as a final-year elective in the sociology undergraduate program. Students take the course from across the different campuses of USP, with most students located in Fiji, Solomon Islands, Samoa, Vanuatu, Tonga and Kiribati. In addition to exploring the ‘classical’ theorists of criminology, we also examine critical, feminist, southern and indigenous criminologies while looking at issues such as DV, violence against LGBTQ+ communities, environmental crimes, corruption and state crimes in Pacific Island countries and territories. As the course progresses, students use different spaces in the course (assessments, consultation hours, discussions) to discuss understandings, experiences and attitudes about crime, deviance, punishment and justice. One major aim of the course is to explore to what extent different theoretical and dominant policy practices in criminology are relevant to Pacific Island communities, as well as make visible how (racial) global capitalism and colonialism continue to play a major role in shaping dynamics of crime, punishment and justice (Cunneen and Tauri 2019). In this reflection, I focus mainly on our discussions and their implications in relation to GBV and DV (against women and children more specifically).

In examining texts, cases and examples and trying to ‘make sense’ of why DV occurs, the most common explanation students bring up goes along the lines of ‘it’s our culture’, ‘we are a very traditional culture, ‘our culture is very strong, it is hard to change’, or sometimes, alternatively or complementarily, ‘it is the religion’. In discussing how things can change/are changing/have changed, they draw on the language of human rights and ideas about global standards and needing to become modern. In this positioning, students locate patriarchal power in culture and religious beliefs and solutions to it outside of culture, faith—in modernity and rights. This is in stark contrast to how students respond to trying to understand other forms of crime and violence, which they often position within capitalism, modernity/coloniality and unequal development/globalisation in driving crime and violence and how tradition, culture and faith can become sites of healing, change, resistance and restoration. Yet, when we are examining indigenous, Pacific and post-colonial feminist criminologies in relation to DV—which explain how patriarchal power works through and in capitalism, modernity/coloniality, unequal globalisation/development—for students, this process seems to usually be reduced to culture as the site of harm. I have been trying to understand why, and I believe it is important to understand the ‘why’.

Of course, unpacking ‘culture’ and ‘tradition’ is part of the process, and it is important to understand that culture is characterised by fluid, dynamic and contested spaces. The resistance to unpacking culture and tradition in this way may be, in part, a product of how culture and tradition have been conceptualised and enacted during colonialism and the drive for modernisation in the wake of formal decolonisation (Merry 2006; Visweswaran 2004). This has further become entangled in women’s rights forums at an international stage. Newland (2017), for example, argues that the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action pits culture as anti-women:

in this document, ‘traditional culture’ is represented alongside extremism as perhaps always and universally anti-woman – and equality is viewed as the only cure. ‘Traditional culture’ takes the place of biology and instinct but appears to remain both endemic and resistant to change. It is somehow contained, maintaining its boundaries in the face of incoming influences. Such a conceptualisation of culture needs to be interrogated. (210)

She goes on to argue that this type of discourse ignores how global and historical political economies of violence and gendered violence are (re)produced.

Moreover, part of the challenge lies in how public discourse, policy and theorisation around DV remain centered on Northern conceptions that make invisible or marginalise the post-colonial, indigenous, southern and Pacific feminist and criminological theorisations underscoring the role of historical trauma, colonial violence and racialised capitalism in producing violence against women, including IPV and DV. I also wonder if perhaps the tendency for students to respond with rights as solution (and culture as problem) is linked to the way in which formal educational spaces have been produced and how students have been disciplined to respond in such spaces. Formal educational spaces, from primary school onwards, have become linked to and accountable to global policy structures and institutions about development in which a language of human rights dominates ways of speaking about injustice, including forms of domestic and family violence. Should not our schools and formal educational spaces also create spaces of dialogue and translations in which the stories and practices that (re)produce harm be reworked to make visible the stories and practices that (re)produce care and well-being?

Concluding Thoughts on Implications for a Pacific Criminology on Domestic Violence

Reflecting on our practices through the conversations above, we argue that we are faced with an important decolonisation question in trying to make sense of DV and ‘our culture’. This is linked to the stories we tell about ourselves—where these stories originated from and how effectively these stories work to locate problems within culture, tradition and faith, as well as

solutions within the modern/colonial/Western framings and institutions. The translation works that Selina describes she is doing or the questioning of religious interpretation, authority and questioning of specific cultural practices that Selina and Sepola describe are not ‘mere’ ‘ideological transfer’ (in ways that critiques of human rights translation exercises have argued). Rather, these can be seen as part of interventions that challenge the idea that culture, tradition and faith are reserves of patriarchy and enforcers of gendered subordination. In the academic space, as Sara suggests, this can be done by making a conscious effort to highlight the different ways that elders, chiefs, pastors, community committees and other actors have mobilised to work against DV, as well as how women’s movements and women leaders in communities have drawn on their culture and faith to ask for and effect change. This helps to ensure that a criminology of DV is not centred on ‘simply’ rights, policing, the state and the criminal justice system. In this sense, a criminology of DV (as both academic discipline and a field of practice) in the Pacific, requires integrating and dialoguing with works that are attempting to decolonise culture and self, as well as theological interventions linked to these dynamics.

Vaai and Nabobo-Baba (2022) point to the need for ‘unthinking’ and ‘rethinking’ in efforts to decolonise the self and culture. Drawing on the Samoan process of *tōfā* (seeking wisdom), Vaai and Nabobo-Baba (2022) put forward what a decolonisation process from a Pacific Island perspective may look like, one that involves *liuliu* (unthinking/deconstruction), *lilii* (rethinking/reconstruction) and *toe liuliu* (return). The first phase they suggest concerns both locating and critiquing the ‘deep-seated colonial perceptions [of the self and culture] that are both external and internal’ (10). The second phase then involves the construction of (re)new(ed) knowledge rooted in Pacific knowledge and ways of being. The third phase is a return to the first phase—returning to deconstruction, located in the (re)new(ed) knowledge to continue the process of decolonisation. Vaai and Nabobo-Baba (2022: 10) write: ‘Decolonisation, therefore, is a fluid back-and-forth transformative way of deconstruction, reconstruction and return that takes into account not only ‘colonialism-out-there’ but most importantly, ‘colonialism-in-here’.

This dual engagement with (de)colonisation, both ‘out there’ and ‘in here’, is inherent in the translation and border crossing work found in CE and formal classroom spaces (such as schools and universities). In particular, it is important to recognise the efforts by Pacific Islands feminist organisations (in Fiji and Tuvalu), mental health and well-being services, and police, which include a strong emphasis on rights and responsibilities grounded in religio-cultural principles of care. Public theology efforts, as suggested by Siu-Maliko (2016), also draw on this emphasis. Moreover, these efforts are not disconnected awareness raising interventions but are linked to renewing/creating relationships of support to prevent the harm produced through DV. The counsellor advocacy work produces EVAW committees across the country to create community groups that are able to support women to report DV, and to advocate for responsiveness from the police and courts. In the process of training committee members, as Selina has noted, she finds herself needing to find ways for community members to see their cultural and religious perceptions differently. As a member of an explicitly feminist organisation that prioritises rights as central to its work, ensuring state and authorities’ accountability to laws and rights protection, the importance of rights has become evident. Sepola, as a police officer in an organisation where the individual is understood through a legal framework of rights, encounters similar dynamics. Her work also makes visible how police-work serves to translate between legal rights and cultural responsibilities of care in the face of patriarchal assumptions about the roles of men and women. As Sepola makes clear though, this translation work is needed with police officers themselves as well. Women, then, placed in specific positions, often become bearers of this translation work—translating between rights, tradition/culture and faith to facilitate ‘unthinking’ and ‘re-thinking’ around how gender is ordered and how violence can be ‘undone’.

The classroom can be a central part of this work by consciously making it a place where these practices are reflected upon—including questioning to what extent reliance on rights perhaps orients the individual (victim and perpetrator and community) to the state and the legal system, and asking whether this potentially risks expanding the wider security apparatus of the state and/or exacerbating an overstretched/under-resourced system? Perhaps looking at culture and religion beyond secular and modernist assumptions can allow us to see how cultural and religious mechanisms may orient us towards each other. In these reflections, questions emerge of both what has shaped our ideas of rights, but also our own understandings of ‘our’ culture, traditions and faith, and what these understandings say about DV and imply about how to change. As calls for pluralist and hybrid justice systems grow (Forsyth, Dinnen and Hukula 2020), it is important to explore how custom, culture, tradition, faith practices and institutions are being mobilised, and ‘whose’ stories are taking centre and hold. We think it is important that all actors in this space seize the opportunity to engage in a deeper collaboration and reflection about how we can work across fields with multiple actors and learn to speak across different ‘languages’ of rights, customs and theologies. And, given the ever-increasing spaces in which these types of actions and conversations take place, we need to consider seriously how to equip ourselves to listen and speak across different ways of being and knowing.

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¹ These data are drawn predominantly from prevalence surveys conducted between 2007–2014.

² Field of action refers to arenas or contexts where interventions, programs, policies and services related to preventing and addressing DV are implemented. It encompasses the different levels at which efforts are directed to address DV, ranging from individual interactions to broader systemic approaches. This article refers to practitioners as those involved in these interventions, programmes, policies and services at various levels, including in education (formal and informal) in academic and non-academic spaces.

³ This form of cultural revitalisation practice, as discussed by Biersack and Macintyre (2016), is distinct from movements and responses that utilise culture/tradition to react *against* efforts to change behaviours linked to DV.

⁴ Feminist and decolonial scholars have identified clearly that feminist and decolonial action requires both work ‘on the ground’ and scholarly work (to undo/challenge power systems and epistemologies), and that scholarly work cannot be disconnected from work on the ground.

⁵ The i-sevusevu is a bundle of kava roots presented by a visitor to those whom he/she is visiting, seeking permission to enter territory and enjoy privileges already enjoyed by the owners. The i-tatau is also a bundle of kava roots or, on esteemed occasions, a whale’s tooth (tabua) presented by visitors or those departing as a traditional farewell to close kinsmen or hosts after an occasion has ended or when someone leaves for abroad. The act of i-tatau honours both the visitor or those departing and the hosts. It is also traditionally believed to bless the journey of those leaving and frees them from any curses that may delay their progress or mistakes that may have offended the hosts or those staying. All in all, the i-tatau is a custom that manifests respect and dignity as well as a promise of diligence and service. Since the majority of indigenous Fijian communities are Christians, most community functions including a training session start and end with a lotu. A lotu is a devotion that includes a short sermon, singing Christian hymns and saying prayers. This is often done to seek blessings from God for a successful event.

⁶ From New International Version, Ephesians, Chapter 5, verses 21–32: 21 Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. 22 Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. 23 For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. 24 Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. 25 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her 26 to make her holy, cleansing[a] her by the washing with water through the word, 27 and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. 28 In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. 29 After all, no one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for their body, just as Christ does the church— 30 for we are members of his body. 31 “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.”[b] 32 This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church.

⁷ From New International Version, 1 Corinthians 13 If I speak in the tongues [languages] of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. 2 If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. 3 If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing. 4 Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. 5 It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. 6 Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. 7 It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. 8 Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. 9 For we know in part and we prophesy in part, 10 but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. 11 When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. 12 For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. 13 And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

⁸ The FWCC defines its work as feminist because it works with the understanding that patriarchy is the root cause of gender inequality and GBV. As such, shifting the power inequalities faced by women in the patriarchal system (through law, economy, religion, culture) is considered the focus of their work. Human rights and survivor foci are considered, as such, key mechanisms to challenge the power inequality through both using rights to hold the state and those with authority accountable, as well as centering women’s experiences and realities by being survivor focused.

⁹ While measures of success can be debated and contested, some indicators of success include how the FWCC’s approach has been actively modelled by other countries in the region, as well as how communities continue to invite FWCC counselling and CE programs into their community (from both women in the communities and also chiefs and other authorities).

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