

The Elephant in the Room: Trauma in the Pacific

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I make two points in this essay that relate to transformative people-centered development. First, we must begin to systematically address trauma because it is a root cause of many social ills, including violence. Second, we must be more inclusive of non-binary people and men as we do this work in the Pacific.

Trauma from Abuse Relating to Patriarchal, Colonial, and Capitalist Conditioning

Trauma ubiquitously impacts relationships. I define trauma as any lasting and disturbing effects of abuse. Domestic violence is rampant in the Pacific: more than 60% of women report facing physical or sexual violence, or both, by an intimate partner in their lifetime in Fiji, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, and Kiribati, with Timor Leste and Papua New Guinea not far behind.¹

I am a coach working in Suva and remotely with clients around the world. I specialize in working with leaders who are ready, willing, and committed to work on their trauma patterns (including people-pleasing, fear, anxiety, and anger) to emerge as confident, authentic innovators. The pattern I've observed as a coach, and what is confirmed by research, is that many boys are abused,² and socially conditioned by the patriarchy to bottle up emotions. As teens and men, they often turn to alcohol,³ drugs,⁴ and other harmful coping mechanisms. They become abusers⁵ of women, girls, and boys, physically and sexually whenever their pent-up trauma explodes as rage. There is also emotional, verbal, and psychological abuse that keeps victims subjugated.

¹ "Violence Against Women, Regional Snapshot, 2023." UNFPA, Accessed February 28, 2024. <https://asiapacific.unfpa.org/en/resources/violence-against-women-regional-snapshot-2023-knowvawdata>.

² Sally Kabbara, "Understanding the Sexual Betrayal of Boys and Men: The Trauma of Sexual Abuse and Healing Sexually Betrayed Men and Boys: Treatment for Sexual Abuse, Assault, and Trauma," *Journal of Trauma & Dissociation* 21, no. 5 (July 12, 2020): 611–12, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15299732.2020.1787088>.

³ "The Latest Research on Young Men and Binge Drinking." Newport Institute, Accessed May 7, 2024. <https://www.newportinstitute.com/resources/treatment/young-men-and-binge-drinking/>.

⁴ Dean G. Kilpatrick, Benjamin E. Saunders, and Daniel W. Smith, "Youth Victimization: Prevalence and Implications," *PsycEXTRA Dataset*, 2003, <https://doi.org/10.1037/e375762004-001>.

⁵ Lindner, Jannik. "Abused Becoming Abusers Statistics: Market Report & Data." Gitnux - GITNUX MARKETDATA REPORT 2024, December 20, 2023. <https://gitnux.org/abused-becoming-abusers-statistics/>.

Women, too, are conditioned to never speak about abuse;⁶ they are brainwashed into being submissive caregivers; and expected to prioritize others' needs above their own. Hence, they typically have low self-worth, despite being talented and resilient. While some women have broken out of this traumatic trap, many women remain dangerously stuck in these horrendous situations. The combined disasters posed by COVID-19 and tropical cyclones Harold and Yasa in 2020 led to a rise in domestic violence in Fiji, exacerbating the crisis.⁷

When we look more deeply at patriarchal conditioning (teaching boys to hide their emotions, and teaching girls to deprioritize themselves), we see interesting trauma patterns not only with men who abuse women, but also with women who abuse women.⁸ For instance, based on my experience working with victims, there are toxic, patriarchal, and neocolonial feminist leaders within the Pacific women's movement. These abusive women subjugate younger colleagues, destroying their employees' self-esteem and confidence in attempts to feel superior (Cornelius, 2024, 37).⁹ The root of this abusive behavior is severe trauma from childhood abuse that

leads to narcissistic (emotionally manipulative) tactics propelled by deep insecurity.

Looking beyond the feminist movement at relationship patterns, the widely accepted capitalistic norm is to get married, settle down, have children, buy a home, and accumulate possessions. Urban Pacific people tend to follow this Western cultural model closely. Of course, there is also sociocultural pressure for couples to stay together, so the divorce option is a road less taken when marriages begin to rupture. The result: affairs, half-siblings, and messy family configurations that can remain hidden for years. The pain of revealing these illicit relationships can break families and marriages apart. I have seen this firsthand in Fiji with both iTaukei and Indo-Fijian families. Of course, the legacy of *girmityas*¹⁰ in Fiji only adds to the complexities, with a history of men exploiting women,¹¹ and Indo-Fijian families (often unknowingly)

⁶ Kamdar, Shraddha. "#ActAgainstAbuse: Why Women Don't Speak Up When They Face Domestic Violence." *Femina*. Femina, <https://www.femina.in/trending/actagainstabuse/actagainstabuse-why-women-dont-speak-up-157823.html>.

⁷ Chanel, Sheldon. "'Crisis within a Crisis': Violence against Women Surges in Fiji." *Al Jazeera*, February 24, 2021. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/2/24/crisis-within-a-crisis-violence-against-women-surges-in-fiji>.

⁸ Cornelius, Marilyn PhD. 2018. *From Abused to Empowered: Recognizing and Releasing Behavior Patterns that Come from Trauma*. Alchemus Prime. <https://amzn.to/48phV9H>.

⁹ Cornelius, Marilyn PhD. 2024. *The Soul of Feminism: Reflections*. Alchemus Prime. <https://amzn.to/4bPp1aa>.

¹⁰ Indentured laborers brought to Fiji by the British from India, who faced many atrocities as slaves, were called *girmityas*. Kumar, Vanita. "Home" January 30, 2017. <https://girmitya.girmit.org/new/>.

¹¹ The ratio was 100 men to 40 women: Kumar, Vanita. "INDENTURED LABOURERS: WOMEN." January 30, 2017. <https://girmitya.girmit.org/new/index.php/2017/01/30/indentured-labourers-women/>.

still grappling with intergenerational trauma.¹²

Gaps in Inclusion

In 2023, I attended the Pacific Update at the University of the South Pacific (USP). I learned a lot in the two gender sessions. Topics spanned intimate partner violence (IPV) in Samoa; gender financing in the Pacific; digital financial products available to women; the Pacific Girl program; Toksave¹³ (a most excellent gender research portal); and how Pacific Women Lead operates. As it happened, my questions revealed gaps in research.

I asked: “Adolescent girls encounter trauma in their families, for example when they witness or experience abuse, and when they are bullied at school. Is there a trauma component in all the work you’ve been discussing?” I wanted to know if there was a focus on trauma healing as part of the 170-million-dollar investment on gender that is being implemented through the Pacific Community (SPC) and other non-profit organizations. The answers were that while trauma isn’t talked about, it is the fundamental reason the women’s movement exists. While there are some initiatives on cyber bullying within the Pacific Girl program, there isn’t any core focus on trauma. Neither is there a specific trauma focus in the Toksave research portal.

My other question was, “Is there current research tracking IPV and financial assistance during disasters to people in Pacific LGBTQIA+ communities?” The answer was that researchers are not focused on this. They were looking at gender and people with disabilities, or families (in Samoa). It didn’t sound like they were going to add this focus, perhaps due to the limiting way in which gender funding is structured. In the meantime, non-binary people still face a lot of stigma and trauma because of continuing high rates of homophobia in the Pacific.¹⁴

Solutions

Addressing trauma inclusively is critical to healing from patriarchal, colonial, and capitalist conditioning of men, women, and non-binary people, which will help reduce domestic, gender-based, and intimate partner violence. *Pacific regional discussions and research on gender and disaster financing must become more inclusive.* Ultimately, working on trauma is a root-level solution that has the power to transform individuals, families, and communities in lasting ways to build unity and resilience.

Feminists, peacebuilders, reconciliation and rehabilitation experts, social workers, social justice and human rights professionals, mental health professionals, as well as government agencies, regional, and international development bodies need to

¹² Marya. “Girmitiya Diaries: Intergenerational Trauma, Memory And Belonging In Brij Lal’s ‘The Tamarind Tree’.” *Research Journal of English Language and Literature (RJELAL)* 12, no. 1 (2024). Accessed February 28, 2024. <https://doi.org/http://www.rjelal.com/>.

¹³ “Toksave: Pacific Gender Resource.” Accessed February 28, 2024. <https://www.toksavepacificgender.net/>.

¹⁴ Starcevic, Seb. “LGBTQ+ Rights Lag in Pacific despite Cook Islands’ Gay Sex Move.” *Openly News*. April 21, 2023. <https://www.openlynews.com/i/?id=49aa9e9e-8900-407c-9d38-b77ce3390ffa>.

work together with shared language, and practices. *Silos need to be destroyed. We—as professionals who work on these issues—need to heal too, because trauma-related territoriality causes many Pacific organizations to still operate in silos.*

Trauma is universal; it affects us all. *Therefore, trauma-informed and inclusive approaches must be prioritized in collaborative, long-term initiatives that focus on changing the harmful behaviors of people across the gender spectrum. These initiatives could begin by creating safe spaces where stories about abuse and trauma can be shared.*

Transcend Oceania and the Pacific Centre for Peacebuilding are doing groundbreaking work that is inclusive of men. DIVA for Equality is doing intersectional work on gender, human rights, climate change, and more. Feminist funds, including the Women's Fund Fiji and newly established Pacific Feminist Fund, are providing much-needed financial support to marginalized groups. If we are to heal our beautiful Pacific from its disproportionately deep collective and individual trauma, *we must build on existing intersectional efforts.*