

Although the associations between partner violence and communication patterns including quarrelling were highly significant with P values of less than 0.001, once again it is not possible to assume causality: that is, the quarrelling may be either a contributing factor, or a form of verbal resistance by women which is a consequence of men's violence, or both.

10.5 Discussion of findings

The findings in this chapter once again challenge common myths about domestic violence. First, women are often blamed for men's violence, on the grounds that they argued with their husband or provoked him (FWCC 1992: 8). Such assertions assume that women have no right to argue with men, and that a woman quarrelling with her husband can be seen as a justification for violence. However, putting the issue of gender power imbalance and unequal human rights to one side for the moment, the findings show that 78% of the women who are experiencing violence say they have good daily communication patterns with their husbands/partners, and 83% only quarrel rarely or sometimes with their husbands/partners. In other words, about 4 in 5 women who suffer from violence do not quarrel often. Even if a woman internalises the view that women have no right to quarrel with their husbands, this does not protect her from violence.



Second, the findings in this chapter demonstrate what FWCC staff have always known: that women show enormous resilience and personal strength in the face of serious violence and abuse, and that they try to cope with the violence themselves before taking the difficult step of even telling anyone else about it, let alone asking for help. Women do not seek help to deal with violence or leave home to escape from the violence for frivolous or minor reasons. They do so

because their lives are in crisis – because they cannot take any more, they are badly injured, they fear for their lives, or they are concerned for the impact on their children. More than 1 in 5 women need to leave home several times during their lives because of their husband's/partner's behaviour. They return because they forgive and love their husbands, because they need to care for their children, and because they believe in the sanctity of marriage.

The women who do ask for help show great courage, particularly when we consider that attitudes condoning men's are widespread in the community. These women seek help because the violence and its consequences are serious. Their experiences reinforce the importance of ensuring that, when women do ask for help or leave their home, that family members, church leaders, friends and service-providers take their requests for help very seriously, and respond appropriately to ensure that their lives and their rights are protected, and that their decisions are respected.



The proportion of women who have asked an agency for help (24%) is considerably lower than the 53% who have ever told anyone about their husband's/partner's behaviour: less than half of the women who told someone about the violence have actually sought help. This was also the case in the WHO multi-country study and several other countries (SPC 2009: 123; SPC 2010: 149; VWC 2011: 162; WHO 2005: 75-7). The lack of accessible services in rural areas is one explanation for the smaller numbers of women seeking help from an agency, particularly in the Eastern Division.

However, there are other key barriers: the WHO concludes that "women living in violent relationships often experience feelings of extreme isolation, hopelessness and powerlessness that make it particularly difficult for them to seek help" (WHO 2005: 79). In addition this study has shown that violent partners, by placing restrictions on women's mobility and participation in organisations, often keep women isolated from potential sources of help.

FWCC staff have commented that most rural women don't even get an opportunity to come into the nearest town (due to poverty and the control exerted over their movements by their husbands), and this makes it even more difficult for them to know about the services that are available, and to access these services. In some areas of the Northern Division, this sense of isolation is compounded for Indo-Fijian women who have been evicted from land they have lived on for several generations: having relocated to new areas, women suffering from domestic violence have even less contact with family and community members, and less knowledge of available services.

Even though Police posts are located throughout the country, these are nevertheless difficult for women to get to, particularly the poorest women and those living in the Eastern Division such as in Kadavu and Rotuma. At the time of the research, Government legal aid centres were only located in urban areas such as Suva, Labasa, Lautoka and Ba, and another has since been set up in Rakiraki. The Department of Social Welfare has offices distributed throughout the country in urban areas. However, women face the prospect of shame, humiliation and blame if they ask agencies such as the Police and Department of Social Welfare for help.

On the positive side, the findings indicate that where there are more accessible services, such as in Central and Western Divisions, there are higher percentages of women seeking help. This underlines the importance of outreach and awareness programs that reinforce women's rights to get help and stop the violence; and the need for front-line service providers to be trained to respond sensitively and without blame so that women are encouraged to seek help.

The fear and threat of more violence is another serious barrier to women seeking help, along with the view that the violence is "normal" or not serious. FWCC has found through its counselling and community education that many women themselves minimise the violence and its impact.





This is a very important coping strategy for women who have very few options for dealing with the problem in any other way. “Resisting violence by not resisting” has been recognised in several counselling studies in other countries as an essential coping strategy for some women, who make a conscious decision to “subordinate themselves in different ways in order to avoid escalating verbal or physical violence from their partners, which could ultimately lead to more harm” (Barassi-Rubio 2013: 15).

In Fiji, FWCC staff also have anecdotal evidence that when women say that violence is “just a slap”, or that the violence is “normal”, women are reassuring themselves that they can handle it, particularly when all the other voices around them are reinforcing the view that it is a “normal” part of life as a woman.⁴ Hence, these women only seek help when the violence has reached a crisis point and is unendurable or threatens their life.

It is interesting that many more women have left home due to violence (40%) than those who have sought help from any agency or authority (24%). FWCC’s experience is that when women do leave home temporarily, they don’t always disclose the real reason for doing so to their relatives – because they don’t want to shame their family, make their husband look bad, or be blamed for the violence.



In many cases, women who leave home temporarily are not taking a stand against violence; they are trying to handle the situation themselves, and often say that they just leaving “for a break”. For example, it is said that Rotuman women, who often leave the island to give birth, sometimes “forget to go home”.⁵ As noted above, women from the Eastern Division tend to stay away from home longer; the Eastern Division also has the highest prevalence of the most severe types of violence. However, the higher numbers of women leaving temporarily may also be due to the fact that some are forced out of the home by their husbands/partners (Box 10.2).

4 Workshop with FWCC staff, September 2012.

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The ethnic differences noted above regarding help-seeking behaviour – where i-Taukei women are more likely to tell friends and ask for help from health workers and religious leaders, and Indo-Fijian women are more likely to tell family members and seek help from government agencies and non-government services such as FWCC – needs to be taken into account when developing and implementing targeted measures for preventing and responding to men's violence.

In some cases health services may be the only agency that a woman approaches for assistance, because she is injured. Given the extensive and serious health impacts of intimate partner violence documented in previous chapters, health workers need to be able to respond appropriately when intimate partner violence is disclosed by their patients.

They need to be able to refer women to FWCC, the police or other agencies if women give permission to do so, and they need to ensure confidentiality and the safety of women in their care. Religious leaders also have an enormous responsibility; even though only 4% of women overall have approached them for help, the messages that they portray about violence can have a huge impact on women's perceptions of themselves, their problems and their rights, and their decision making about seeking help.



Family members and friends are often the first people whom women tell about the violence; family members are also the ones that many women would like more help from. This is not surprising and it highlights how important it is for family and friends to respond in a sensitive and supportive manner that respects women's rights, when survivors of partner violence finally make the very difficult decision to tell someone, ask for help, or leave their home during crisis. According to the WHO multi-country study and other research, women who have support from family and friends suffer fewer negative effects on their mental health, and are better able to cope with the violence (WHO 2005: 79; Barassi-Rubio 2013: 9, 19-22).

It is very positive that some women sought help because they were aware of their rights, that 11% of women who have experienced partner violence wanted more help from FWCC or its Branches, and that some women were encouraged by family and friends to either seek help or to escape from the violence by leaving home temporarily.

Although there are no direct quantitative comparisons with FWCC's 1999 and 2006 research projects, it is very clear that attitudes have changed over the past decade. For example, in FWCC's 1999 survey, women were also asked their reasons for seeking help from agencies, and no respondents mentioned that they were aware of their rights (FWCC 2001: 49).



In FWCC's 2006 research into attitudes and tolerance of violence, the overwhelming conclusion was that domestic violence was seen as a private matter, and there was little evidence that study participants agreed with either providing assistance to survivors or confronting perpetrators (FWCC 2006: 4-8).

As noted in earlier chapters, FWCC staff are noticing that women are increasingly being referred for counselling by friends, mothers, sons and FWCC's male advocates⁶, who may be relations, community leaders or members or work colleagues. Many women and men have grown up with FWCC and its strong messages on gender equality and human rights. The findings from the survey show that this has led to a strong foundation for further work to strengthen the coping strategies of survivors, and the families and friends who try to support women living with violence.

⁶ See Chapter 1 for details on FWCC's programs to eliminate violence against women.