Do No Harm: The Relationship between Violence Against Women and Women's Economic Empowerment in the Pacific

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It is now widely accepted that women's economic empowerment brings a range of benefits even beyond gender equality gains for individual women, greatly improving the health, wellbeing, and productivity of entire families and countries, and contributing to effective, sustainable development. Recognising these substantial benefits, the Australian aid program places strong emphasis on addressing women's economic disadvantage. In the recent announcement of the appointment of the new Australian Ambassador for Women and Girls, Natasha Stott Despoja, both the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Julie Bishop, and the Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for Women, Senator Michaelia Cash, highlighted the need, particularly in the Pacific, to promote gender equality and women's economic empowerment, and to address violence against women (Bishop and Cash 2013).

The document currently guiding delivery of Australian aid, *An Effective Aid Program for Australia*, states that a key objective is 'empowering women to participate in the economy ... because of the critical untapped role of women in development' (AusAID 2011, 30).[1] However, even as the importance of women's economic inclusion and empowerment is acknowledged and acted on, it is also known that such gains are not without risk; for increasing command over financial resources can expose women to domestic conflict and violence.

The broader development literature indicates that women's economic empowerment can have positive and negative outcomes for them, including both increases and decreases in levels of violence.

On the positive side, some studies argue that economic empowerment programs strengthen women's economic autonomy and enable the pursuit of non-traditional activities (Cheston and Kuhn 2002). A 2007 UNESCAP report concludes that the greater financial independence facilitated by microfinance increases women's options, helping them to stand up to abusive spouses, and to serve as role models in the community. Others have found that economic empowerment programs such as microfinance improve women's ability to contribute to household income and to increase their own assets. There is also evidence that women's earnings can increase household expenditure on food and children's education, especially for girls (Hailie et al. 2012, 256), thus delivering a multiplier effect (UNESCAP 2007). Some scholars have found that economic empowerment associated with microfinance lowers the incidence of domestic conflict and violence (Hailie et al. 2012, 263). Kabeer (2001) also found that access to credit reduces marital conflict because it helps women to provide for the family and share men's burden of family support. Cheston and Kuhn (2002) concluded that microfinance strengthens and improves family relationships.

On the negative side, some researchers have found that increased contribution to household income is not often linked to an ability to renegotiate other gendered responsibilities, contributing to an increase in women's workload overall and relative to men (Chant 2006). Programs that have gender equality at the heart of their strategy appear more successful in enhancing women's earnings and their decision-making power within the household than other programs (Hailie et al. 2012, 258).

Few studies have addressed this issue comprehensively in the Pacific. There has been some discussion of the relationship between women's economic empowerment and violence against them in the Melanesian context, and the Australian Government report *Violence Against Women in Melanesia and East Timor* found that, although microfinance can strengthen women's ability to stand up to family violence, 'interventions aimed at empowering women can generate unintended consequences, often in the form of violent backlash. (As women increasingly demand equality, men increasingly assert their control over women.)' (AusAID ODE 2008a, 17).

Bradley has found that a relationship exists between women's increased earning potential and domestic violence in Papua New Guinea:

> Although having earning power may strengthen women's bargaining position at home, it can have the opposite effect. ... Husbands may react

with increased aggression to what they perceive as a threat to their control over their wife, even to their masculinity and self-respect, when their wife has her own income, particularly if she is the higher earner, holds a responsible position, or is the sole breadwinner (2011, 2).

Findings from research on the gender equality outcomes of economic growth in the Pacific suggest that in semi-subsistence Melanesian communities in Solomon Islands and Fiji, any cash in the hands of women can expose them to risk of violence by men, often in association with resource-depleting activities such as gambling and drinking (Carnegie et al. 2013). A recent study on deepening women's financial inclusion in the Pacific noted that 'the relationship between gender-based violence and the provision of financial services is not yet fully understood' (Bantia et al. 2013, 66).

We continue to see poor development outcomes for many women in the Pacific, with high levels of both economic exclusion and violence against them. Given this, and the policy priority attached to sustainable economic development in the region, understanding what factors enhance women's economic inclusion and empowerment in the fullest sense, and what factors mitigate against this, is essential to enabling change that also advances security. Research that indicates clearly to donor agencies what needs to be incorporated in the design and implementation of economic empowerment initiatives, and in organisational policies, in order to minimise possible harm and to maximise positive gender equality outcomes will assist them to meet their minimum ethical responsibility to do no harm.

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Endnote

1 The economic situation for women in the region is extremely poor. Figures for women's involvement in the economy are especially poor, with the 2012 *Women's Economic Opportunity: Global Index and Ranking* placing a number of countries from the Pacific in the bottom five countries of the world (Solomon Islands 124/128 and Papua New Guinea 125/128 respectively; Vanuatu was 106/128) (Economist Intelligence Unit 2012, 8).

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