



# The Police Practice of Resolving Domestic Violence in Fiji

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## Abstract

Using the plural policing and Global South policing frameworks, this article examines police officers' actions when handling domestic violence (DV) cases in Fiji. Drawing on an empirical survey of 365 police officers, it discusses what police do when dealing with DV reports. The findings show, firstly, that the majority of police officers are aware of the zero-tolerance policy for DV. Secondly, the majority of police officers assert they do not implement the zero-tolerance policy when handling DV cases. Thirdly, police officers take DV cases seriously. Fourthly, officers say they encourage people to use traditional customary and religious ways of settling cases and proceed with further investigation and possible prosecution only if the victim insists. Theoretically, the findings show that police practise a plural policing method of resolving DV. The article empirically and theoretically contributes to the literature on plural policing of DV in Pacific Island countries.

**Keywords:** Domestic violence; plural policing; police practice; Pacific policing.

## Introduction

The *World Bank Annual Report* (World Bank 2022) states that domestic violence (DV) is a global issue. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), one in three women (736 million) experience some form of gender-based violence once in their lifetime (World Health Organization (WHO) 2021). Policing responses to DV as an area of study has gained prominence in recent years (Diemer et al. 2017; Douglas 2019; Retief and Green 2015; Segrave, Wilson and Fitz-Gibbon 2018; Sherman, Schmidt and Rogan 1992; Stover 2005). Of relevance to this article are scholarly discussions around the recurring themes of pro-arrest, zero-tolerance prosecution policies,<sup>1</sup> the high attrition rate of DV criminal cases due to victims' non-appearance, reconciling with offenders, and differences associated with the socio-cultural context of countries.

According to Fiji Police Force (FPF) Crime Statistics Annual Report (2020b). The record shows that around 66% of women face DV in Fiji. Alarming statistics like this have sparked renewed interest in addressing DV by women-focused non-governmental organisations (NGOs), human rights movements, international donor agencies, national governments, and police in the Pacific region. Some scholarship exists on policing DV in the Pacific context (Bull, George and Curth-Bibb 2019; Dinnen and Peake 2015; Dinnen 2022; Forsyth 2009; Jolly 1996; Rooney et al. 2023; Watson, Amin and Robinson 2024). Within this literature, some of it specifically addresses DV in Fiji (Adinkrah 2000; Tonsing and Barn 2021). However, most of these studies



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are based on the analysis of secondary literature, government reports, and discussions with women's organisations. Few address the perspective of police officers who work on cases of DV. This gap means that we do not know or understand empirically what the perceptions of police officers are in relation to DV in the Pacific context. This lack of knowledge extends to not understanding whether officers consider DV to be a serious crime and, if warranted, how police officers' understanding of the seriousness of DV can be improved. While there is some literature on policing in the Pacific region based largely on secondary documents and perspectives of stakeholders, there are scant empirical studies on what police officers think about their roles and their views on policing, let alone on DV. So far, only three empirical studies in the Pacific region have sought to ask about and seek police officers' views on the role they play in policing generally, with little focus on addressing how police officers perceive DV. Firstly, Howe, Watson, and Newett's (2021) survey looked at police officers' perceptions on community policing in Tuvalu and made reference to alcohol-related DV. Similarly, Watson, Rivera, and McNinch (2019) examined the views of police officers and members of the public on community policing in Guam, with little focus on DV. Lastly, Harry, Watson, and Nanau (2022) sought police officers' views on the use of state legal law and customary law (plural policing) to address crime in the Solomon Islands and not on DV per se. Considering these previous studies, our study shifts the focus to specifically examine the perceptions of 365 police officers on DV in Fiji.

Our study is based on five research questions: firstly, whether police officers are aware of the zero-tolerance policy towards DV adopted by the FPF. Secondly, do officers practise or use this policy when dealing with DV in their day-to-day work? Thirdly, do Fijian police officers consider DV as a serious form of crime and believe that police intervention is the best way to deal with it? Fourthly, what method of resolving DV cases is preferred and encouraged by police officers (legal framework or plural solution), and why? Finally, what suggestions do police officers have to reduce DV cases in Fiji, and what are the reasons for such suggestions? This article aims to contribute new insights to help enrich the emerging literature on police perspectives regarding DV in the Pacific region.

## Literature Review

Several theoretical frameworks have been used to analyse and suggest how DV cases should be resolved in the Pacific Island countries, with the aim of ensuring that female victims are not disadvantaged. For instance, Jolly (1996, 2012) explored the debate between 'universal human rights' and 'cultural relativism' perspectives and argues that 'universal human rights theory' is more appropriate to use in DV cases due to weaknesses of the traditional approach, such as its potential to perpetuate harmful cultural practices and its failure to adequately protect victims. Similarly, Bull, George and Curth-Bibb (2019) discuss the advantages and disadvantages of 'customary policing' and the 'state-legal system' (also referred to as 'policing by strangers') in resolving DV cases and argue that the 'state-legal system' provides better justice for female victims due to its ability to enforce consistent laws and provide specialised support services for victims. When both customary and state approaches to justice are being used to involve a range of actors and institutions to maintain public safety and order, this is known as 'plural policing', which reflects what is happening in both Fiji and other Pacific Island countries. Forsyth's (2019) comparative study of Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea (PNG) and Dinnen's (2022) research in PNG both highlight a range of merits and disadvantages of plural policing in addressing DV. For instance, Forsyth (2009) argues that village police constables who are well-versed in both customary law and Western law tend to be better placed than officers who only use state-legal law to address DV cases.

## Theoretical Frameworks

This article examines police officers' responses to DV cases in Fiji through the lenses of plural policing and Global South policing.

### *Plural Policing Framework*

The plural policing framework posits that state and traditional customary law (local indigenous legal structures) approaches co-exist for dealing with crime; it is a framework that combines communal, customary, and traditional approaches with formal Western state policing approaches to resolve conflicts and violence (Forsyth 2009; Watson et al. 2023). According to customary law, village leaders and members take greater responsibility for addressing disputes affecting their communities; this often takes place through a community-based forum for resolving disputes and dispensing justice, such as through a 'public court'. Several authors have analysed plural policing in Pacific Island countries, including in PNG (Dinnen 2017), Solomon Islands (Dinnen 2017), Vanuatu (Forsyth 2009; Jolly 1996), and in a combined country study of Fiji, PNG, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu (Bull, George and Curth-Bibb 2019). Various perspectives are held by scholars when discussing DV, such as 'legal-state policing system', 'universal human rights', 'women's rights', 'cultural relativism', 'customary policing', 'community policing', 'legal pluralism', and 'hybrid' policing (Bull, George and Curth-Bibb 2019; Dinnen 2017; Forsyth 2009; Jolly 1996). A debate exists on whether the legal-state law system or traditional customary approach is preferable for resolving DV cases.

On the one hand, Bull, George, and Curth-Bibb (2019) and Watson, Amin, and Robinson (2024) suggest that the formal state-legal system is better, particularly where it involves female victims getting effective justice because most customary leaders are males with strong patriarchal views. Further, Watson, Amin, and Robinson (2024) suggest that in rural Melanesian countries with limited police presence, use of traditional customary social institutions to resolve DV cases can be problematic for women victims because these practices often reinforce patriarchal norms and may not adequately protect women's rights or safety. On the other hand, Jolly (1996) uses the term 'cultural relativism' to suggest that a Western 'universal human rights' perspective cannot be considered as totally appropriate for Pacific Island countries such as Vanuatu. The plural policing literature reveals that scholars view both types of law as potentially appropriate for resolving DV in the context of the Pacific Islands, as long as the approach chosen is not detrimental to female victims (Dinnen 2022; Forsyth 2009).

### **Global South Policing Framework**

Global South policing has roots in *Southern Theory*, a sociological perspective developed by Connell (2007). In applying Southern Theory to the areas of criminology and policing, Carrington et al. (2018) argue that when analysing policing in Global South countries, we must explain it in the context of a society's cultural, social, religious, and political factors. The main argument of Global South policing theory is that *context* is key to analysing policing issues in Global South countries, particularly in Pacific Island countries (Jolly 1996; Watson et al. 2023). Numerous scholars have argued for decades that Western policing models do not fit well in countries with different socio-cultural contexts (e.g., see Amin, Watson and Girard 2020; Dinnen and McLeod 2009; Frühling 2007; Watson and Dinnen 2020). Similarly, Pacific policing scholars have emphasised the dangers in automatically transposing any policing practice adopted in one country to another, as there are fundamental key contextual historical, social, economic, and political differences between Western and small island countries of the Pacific region (Amin, Watson and Girard 2020; Dinnen and McLeod 2009). When we refer to 'context' in our study, we mean both the existence of traditional village authority leadership of the *Turaga-Ni-Koro* (village headman), who has a key role in resolving DV cases in his village via *bulubulu* (forgiveness and reconciliation), and the way in which the exercise of this traditional role impacts justice outcomes.

### **Study Setting: Background of Fiji and the Fiji Police Force**

Fiji comprises around 300 islands and has a population of approximately 900,000 (Fiji Bureau of Statistics 2022). The majority (57%) of the population are indigenous Fijians (*iTaukei*), 36% are Indo-Fijians, and the remaining 7% consists of Chinese, part-Europeans, Rotumans, Rabi Islanders, and other Pacific Islanders (Fiji Bureau of Statistics 2022). Traditional customary beliefs and practices remain strong among the various ethnic groups despite modern influences.

As per the latest FPF Annual Report published in July 2020<sup>2</sup>, the force has a total workforce of 4,580, of which, the regular staff is 4,156 (90.6%), Special Constables 239 (5.2%), civilian office staff 139 (3.0%), and wage earners 54 (1.2%) (Fiji Police Force (FPF) 2020a: 18). Females represent 22% of the FPF workforce and 78% of male police officers (FPF 2020a: 18).

The Domestic Violence Act (Fiji) 2009 was enacted in Fiji for three key reasons: (i) to protect potential victims from DV, (ii) to clarify the responsibilities of police, and (iii) to provide domestic restraining orders (DVROs) to perpetrators (Domestic Violence Act (Fiji) 2009:534). Prior to the enactment of the law, DV was often perceived as an internal family issue left for the couple to resolve (Sharma 2005; WHO 1998). The Domestic Violence Act (Fiji) 2009 has given police officers the authority to investigate any request from victims and communities relating to DV (Cokanasiga, 2023). Despite the Act's existence, police often take the soft approach in dealing with DV cases by clustering them into categories: petty (e.g., verbal, physical abuse, and damaging personal property) and serious cases (e.g., serious bodily injury and homicide). The FPF often advises victims to pursue civil cases to resolve DV cases by applying for a DVRO. Additionally, some individual officers do counselling and provide advice to perpetrator partners. Fiji police officers, as members of Fijian society, consider mending and sustaining intimate partner relationships as important and, therefore, tend to prefer that option when dealing with petty DV cases (DeFrain, DeFrain and Lepard 1994). However, they do apply the full force of the law in serious cases by prosecuting alleged offenders in serious cases such as homicide, or where victims suffer serious injuries and/or there is a breach of a DVRO (Adinkrah 1999).

### **Methodology**

The FPF's Acting Commissioner gave us permission to undertake research on policing practice in Fiji. Self-administered semi-structured questionnaires were distributed to 500 police officers in 29 police stations across the main island of Viti Levu, where most of Fiji's population and police officers are based. The questions in the questionnaire were open-ended, with individual questions and space provided for police officers to fill in their answers. In other words, no pre-determined response categories or Lickert scale options were provided, and blank space was provided, enabling officers to write freely. The open-ended questionnaire allowed us to collect rich data. We received 427 questionnaires and 365 (n=365) were useful for analysis. We

used convenient sampling to select participants. We distributed questionnaires to 29 police stations and allowed three weeks for them to be completed. The questionnaires were filled by whichever police officers were available at the 29 police stations. We also interviewed three senior police officials to help us understand the FPF's zero-tolerance policy on DV and what is expected of frontline police when dealing with DV cases. To assist our analysis, we reviewed relevant scholarly journal articles and book chapters on how DV cases are approached in the Pacific region, and further reviewed secondary documents such as the Domestic Violence Act (Fiji) 2009. We also analysed relevant grey literature on DV created by international organisations such as the World Bank.

We used thematic analysis for the study. Thematic analysis assists in grouping information and discussing the results (Silverman 2020). After compiling the written answers given to us by the participating police officers, we identified themes and used these to discuss the findings.

We acknowledge the limitations of the study. Firstly, police officers were not selected randomly, rather, we had to rely on whoever was available at the police station during the three weeks of study to fill in the questionnaire. Secondly, in terms of geography, only police officers from the main and largest island in Fiji (Viti Levu) were part of the study, not Vanua Levu (the second largest island) or small outer remote maritime islands. Hence, we cannot make generalisations for the whole of Fiji. Thirdly, possible individual police officer bias may be present in the answers given.

### ***Demographic Data of Police Officers***

Table 1 shows the demographic data of police officers who participated in the research. It shows that, in terms of ethnic composition, around three-quarters (70.2%) of police officers were indigenous Fijians (*iTaukei*), 26.5% were Indo-Fijians, and 3.3% belonged to other ethnic groups. This is representative of the ethnic composition of the FPF. In terms of gender, 66.7% of the officers surveyed were male and 33.3% were female. This reflects a similar gender composition to the overall police workforce. As per the FPF Annual Report (2020a) (the latest available), 69% of officers are males and 33.3% are females. The majority (59.6%) of officers surveyed had some level of tertiary education and 38.2% had completed secondary education. The current minimum educational requirement to join the FPF is a Year 13 pass. However, 2.2% of officers had only completed primary education. This latter category may indicate older police officers who joined the FPF at an earlier time when the entry requirements were lower. The police officers were mostly between the ages 18-24 years (30.5%), 25-31 years (31.6%), 32-38 years (16.1%), 39-45 years (11.7%), and 46 years or more (10.2%). Regarding years of experience, 37.3% had 1-3 years of experience, 26.9% had 4-6 years of experience, 7.1% had 7-9 years of experience, and 28.6% had 10 or more years of experience. This indicates that, of those surveyed, the majority had 6 years or less of work experience in the FPF.

**Table 1: Summary of demographic data of police officers who participated in the survey**

	<b>Scale:</b>			
<b>Geographical area</b>	<b>Suva-Lami- Navua</b>	<b>Ba-Tavua-Rakiraki-Tailevu</b>	<b>Sigatoka-Nadi-Lautoka</b>	<b>Nasinu-Nausori</b>
	35.1%	20.3%	18.3%	26.3%
	<b>Scale:</b>			
<b>Age</b>	<b>18-24 yrs</b>	<b>25-31 yrs</b>	<b>32-38 yrs</b>	<b>39 yrs +</b>
	30.5%	31.6%	16.1%	21.2%
	<b>Scale:</b>			
<b>Gender</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Male</b>		
	33.3% (31% women are in FPF as per the FPF Annual Report 2020a <sup>3</sup> )	66.7%		
	<b>Scale:</b>			
<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Indigenous Fijian (<i>iTaukei</i>)</b>	<b>Indo-Fijian</b>	<b>Other</b>	
	70.2%	26.5%	3.3%	
	<b>Scale:</b>			
<b>Education level</b>	<b>Primary</b>	<b>Secondary</b>	<b>Tertiary</b>	
	2.2%	38.2%	59.6%	
	<b>Scale:</b>			
<b>Police experience</b>	<b>1-3 yrs</b>	<b>4-6 yrs</b>	<b>7-9 yrs</b>	<b>10 yrs +</b>
	37.3%	26.9%	7.1%	28.6%

## Research Findings

This section discusses the findings from five key questions regarding how police officers deal with DV cases.

### *Awareness of Zero-Tolerance*

The FPF has adopted a zero-tolerance policy on DV. This policy, introduced in Fiji in 2009 (Rina 2023), requires police officers to investigate DV cases thoroughly and, if necessary, pursue such cases to the court level. This high level of persistence in the zero-tolerance policy means that the policy is often referred to as ‘the no-drop policy’. The zero-tolerance policy was introduced in response to continuous pressure by a coalition of the Fiji Women’s Crisis Centre (FWCC), Fiji Women’s Rights Movement (FWRM), Empower Pacific (EP), and other women’s NGOs in Fiji. The Fiji government has ratified the Convention of Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and is required to provide regular updates on its implementation (Rina 2023). The zero-tolerance policy is designed to ensure that all DV complaints are fully investigated by police, including referring cases to the magistrate’s court. This policy is designed to alleviate the pressure often placed on women to drop their complaints. However, in reality, the zero-tolerance policy is not consistently practised by officers. The FWCC and other NGOs have repeatedly complained that police officers do not implement the zero-tolerance policy when dealing with DV cases. In light of this concern, we asked a series of questions related to the policy to determine if police officers were aware of it, if they implemented it, and their reasons for doing so or not.

The first question we asked was: Are police officers aware of the zero-tolerance policy when attending to DV cases? Table 2 shows that a very high majority (89.0%) of police officers were aware of the zero-tolerance policy, while 11% were not. It is noteworthy that 11% of officers were not aware of the policy, despite having received training about it by the Fiji Police Academy (interview with the Senior Superintendent of the Fiji Police Academy, February 2023).<sup>4</sup> Of the 40 officers who said they were not aware of the policy, 23 (58%) were male officers and 17 (42%) were female officers. In terms of age group, the majority of the officers who were not aware of the zero-tolerance policy were between the ages of 18-31.

**Table 2: Are police officers aware of the zero-tolerance/no-drop policy on domestic violence?**

Responses	Count	%
Yes, I am aware of the zero-tolerance policy towards domestic violence.	325	89.0
No, I am not aware of the zero-tolerance policy towards domestic violence.	40	11.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>365</b>	<b>100%</b>

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### **Implementation of the Zero-Tolerance Policy**

The second question we asked was: Do police officers implement the zero-tolerance policy when attending to reports of DV? The findings are shown in Table 3.

**Table 3: Do police officers implement the zero-tolerance/no-drop policy when dealing with domestic violence cases?**

Responses	Count	%
Yes, I implement the zero-tolerance policy.	107	29.3
No, I do not implement the zero-tolerance policy.	258	70.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>365</b>	<b>100%</b>

Table 3 shows that 29.3% of police officers practised the zero-tolerance policy and the remaining 70.7% of officers said that they did not practise it. This result is notable because, despite 89% of officers indicating in Table 2 that they were aware of the policy, 70.7% did not practise it when dealing with DV cases. This reveals a mismatch between policy and implementation. Our finding highlights a gap between the zero-tolerance policy adopted by the FPF and its non-enforcement by frontline police officers. A similar observation was made by Bull, George, and Curth-Bibb (2019) in their study on DV in PNG, Fiji, the Solomon Islands, and Kiribati. Bull, George and Curth-Bibb (2019) argue that:

... in the Pacific, it is challenging to translate programmes of policing reform in ways that affect everyday policing operation ... and there is generally a vast distance between ... policies to reform policing in the workday micro-processes of policing practice. (64)

Further analysis shows that around two-thirds (66.7%) of officers who said 'I do not implement the zero-tolerance policy' were male officers, which likely reflects the strong patriarchal views often held by male police officers. Notably, one-third (33.3%) of female officers also indicated they did not implement the zero-tolerance policy. Moreover, in terms of ethnicity, the findings show that a high percentage of indigenous Fijians (*iTaukei*) police officers encouraged the use of traditional customary methods. In terms of age group, the majority of the officers who did not implement the zero-tolerance policy were between the ages of 18-31.

Instead of practising the zero-tolerance policy, police officers said they encouraged women victims to use traditional customary ways of settling DV cases. A similar finding was reported by Newland (2016), who explored the occurrence of DV in Fiji's small island of Kadavu. In this study, she highlights that, in most Fijian villages, police officers do not use the zero-tolerance policy because they tend to prefer referring victims to traditional leaders. Newland mentions:

In some instances, the victim goes directly to the police, but, rather than laying charges, the police may advise the victim to return to the Turaga-Ni-Koro to solve the problem with him instead, contravening the 'no drop' policy in favour of prioritizing local relationships with village leaders who are acknowledged as having legitimate and direct authority in the community. (2016: 57)

### ***Why Police Officers Do Not Practise the Zero-Tolerance Policy***

The frontline officers mentioned the following reasons to suggest why they did not practise the zero-tolerance policy:

I believe family disputes and domestic violence cases should be solved by family members to maintain peace in the family.

Domestic violence is a private family issue and not a public issue.

DV is a private family affair left to the couple to solve.

We officers do not take action if the offender is a chief or from a chiefly family.

Other police officers mentioned how they believed in preserving the family and looking after the interests of the children:

We police officers tend to think about the children – care, custody, and welfare of the child.

I prefer to use traditional ways to solve family issues to maintain peace in the family so that family relationship is not spoiled or ruined.

The victim may want police only to warn their husbands and not want to pursue the case further, go through separation, divorce or court.

I do not refer the domestic violence case to the court level because most times the victims want the case to be dropped because they have reconciled with their partners.

Some police officers clarified that if DV was ‘minor’, then they preferred to use the traditional method of solving it, while in serious cases, they would refer the offender to court:

In cases where a dispute is a minor offence, the traditional *iTaukei* way of settling domestic violence cases is used.

### ***Police Officers Who Practise the Zero-Tolerance Policy***

Only around one-third of the police officers (29.3%) stated that they did implement the zero-tolerance policy, including investigating the case further and accelerating it to the court level. Officers who said they did implement the zero-tolerance policy gave the following reasons for doing so:

I do not promote the customary approach because my supervisors tell me to use the zero-tolerance policy.

I do not have the power to reconcile domestic violence cases.

If I do not investigate the case, the domestic violence will continue and get worse.

Women are at risk, especially when the offense is repeated as few women may die.

Children are at risk because they are assaulted.

### ***Traditional or other Forms of Settling Domestic Violence Cases***

In both indigenous Fijian (*iTaukei*) and Indo-Fijian cultures, there is a traditional customary system of forgiveness and reconciliation. Indigenous Fijians use *bulubulu* or *soro* (sorry for wrongdoing) and Indo-Fijians normally rely upon elderly members of their extended family, e.g., grandparents or parents of the couple, to help the couple reconcile. In a typical *iTaukei* scenario of DV, the wife returns to her parents’ family and the husband will provide *soro* (with gifts) to the woman’s family, seeking forgiveness or atonement. The wife is normally pressured by the wife’s parents and village leaders to accept *soro* (Tonsing and Barn 2021). The gift or compensation given by the offender to the woman’s family serves as a way of pressuring women to return to the offender. This custom is regressive because it lacks fairness and justice for the wife; there is no punishment to the husband, only shame and fear of gossip from others. Additionally, it prioritises men over women.

The authors asked police officers if they encouraged couples to use traditional customary methods to deal with DV. Table 4 shows that 70.7% of officers said they encouraged the use of traditional ways of settling DV disputes, despite knowing that the FPF has a zero-tolerance policy.

**Table 4: Do you encourage traditional or other forms of settling domestic violence cases?**

Responses	Count	%
Yes, I encourage traditional ways of settling DV disputes.	258	70.7
No, because the police do not have the power to reconcile DV cases due to the zero-tolerance policy.	107	29.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>365</b>	<b>100%</b>

### *Seriousness of Domestic Violence*

The third question asked was: Do police treat DV as a serious crime and prosecute reported cases? We asked this question because the FWCC has mentioned in PNG newspapers that police do not treat DV as a serious problem (FWCC official 1).<sup>6</sup> Table 5 shows that more than half (57.2%) stated that they took DV cases seriously, and around 42.7% said they did not. We probed participants who indicated a 'yes' answer to explain why, and the qualitative responses were as follows:

It is a crime, like normal physical assault.

We are trained to practise zero tolerance to domestic violence cases. We need to be more proactive.

I take it seriously if: the 'victim is adamant about pursuing the matter further', 'victim decides to separate from the offender', 'there is a major injury to the victim', or 'there is a death threat'.

The police officers who did not take DV seriously were asked why, and the qualitative responses are as follows:

From my experience, pursuing domestic violence cases is a waste of time because some victims withdraw cases in the middle of the investigation as they have forgiven and reconciled with their partner.

The dropout rate by victims is high, and so I do not take action as with other crimes.

Most of the time, the victim reports to the police so that the police can warn the offender but not to take the case further.

These findings underscore that a significant percentage of police do *not* take DV seriously. Police officers mentioned that they took other types of crime more seriously, such as murder, violent robbery, and burglary, as opposed to DV. This likely reflects that Fijian male police officers often hold patriarchal beliefs.

### *Suggestions by Police Officers to Reduce Domestic Violence*

The final question we asked police officers concerned their views on how to reduce DV cases in Fiji and how to assist the victims. Table 6 shows half (50.2%) of the police officers suggested that more awareness and counselling were required by police officers, village headmen, and religious leaders, to help them to understand better and to give them the skills and resources to be able to tell the community that DV is a crime and is not acceptable. Around 22% of officers suggested that they were advised to visit the victims personally, as a clear visual means to warn the offender to stay on track. Another 28.2% of officers had the means to be able to support various helpful approaches, such as: reaching out to the victims through social media; providing a toll-free phone number for victims to call them for help; and/or establishing a community safety centre as a safe place for women to stay in a serious case of violence, providing direct help where the victim's life is in danger. Some officers also participated in raising awareness through public media (TV, radio, newspapers).



**Table 6: Police officers' suggestions on how to reduce domestic violence in Fiji**

<b>Responses: Ways to reduce domestic violence cases in Fiji</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>%</b>
More awareness and counselling are required by police officers, village headmen, and religious leaders to help them understand that DV is a crime and not acceptable.	183	50.2
Prompt response by police is needed. Visit the victims of DV personally so that they can be supported to live a free life.	79	21.6
Reaching out to the victims through social media, having toll-free numbers that connect concerned parties, setting up a Women Victims Centre, and media messaging.	103	28.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>365</b>	<b>100%</b>

## Discussion

This article illustrates that the plural policing and Global South policing frameworks help researchers to explore both the views of police officers and their individual ways of dealing with DV cases in Fiji. Our analysis shows that, despite Fiji having adopted the zero-tolerance policy, police officers are not all aware of it, and the empirical evidence highlights that a significant percentage of frontline police officers do not implement this policy when dealing with DV cases. Moreover, many police officers do not regard DV as a serious crime but instead prefer to resolve DV cases using traditional and customary processes. This finding underscores that frontline police officers often ignore the official state law, with many officers encouraging couples to resolve DV via traditional customary methods. In many cases, police officers do not charge offenders. This reveals a gap between the policy of the FPF and the actual practice by frontline police officers, something also noticed by Bull, George, and Curth-Bibb (2019). This finding reveals that a de facto plural policing strategy is occurring, which is likely to involve both advantages and disadvantages.

Our research further found that involvement of male-dominated customary leaders in DV cases results in considerable pressure being placed upon women victims not to break marital vows or their families. A second associated danger is that women victims are often pressured to forgive their offenders. Existing studies by Bull, George, and Curth-Bibb (2019), Forsyth et al. (2020), and Jolly (1996) highlight the dangers of using the customary ways of resolving DV cases in the Pacific context. For instance, Bull, George, and Curth-Bibb (2019) argue that policing by 'strangers' is more effective because, in highly patriarchal and religiously traditional societies, decisions are made by customary leaders who are mostly males. They often favour the perpetrators' perspectives and needs over the well-being of women victims, whose safety is not supported and whose concerns are often not addressed.

Our research demonstrates that plural policing is happening in the cases of DV, and that new strategies are required that grapple with this reality to effectively mitigate any risks to women who are victims of DV. To ensure that women victims receive a fair hearing, we suggest, firstly, an equal number of women leaders be part of any village committee or community process that seeks to resolve DV cases. We cannot assume, however, that having women in such meetings will necessarily protect the interests of the woman victim, particularly if the women representatives hold conservative cultural beliefs. Secondly, women victims should be heard (given a voice) during any traditional method of resolving DV cases. In no circumstances should the woman victim be pressured to accept the village committee's decision if it puts her in danger or if she is uncomfortable with it, regardless of cultural considerations, especially if there is a risk of DV continuing. Thirdly, female police officers, rather than male officers, should be prioritised in the handling processes of DV cases. They should be provided with the resources and support to be able to inform the village leaders about the requirements of the law, to increase the community's understanding that the resolution of the dispute must account for the concerns of the woman victim and her children before a final decision is made. Fourthly, police officers must be required to follow the standard operating procedures (SOP) with respect to DV strictly and not leave the approach to DV cases to their own discretion. To ensure that this is effective across the force, our research findings suggest this will likely require refresher training to be provided by the Fiji Police Academy.

## Conclusion

This article, based on our primary empirical survey, has explored how FPF police officers deal with DV cases. Traditional cultural beliefs and values held by police officers impact how they approach their individual roles and perform their daily work. This applies both generally and more specifically with respect to decisions on whether to arrest an alleged offender under the Domestic Violence Act (Fiji) 2009. Our findings reveal that a significant percentage of police officers do not implement the

zero-tolerance policy, with many frontline police officers instead referring parties to rely upon traditional customary methods of resolving DV cases, with the intention being to keep the family intact. Inherent in 'keeping the family intact' is the cultural belief that to do so will ensure family values, maintain relationships between couples, create peace and harmony in the family, and safeguard the future of the children. Given this reality, our study suggests that theoretically, a plural/hybrid model (state law and customary law) is being practised in Fiji and other Pacific Island countries to resolve DV cases. We suggest it is crucial for the police organisation to improve officers' awareness of the zero-tolerance policy, including clarifying how it can support women victims. Officers should receive instruction on navigating implementation of the policy in a plural policing context, especially where police officers feel it is appropriate to suggest the use of customary practices for resolving DV cases. Such training should aim to help all officers understand the importance of women victims having options that safeguard their well-being, interests, and rights. This would help ensure that women victims are more likely to receive a fair hearing and justice in cases of DV, as they would in any other form of abuse. Finally, we recommend that more primary empirical research be conducted on the police practices of resolving DV cases in Pacific Island countries, in order to contribute empirically and theoretically towards building stronger policing and DV literature for the Pacific region.

## Acknowledgments

We acknowledge the Fiji Police Force (FPF) for permitting us to collect information from the FPF's police officers. We also acknowledge the helpful suggestions made by the two reviewers of this article and Felicity Tepper for editing and proofreading.

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'zero-tolerance policy' towards DV is also known as the 'no-drop policy'. We use the term zero-tolerance policy in this article.

<sup>2</sup> We have used the latest Fiji Police Force (FPF) Annual Report, dated July 2020. In Fiji, most public sector organisations do not release their annual reports on time and are usually several years late.

<sup>3</sup> At the time of writing, the FPF Annual Report (2020a) is the latest report available.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with a police officer from Fiji Police Academy, Fiji Police Force, January 2023.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with a police officer from Fiji Police Academy, Fiji Police Force, January 2023.

<sup>6</sup> Interview with an official of Fiji Women's Crisis Centre (FWCC), February 2023.

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