Online Violence against Women and Girls in the Pacific (Panel Discussion)
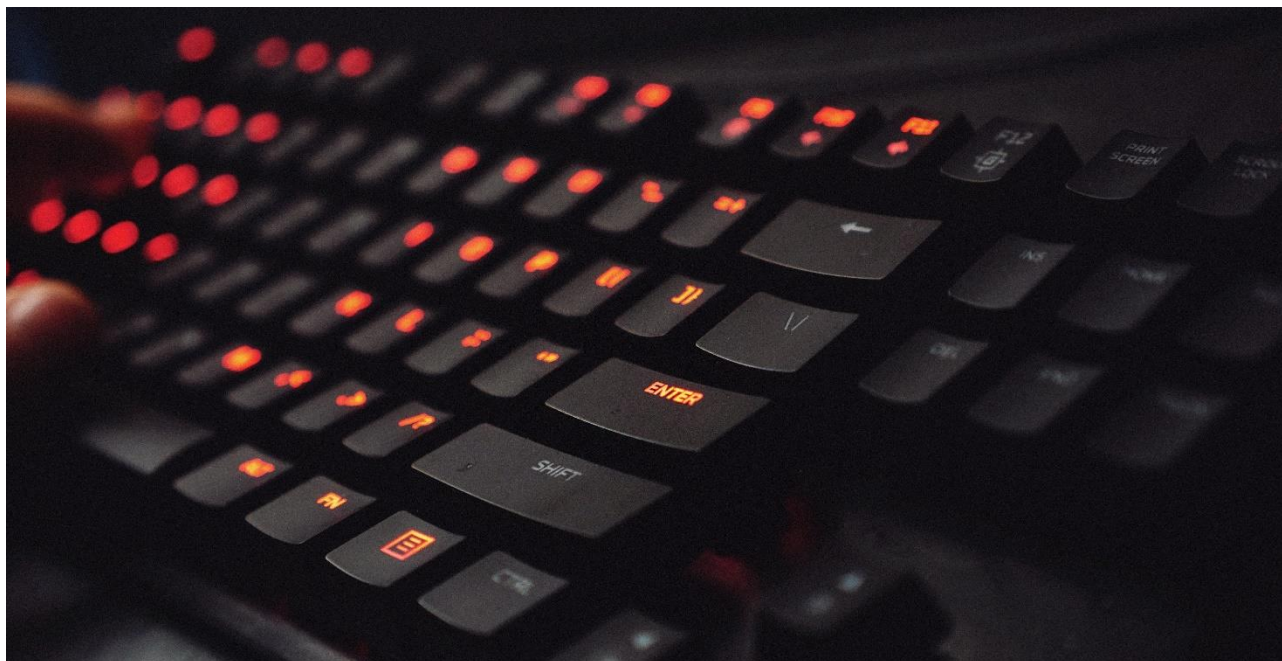
Summary Paper

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Background

About Women Leading and Influencing (WLI)

Australia Awards *Women Leading and Influencing* (WLI) is an Australian Government initiative that aims to develop the skills, confidence and connections of leaders to drive positive change in the Pacific region. An on-Award (in-Australia) and reintegration (in-Pacific) enrichment program, WLI offers a range of developmental leadership offerings to Pacific scholars studying at Australian universities and institutions. The program builds on the preceding *Women's Leadership Initiative* Pilot (2017–2022) to enhance support for WLI alumni returning home, and the role of men supporting women as change agents.

Introduction

In September 2022, the WLI hosted a virtual Learning and Networking event on online violence against women and girls (also called online gender-based violence) in the Pacific. Featuring a Q&A, small group reflection sessions and an expert panel discussion moderated by Kira Osborne, Senior International Development Officer and Pacific Lead at Australia's eSafety Commissioner, the event explored the prevalence, challenges, gaps in data, and effective strategies to address online gender-

based violence (OGBV), and priorities for policy, program and legislation reform.

The Panel

- **Stephanie Dunn**, Legal Officer, Fiji Women's Crisis Centre (FWCC)
- **Paula Smith**, eSafety Women's Presenter and Training Facilitator, Australia's eSafety Commissioner
- **Jope Tarai**, PhD Candidate, Australian National University (ANU)
- **Tracey Shields**, Senior Advisor, Child Rights and Protection, Plan International Australia
- **Anju Mangal**, Asia-Pacific Regional Coordinator, Alliance for Affordable Internet, World Wide Web Foundation
- **Facilitator Kira Osborne**, Senior International Development Officer and Pacific Lead, Australia's eSafety Commissioner.

Understanding Online Gender Based-Violence (OGBV)

What is OGBV?

OGBV takes many forms and is often intersectional in nature, meaning that women from diverse and vulnerable communities are disproportionately (and often more severely) impacted. It can include:

- **Technology-facilitated abuse:** within a family violence context, technology is used to isolate, monitor, stalk, impersonate, harass, threaten or humiliate someone. This can involve sharing or threatening to share intimate images, the non-consensual use of tracking devices, and using 'imposter' accounts to send threatening Direct Messages via social media platforms.
- **OGBV against women with online presence:** women in politics, media, senior executive positions, entrepreneurs, small business, activism and many other spheres are targeted to receive online abuse that is intended to silence their voices.

> 'Victim-survivors tell eSafety [that] perpetrators use tech to exert power to make them feel guilty or like 'they're going crazy' or denigrate them and to undermine trust.' – Kira Osborne

Insights from International Evidence

According to panellists, international research and evidence indicate:

- Globally, rates of OGBV are increasing, with spikes experienced during COVID-19 lockdowns/isolation.
- Women are disproportionately targeted to experience every form of online abuse.
- OGBV thrives where gender inequality is already well-entrenched, is rooted in misogyny, and is designed to control and silence women online.
- Online abuse of women and girls is more violent, sexualised and focused on appearance than online abuse experienced by men. It may question a woman's supposed virtue or fertility. It may also threaten rape of violence against their children.
- Gendered abuse starts young; almost 60% of girls worldwide have experienced some form of online sexual harm.
- The Economist's Intelligence Unit indicates that 85 per cent of women globally have witnessed OGBV.

> 'To date, research on online abuse of women and girls has excluded Pacific Island countries. As such, regional knowledge and evidence of the issues and experiences of online gender-based violence are anecdotal and from small, targeted research and coordinated regional projects.' – Kira Osborne

How OGBV impacts on women's leadership

Research available on the Australian experience of OGBV (including through Women in the Spotlight; an eSafety Australia analysis of available data) indicates that:

- Almost one quarter (24 per cent) of all women and almost half (42 per cent) of women with disability who had experienced online abuse noted they were reluctant to move into leadership positions because it would require them to have a media/online presence.

- The impact of OGBV on survivors is 'mainly mental', with confidence and self-esteem reduced as perpetrators attempt to silence women.
- Women, particularly journalists, who have opinions about structures built by and for men are more often targeted to experience online abuse.
- Women report constantly second-guessing / hesitating when making public posts, comments and actions out of fear of being attacked.
- When women withdraw from public life (including social media) out of fear of being attacked, it entrenches gender inequality and negatively impacts on society.

> 'We've had several high-profile journalists and politicians be attacked, and that can make them withdraw. If women are silenced like that, it's actually impacting on every decision they make. We've had one case where that includes policy, so it's actually impacting on our democratic system, because she had to think twice about, 'Do I put this policy out there?' Knowing that it might cause some online abuse... Things won't change because there is that fear.' – Paula Smith

Challenges Addressing OGBV

Panellists discussed the challenges in addressing OBGV in the Pacific region, including that:

- Research on online abuse of women and girls to date has excluded Pacific Island countries and is limited to the gender binary. Regional knowledge and evidence of issues and experiences are therefore anecdotal and limited to small projects and fail to encompass the spectrum of gender diversity.
- Most policy relating to online safety in the Pacific focuses on cyber-crime and security, rather than issues if safety, including OGBV, which receives less attention.
- There are limited resources to handle OGBV cases in the Pacific region, with Fiji the only country (after Australia) to establish an Online eSafety Commissioner with legislative function to remove abusive content online.

> 'While there may be laws in existence that do give a bit of protection to survivors, the effectiveness of policies becomes very limited when you don't have the expertise or the human resources to ensure that laws or policies are effectively enforced on the ground, say for example, if you're trying to pull down a fake profile.' – Stephanie Dunn

- Slow responses from key enforcement agencies cause more harm to survivors and disincentivise others from coming forward. An abusive post causes more harm the longer it stays online (as it is shared and seen more widely).
- Survivors reaching out for assistance report experiencing a lack of sensitivity/awareness from key enforcement agencies (most often police) which reduces survivors' trust in reporting processes.
- Enforcement agencies can minimise the severity of online abuse, despite its very real physical/psychological consequences and the connection between online and offline harm.

> '*It is ignored because there is this misconception that online abuse and harassment or even online bullying is not as harmful as abuse in the physical world, and I think that requires a lot of change in the mindset of people. Particularly, multi-stakeholder communities and partners need to understand how to work on these issues.*'
> – Anju Mangal

- Solutions tend to focus on women withdrawing from online spaces which not only exacerbate gender inequality, but also do nothing to stop abuse. When survivors go offline, perpetrators often seek them out in the real world to continue the abuse. Removing women from the online world also has 'serious economic and social impacts for women and communities'.
- Pacific women are blamed for their own abuse in part due to the 'patriarchal nature' and stereotypes about how women 'should' or 'shouldn't' behave – particularly in the case of image-based abuse, when intimate images are shared/threatened to be shared without consent. Online criticism of women in the Pacific seems to reflect societal constructs and stereotypes.

Opportunities and Actions

Opportunities and actions to be taken across research and policy, direct response, capacity building and programming were identified by panellists and include:

- Ensuring women and girls are informing and at the centre of policy, program, technology design and decision-making (including safety tools and through representation at technology companies).
- Partners and funders giving full ownership of projects/programs to countries rolling them out.
- Establishing dedicated funding for research/policy interventions relating to OGBV.
- Working with multi-stakeholder groups to develop human-centred laws and regulations that address emerging digital threats against women while avoiding duplication.
- Increasing access to digital literacy training for parents (and women and girls) and wider communities that is contextual and routinely updated alongside emerging threats.
- Addressing 'gaps in research' to better understand drivers of the increase in women represented online. Data show a shift in the representation of women from Pacific countries in digital spaces, with the proportion of female-identified social media accounts increasing across the Pacific region; particularly during COVID-19. And in Fiji, more women are registering to vote in the elections, and according to Fiji's election office, women (57 per cent) are more likely than men (43 per cent) to engage with election-related materials online.

> '*Melanesian countries typically known to have their own societal constructs of male dominance … have shifted to a greater number of female-identified accounts. This opens up gaps in research; to explore whether there's a proliferation of access for women, or is it about socioeconomic capabilities after or during COVID-19?*' – Jope Tarai

- Undertaking inclusive, intersectional Pacific context-based research, data and programs to better understand the experiences of and solutions for

survivors and inform direct response, policy, legislation, research and regional programs.
- Ensuring issues relating to OGBV are broken down into 'layman's terms' to help policymakers, legislators and the general public understand its impact and connection to cyber-crime.
- Building the capacity of key enforcement agencies (including through sensitivity training) to ensure stronger response processes and build survivors' trust in responders. This includes trauma-informed training for researchers.
- Building the capacity of workplaces, schools, churches (and other settings relevant to women and girls) to respond to experiences of online abuse, including through the development of policies.
- Ensuring resources are available (and that sustainable programs are designed) to enforce existing and future legislation on OGBV across the region is key to effectiveness.
- Ensuring responses are survivor-centred and holistic; seeing women referred to services they need in order to stay safe, recover, and guide others in the same position.
- Keeping in mind that while interventions can build the capacity of women and girls to stay safe, the problem is abusive behaviour perpetrated by men and requires interventions designed for men.

Case study: Online Safety in the Pacific Report

In 2020, Child Fund, Plan International and Western Sydney University undertook research to better understand the challenges of and opportunities for technology-use of young people across the Pacific region. One of the ensuing recommendations was to develop specific measures to empower young women and girls via digital technology which linked to broader social policy objectives.

Key strengths and features of the research (and work relating to it, including the Safer Cities for Girls project in Honiara and Swipe Safe) according to Tracey Shields include that it was:

- Girl/survivor-centred: using a social-ecological model, girls and their needs and circumstances were placed at the centre.
- Participatory in nature: girls were actively involved and informed in all stages of the project.
- Grounded in context: Design and recommendations were relevant to the region in which they applied and involved situational gender and disability analyses.
- Collaborative: Communication, coordination and information-sharing between governments, agencies and other local actors and communities strengthened the research project while contributing to the evidence-base.

> '*One of the key findings from our research was that parents were absolutely screaming out for digital literacy training… Parents and caregivers are absolutely critical.*'
> – Tracey Shields

Resources

A number of resources were highlighted in the panel discussion, including:

- The large suite of resources on the topic of Online Gender Based Violence on the eSafety Commissioner website
- Online Safety in the Pacific – a Plan International, ChildFund and Western Sydney University report on Living Lab in Kiribati, Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands
- A series of booklets for parents and carers to understand online safety developed by eSafety Australia in partnership with Fiji's Online Safety Commission
- Swipe Safe – a ChildFund project aimed at preventing online abuse and exploitation of children through skill and knowledge building
- Cyber Safety Pacifika – a police-delivered program building awareness and knowledge of technology.
- Launch of the Digital Cities Scorecards for Tonga, Samoa and PNG in October

Support services across the region

Fiji
Fiji Women's Crisis Centre(24-hrs) 3313300

Solomon Islands
Family Support Centre 677 26999

Vanuatu
Vanuatu Women's Centre .... +678 25764

Kiribati
Kiribati Women and Children Support Centre .... 191 Helpline or 750 21000

Tonga
Tonga Women's Crisis Centre .... +676 22 240

PNG
Family and Sexual Violence Action Committee .... +675 321 1714

Samoa
Samoa Family Health Association .... +685 842 6969

Conclusion

This Summary Paper outlines the key points made by panellists of the September 2022 WLI Learning and Networking event on online violence against women and girls, or online gender-based violence in the Pacific. The event explored prevalence, challenges, gaps in data, and effective strategies to address online gender-based violence, and priorities for policy, program and legislation reform.

Interested? Want to know more?

Listen to the panel discussion   https://bit.ly/WLI_LN_EVENT   Or scan the QR code

Find more information on Australia Awards *Women Leading and Influencing* and how you can get involved:

https://www.wliprogram.org   info@wliprogram.org