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Domestic Violence, Youth and Media Reporting in Papua New Guinea

This paper has come from research into the impact of domestic violence on the lives of students at Divine Word University (DWU), Madang, Papua New Guinea. It also looks at students’ perceptions of the media’s role in addressing the issue of domestic violence in the country. The research is being conducted in partnership with the PNG Family and Sexual Violence Action Committee’s (FSVAC) Research Centre in Port Moresby, whose members have recently stepped up their media campaign against domestic violence.

Violence was regularly used in the past when opposing groups fought in the Pacific, but these days the trend for physical and sexual violence to be accepted as normal within families is a serious issue affecting all countries in the region. Its causes are complex and its effects are devastating. It is related to the phenomenon of development, which disrupts traditional structures and moves whole societies into transition. Rural to urban drift sees people crowd into squatter settlements with no possibility of engaging in traditionally sustainable land usage. Changing forms of family life place intolerable stresses on conjugal relationships. Drugs, alcohol, delinquency and the demands of modernisation often push people beyond the limits of their endurance and contribute to violence in the region. Contrary to popular belief, criminals are responsible for only a small fraction of the violence that occurs. Most of it is perpetrated by “ordinary people.”

This paper is theoretically informed by the work of researchers in PNG and the wider Pacific Islands region. The main methods employed for this research include a survey of students and a media content analysis. The extensive survey is being conducted in order to find out students’ perceptions of the causes and effects of domestic violence, as well as their views on the role of the media in dealing with the issue. A media content analysis looks at the three national newspapers in order to identify modes of covering domestic violence stories. It also seeks to identify the social and cultural values represented in these stories. Initial observations indicate that there is an increase in the number of such stories published, but journalists are generally reporting the events without tackling the more difficult task of analysing them. In the papers’ public opinion sections, however, there is intense debate about these sensitive issues with well-informed, passionate commentary. This disparity indicates that there is a need for further training of media personnel on the subject of reporting violence, so that they can contribute more effectively to the community’s understanding of the problem. Then, instead of merely reporting acts of violence, they can more proactively reflect and even influence community attitudes on this subject.

The paper concludes with suggestions about how journalism students can be better trained to deal with issues surrounding violence.