

Men and Women Unite Against Violence Against Women
International Women's Day
7 March 2009

Gun Violence Against Women & Girls

This event was organised by the Australian High Commission as part of Australia Week.

Your Excellency Chris Moraitis, our special guest Christine Anu, women gathered here and in PNG, distinguished guests.

Thank you for giving Oxfam the opportunity to speak with you on the issue of gun violence against our communities, and particularly against our women and girls, and of our work in this area.

Guns have not always been perceived as instruments of fear, intimidation and death in this country. As a little girl growing up, I saw the gun as an altogether different instrument. My father's shot gun brought home wild pigs and birds and meant food for the family. I never once thought that the same thing that was used to kill animals could easily be turned on people. And my father never used the gun in a threatening manner on any person. He was so careful when storing it, making sure it was unloaded, and pointing away from where people would be.

That was in the 1960s and early 1970s. Today, as a woman with a teenage daughter, I am a member of a coalition advocating a stop to gun violence. So in half a life time my experience of guns as a girl and those of my daughter and her generation are so very different.

I recall the terrible ordeal of a beautiful 19 year old grade 12 student who was kidnapped at gunpoint on her way home at Gerehu in April 2006. She was taken to the back of Morata swamps and raped repeatedly. She was left there to die but she crawled out of the swamps to a road side where she was found and taken to the hospital. The doctor that examined her said she was badly mutilated. Her uterus was ripped up by foreign objects which left huge holes in them. The doctor was able to patch up the wholes but she could never have any children. She was severely traumatised. Her life would never be the same again. School ended for her then, and perhaps many of her dreams, and that of her family.

This girl is only one example of the growing number of women and girls falling victim to the proliferation of illegal guns in our communities. I have personal friends, and colleagues, who have been shot and disabled. Others have lost their husbands, sons, mothers or daughters.

I am sure you have your own experience or experiences.

The way we live reflects our fears. We live behind fences and refuse to go to the aid of neighbours calling for help, hoping against hope it never happens to us. Women walk around and live in fear for themselves and the lives of their daughters and male members of their families, quickly getting in and out of cars and the gates to their homes, constantly looking over their shoulders, wondering if the man walking towards them might be a gun carrying assailant. It really is hard to enjoy life that way.

For those victims that survive, there are no trauma counselling services that could help them - making the chances of a decent recovery difficult.

Home made guns, and factory-made guns have become a weapon of choice for criminals, tribal fighters, corrupt officials, human rights abusers, and other perpetrators of violence. Rape and domestic abuse increasingly involve guns. Across the country guns are used to cause violent death, injury, and psychological trauma to thousands of people each year.

Exact numbers are hard to find as data collection is poor and gun-related deaths and injuries often go unreported but there is enough anecdotal evidence to suggest that PNG Guinea has a serious problem and that guns have now evolved into a culture in our communities. PNG has even got to the point where its people are now not only making guns but are manufacturing ammunition.

Gun violence breeds fear and insecurity. It destroys lives and livelihoods. It exacerbates poverty by undermining economic and social development. Whether in situations of conflict or crime, it imposes enormous costs on states, communities and individuals. The psychological costs can only be guessed at.

For many of our women gun violence has resulted in HIV and pregnancy, and in many cases both. Last year I met this incredible woman during World AIDS Day. She was a married woman who was gang raped at gunpoint and in the process, not only contracted HIV but also became pregnant. Her husband left her, blaming her for the rape and HIV. I say incredible because she has been able to not only survive but use her story to help other women who have suffered similarly. She is an example of the resilience of women in PNG and the world over, whom, despite being victims or despite their circumstances rise up and use their experience to change their communities. Even so, no woman or girl deserves to suffer so.

The Geneva Declaration on Armed Violence which PNG is a signatory to states that “Living free from the threat of gun violence is a basic human need. It is a precondition for human development, dignity and wellbeing.”

The declaration states in the same paragraph that: “Providing for the human security of their citizens is a core responsibility of the government.”

The government has signed human rights treaties, including the Geneva Declaration, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, committing to protecting its citizens, women and girls, from violence and harm and creating a peaceful and secure environment. It needs now only to translate these commitments into action.

In terms of how Oxfam is contributing towards addressing this problem, at the community level we are supporting local peace building initiatives in Chimbu and the Southern Highlands. We are also carrying out an action research in the Hela region of Southern Highlands with the aim of:

- documenting and understanding community based small arms supply and demand issues;
- Identifying and supporting local community driven law and justice initiatives that are working to reduce violence;
- Understanding the impact these initiatives have on community security and well-being;
- Understanding the lessons from these initiatives that could be applied in order to promote community initiatives in a wider PNG context.

This research will feed into Oxfam and Coalition to Stop Gun Violence’s advocacy work at the national level and we hope the government’s law and justice initiatives.

We have together with Doctors Without Borders (MSF) used some findings of this research and advocated for reduced fees for victims of violence at Tari hospital, to waive the K50 fee. This fee was charged to all people who were affected by violence, including rape victims, physical violence, armed violence and domestic violence cases. The fee has been waived, at least for several months and Oxfam is continuing to look at the effect of this including the numbers presenting to Tari hospital.

Oxfam is also part of the international Control Arms Campaign with Amnesty International and the International Action Network on Small Arms which is pushing for an international Arms Trade Treaty to bring weapons trade under control.

In closing, Oxfam recommends as a matter of urgency that:

1. the Papua New Guinean government and major development donors directly support community-based efforts to reduce armed violence in Papua New Guinea. This will require a change in the aid programming focus and engagement with civil society;
2. that policy makers and programme developers (whether governmental, inter-governmental or non-governmental) should ensure that policy and interventions aimed at reducing armed violence are based on a sound understanding and analysis of the nature, causes and effects of insecurity. The nature, causes, and effects of insecurity in PNG vary widely, and interventions have to be developed that are specific to each context.
3. Related to that, policy and programme developers must ensure a comprehensive approach to armed violence reduction issues, recognizing the different situations, needs and resources of men and women, boys and girls, as reflected in the provisions of UN Security Council Resolutions 1325. A clear understanding of the particular experiences of men and women—as perpetrators, victims and survivors of small arms violence—is needed to inform policy and action.
4. In order to achieve 1 and 2, national and international non-governmental organisations should collaboratively conduct research on; the nature, causes and effects of insecurity; the effectiveness

and appropriateness of the national and regional responses to armed violence and development issues; and community based responses to armed violence. There has been limited examination in Papua New Guinea of local solutions developed in response to conflict and no formal recognition of the impacts of insecurity and conflict on people's lives.

5. Related to the above, policy makers and programme developers must learn from local approaches to conflict reduction and peace building and identify appropriate entry points to engage with communities on security. Providing a voice to groups vulnerable to violence will draw attention to appropriate intervention strategies and alternative peace building models. This approach can offer alternatives and fresh perspectives to addressing the security needs of women, marginalised groups and local populations.
6. Programme developers must prioritize long term engagement over short term solutions. Top-down approaches to insecurity are by themselves inadequate without parallel nationwide peace work at ground level.

International Women's Day is a celebration of what women bring to peace building and development efforts, and also recognition and a reminder of their struggles. The theme Men and Women Uniting Against Violence Against Women and Girls is relevant. My sharing this morning I hope has been a sharing of experiences together with our men, so that together, we can work to find lasting solutions to build peace and a better country and world for our daughters, our sons and each other.

Thank you.

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