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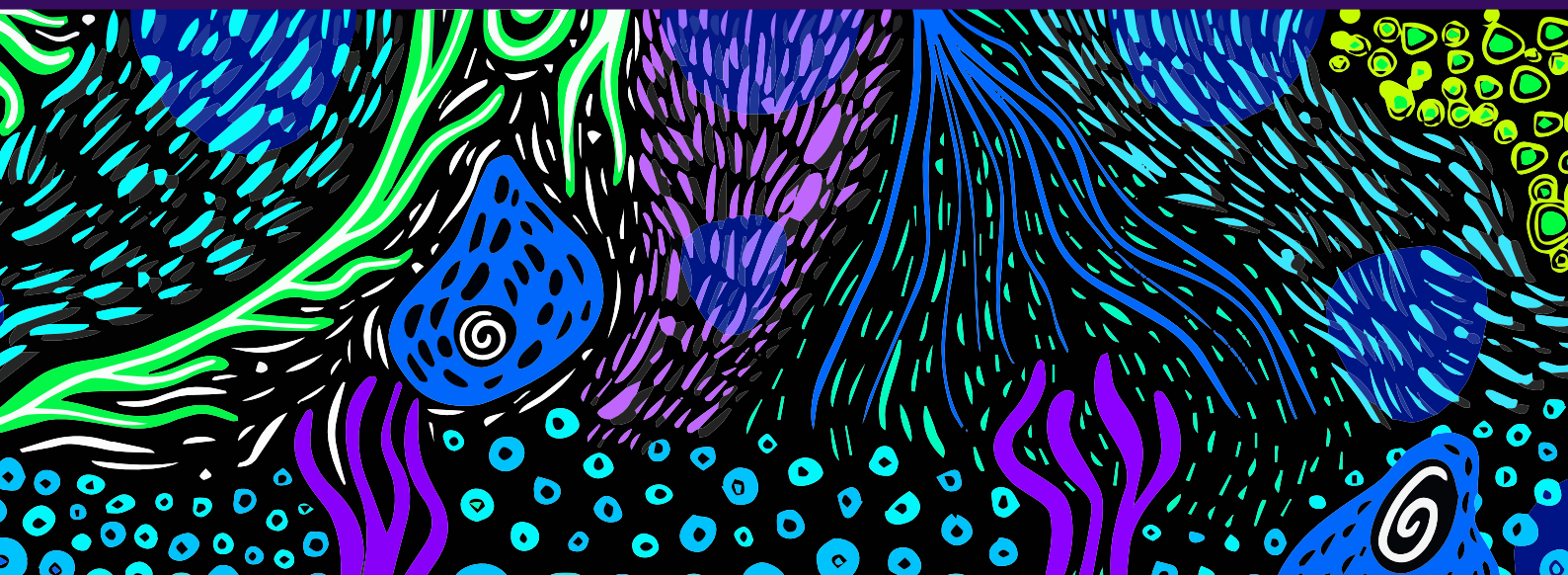
CONFLICT-RELATED SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN THE PAPUA NEW GUINEA HIGHLANDS

TECHNICAL REPORT



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TECHNICAL REPORT

Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for the Elimination of Violence Against Women
Conflict-Related Sexual Violence in the Papua New Guinea Highlands

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Papua New Guinea, Indo-Pacific, conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV), gender-based violence, Highlands

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Summary of Recommended Actions

This report presents the findings from a two-day research dialogue workshop conducted in November 2025 in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea. This dialogue workshop was suggested after the CEVAW Justice Denied conference was convened in June 2025, where the focus was on impunity for conflict-related sexual violence across the Indo-Pacific. It was suggested that Papua New Guinea is an important, yet neglected case of conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) in United Nations reports and assessments of high risk CRSV locations despite documented sexual and gender-based violence in association with tribal conflicts, elections, and land disputes.

The workshop convened 11 participants from seven Highlands provinces, including representatives of women civil society organisations (CSOs), women human rights defenders (WHRDs), Women, Peace and Security (WPS) advocates, a ward councillor, a local government officer, and a police officer from a Family and Sexual Violence Unit. Participants were selected in collaboration with Voice for Change, a leading Highlands women's rights organisation, based on their frontline experience responding to conflicts and sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), demonstrated leadership in protecting women and girls, and active engagement in community-level prevention and response initiatives.

The report makes three key recommendations, outlining within each, practical measures required to response to the unique features of sexual and gender-based violence associated with local conflicts in the Highlands provinces.

1 *Strengthen coordination between civil society and state actors*

a) Formalise partnerships through MOUs between CSOs, police (especially Family and Sexual Violence Units), courts, and community development offices to clarify roles, strengthen accountability, and enable resource sharing during local conflict situations. This requires a specific partnership designed and enforced during 'peacetime' in preparation for conflict periods.

b) Establish or strengthen "Rapid Response Teams" within police stations, linked effectively with frontline CSOs for survivor rescue and case referral, particularly in remote areas. While promising, the sustainability of such mechanisms remains contingent on staffing, funding, and operational capacity within police systems in cooperation with provincial government.

c) Integrate engagement with CSOs in state planning, budgeting, and implementation of violence against women action plan work so that government actors can be regularly informed of ongoing community-level activities, and mobilise resources for joint response in conflict situations.

2 *Strengthen victim-survivor-centred response practices sensitive to conflict and political conditions*

a) Prioritise immediate access to healthcare and safe accommodation, recognising that in practice, access to these services remains uneven across provinces.

b) Enhance coordination of survivor referral protocols to reduce repeated interviews and re-traumatisation.

c) Promote standard practices across provinces through shared training for police, health, and CSO actors on survivor-centred approaches and trauma-informed interviewing, while acknowledging that standardisation may be difficult in contexts with highly variable resources and institutional capacities.

d) Upskill police and local officials on gender, human rights, and confidentiality to address cases of misconduct and improve survivor-centred responses.

e) Engage community leaders and churches as accessible first responders and counsellors by providing targeted training and including them in reporting and referral networks, recognising their existing influence at the community level.

f) Reinforce existing laws and promote justice and accountability as a core component of response efforts, although participants' experiences suggest that enforcement remains a significant challenge.

3 *Improve data collection, data management, and translation of data to action*

a) Develop a consolidated provincial database for SGBV in collaboration with the Highlands Human Rights Defenders Movement (HRDM), Highland based CSOs, community-based organisations (CBOs), and churches. Important to also consider the data ownership, long-term sustainability, and governance of such a system.

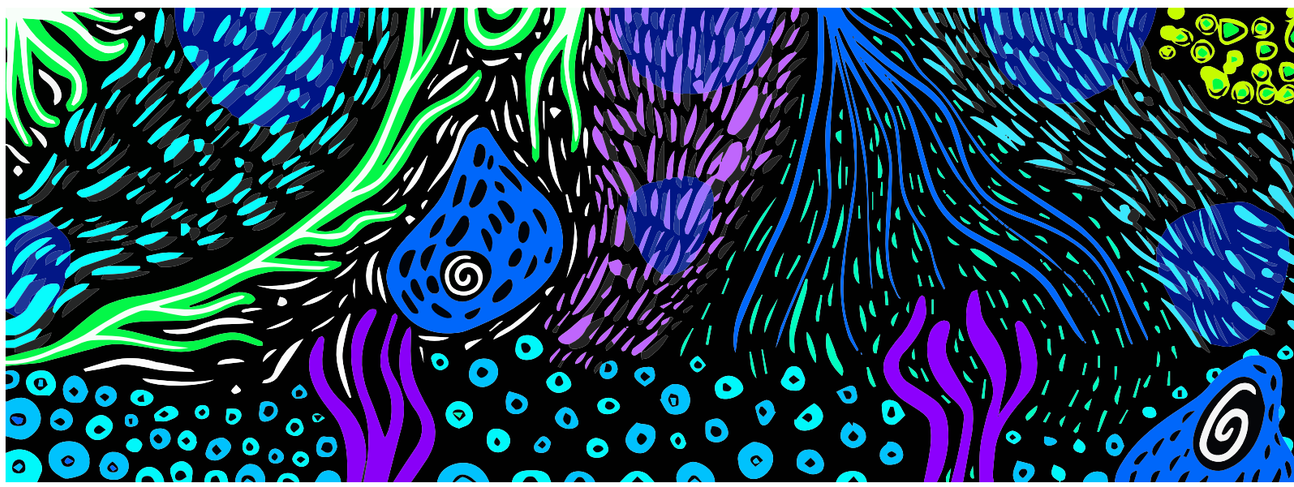
b) Build data management skills of CSO and government staff through training on recordkeeping, case documentation, confidentiality, and digital tools.

c) Institutionalise quarterly coordination meetings (through Provincial Gender-Based Violence Action Committees) to review and validate data before public release.

d) Develop a shared platform to share the database with provincial and national government departments (such as Community Development Offices) through structured data-sharing agreements, while ensuring safeguards for confidentiality and survivor protection.

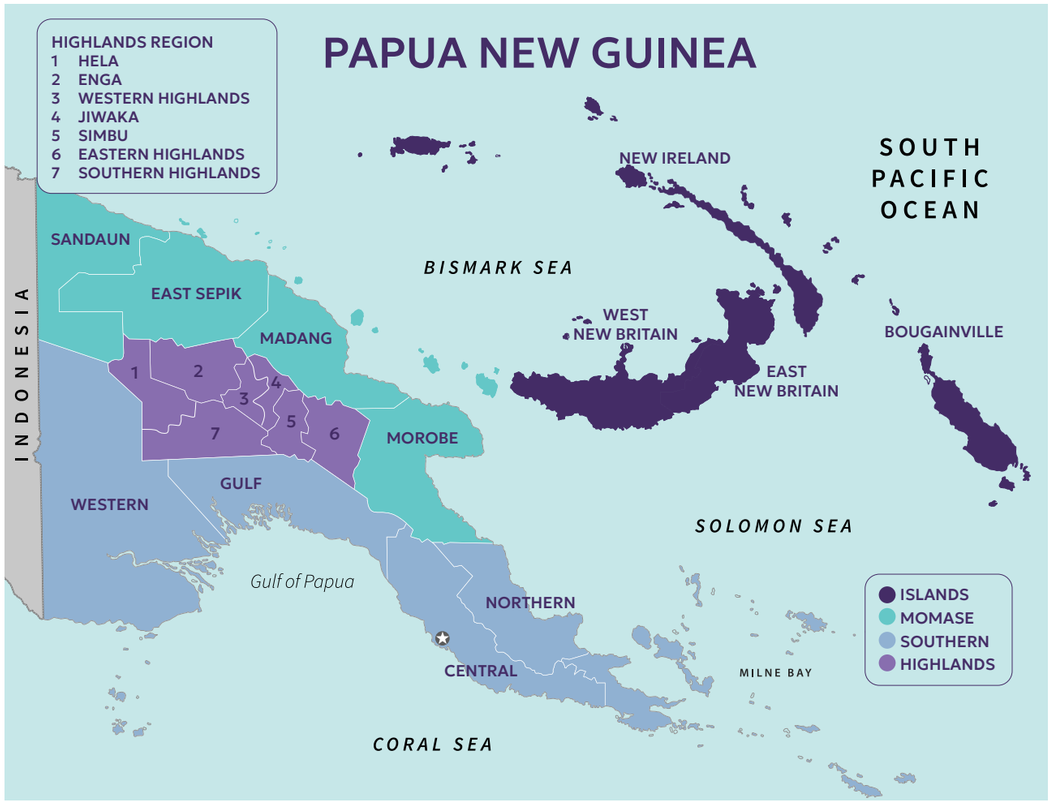
e) Use data for advocacy and resource mobilisation, presenting evidence to government and donors to direct funding toward conflict-affected and high-risk areas, although the link between data and resource allocation remains contingent on political and institutional priorities.

f) Access to additional institutions, such as the UN Human Rights Council and the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) Committee, as alternative sites where reports can be received and validated to ensure a variety of reporting conditions and sources are being heard at the highest political levels.



1. Introduction

Papua New Guinea (PNG) is home to over 10.18 million people, making it the most populous country in the Pacific. The country is marked by linguistic and cultural diversity, with more than 800 Indigenous languages spoken. Tok Pisin is the national language, while English is the official language of government and education. PNG comprises 22 provinces and is governed by a system of national, provincial, and local-level administrations. Formally a constitutional monarchy with a parliamentary democracy, governance in PNG operates alongside customary law and kinship structures.



PNG faces some of the highest documented rates of violence against women in the Pacific region. Structural gender inequality is reinforced by limited political representation, restricted access to economic resources, and cultural norms that privilege male authority.[1] Gender-based violence (GBV) is pervasive, with 64% of women experiencing intimate partner violence in 2025 and 82% affected by some form of GBV in their lifetime, a surge of over 210% in the past four decades.[2] Legislative reforms, including the Family Protection Act 2013 and amendments to the Criminal Code, have established legal frameworks to address GBV. Yet enforcement remains weak, prosecution rates are low, and access to justice is constrained by geographic isolation and the interface between customary and formal legal systems.[3]

Recurring localised conflicts, particularly in the Highlands Region, exacerbate women's insecurity. Inter-tribe rivalries, disputes over land and resources, electoral violence, and the proliferation of firearms have contributed to persistent cycles of armed confrontation. While large-scale civil war was concluded by the 2001 Bougainville Peace Agreement, sexual and gender-based violence co-occurring during tribal fighting, displacement, and politically motivated violence is rarely recognised as conflict-related harm in national policy or research. This conceptual gap perpetuates impunity, limits survivor support, and reduces the effectiveness of prevention strategies.

Nonetheless, Papua New Guinea's National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Gender Based Violence recognises that some forms of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) occur within conflict settings.[4] This recognition of SGBV as conflict-related presents an important opportunity to strengthen responses to violence occurring within conditions of localised conflict, displacement, and insecurity, particularly as PNG advances the development of a National Action Plan under the Women, Peace and Security Agenda.[5] It is therefore critical to understand the patterns, escalation, and conflict-specific drivers of SGBV that trigger violence against women and girls during conflicts in order to strengthen policy frameworks and their implementation aimed at developing effective prevention and response interventions.

This report draws on a research dialogue workshop with women leaders from across the Highlands Region to examine how conflict-related sexual (and gender-based) violence (CRSV) is experienced, understood, and addressed at the community level. By centring the perspectives of women working on the frontlines of conflict-affected communities, the research seeks to

- generate context-specific knowledge on CRSV in the Highlands Region;
- examine forms and drivers of sexual and gender-based violence experienced by women and girls during periods of conflict and political/tribal instability;
- examine the role of community-based women's organisations and networks in protecting and responding to SGBV during periods of conflict and instability;
- identify priority actions for policy advocacy and research.

1 Eves, Richard, "'Full price, full body': norms, bride price and intimate partner violence in Highlands Papua New Guinea." *Culture, health & sexuality* 21, no. 12 (2019): 1367-1380.; Jolly, Margaret, Christine Stewart, and Carolyn Brewer, eds. *Engendering Violence in Papua New Guinea*. ANU E Press, 2012.; Philip Gibbs, "Men's matters: Changing masculine identities in Papua New Guinea." Gender Violence (2016): 127.

2 Government of Papua New Guinea, *The National Papua New Guinean Strategy to Prevent and Respond to GenderBased Violence 2026–2035* (National GenderBased Violence Secretariat, Department for Community Development & Religion, 2026), accessed 30 March 2026, https://ngbvs.com/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/The-National-Papua-New-Guinean-Strategy-to-Prevent-and-Respond-to-GBV-2026-2035.pdf; Vilupti C. Corlis and Dr. Orovu Sepoe, *Multidimensional Analysis of the National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to GBV 20162025 Report* (Port Moresby: United Nations Population Fund, Papua New Guinea, 16 May 2025), accessed 30 March 2026, https://png.unfpa.org/en/publications/multidimensional-analysis-national-strategy-prevent-and-respond-gbv-2016-2025-report.

3 Gabriella Richardson, Gender-Based Violence in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea: A Literature Review (2021).

4 Government of Papua New Guinea, *National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to GenderBased Violence 2016–2025* (Papua New Guinea: Office for the Development of Women/Department for Community Development and Religion, 2016), accessed 14 May 2026, https://femilipng.org/wp-content/uploads/National-Strategy-to-Prevent-and-Respond-to-GBV.pdf

5 *UN Women*, "Women Civil Society Leaders in Papua New Guinea Unite to Advance the WPS Agenda," AsiaPacific (20 February 2025), accessed 30 March 2026, https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/stories/feature-story/2025/02/women-civil-society-leaders-in-papua-new-guinea-unite-to-advance-the-wps-agenda

This report finds that sexual and gender-based violence occurring within localised tribal conflicts in the Highlands is shaped by conflict-specific dynamics and socio-political settings. Violence is embedded within systems of male territorial control, where women's bodies are instrumentalised as part of power, reward, and conflict resolution. The findings further indicate that the proliferation of firearms has significantly intensified both the scale and severity of sexual violence during and after conflict.

Labelling a situation as CRSV is a political process. It is sensitive. It starts with whether there is a recognition about a situation as 'conflict' and whether it should be labelled as 'conflict.' The label 'conflict' is particularly contentious when sovereign countries continue to maintain territorial control. This report is not calling for a UN Security Council declaring the Highlands a conflict affected region. It is calling for recognition in policy, research and advocacy, that SGBV crimes and the available responses to victim-survivors is occurring in conflict conditions in the Highlands. This is not a peaceful and secure environment to practice referral services, conduct investigations, pursue justice, and prevent the violence from reoccurring. Along this line, the report underscores the central role of women's civil society organisations (CSOs) in mediating conflict, providing community-level protection, and delivering survivor-centred support; while highlighting the constraints they face operating on the front lines and the priorities they identify for strengthening prevention and response.

2. Why Conflict-Related Sexual (and Gender-Based) Violence?

A United Nations Secretary General report on situations of conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) is submitted annually to the UN Security Council. This was a hard-won achievement under a series of Security Council resolutions that originally stem from the Women, Peace and Security Resolution 1325 which called for, in paragraph 10 and 11, all parties to armed conflict to take special measures to protect women and girls from all forms of violence, including sexual violence, in conflict; and states to prosecute all those responsible for war crimes, genocide, and crimes against humanity, including those crimes relating to sexual and gender-based violence.

In 2008 and 2009, two further resolutions were adopted to lay the groundwork to establish a dedicated office on CRSV under the UN Secretariat, to ensure data collection on all forms of sexual and gender-based violence in all conflict situations, and the Council to hear reports on these situations including the suspected armed perpetrators listed in these annual reports. Since the first report in 2012, there have been over 40 conflict situations and over 5 'other' situations listed in these reports. The report will list both states and non-state actors as perpetrators. These annual reports detail a small fraction of the sites where sexual and gender-based violence is occurring and the number of perpetrators – both state and non-state actors committing this violence. The UN Secretary-General's 16th annual report documents 47 non-state armed groups and 13 state forces named as perpetrators of CRSV.[6] Although most conflict-affected situations in the Indo-Pacific, including Afghanistan, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Timor-Leste, Nepal, and Cambodia (historical), are included in the UN Secretary-General's annual reports on CRSV, other contexts such as the Philippines, Solomon Islands, and Papua New Guinea are not consistently recognised within the same CRSV reporting framework. Which situations are listed in a report is informed by multiple factors: presence of armed conflicts, existing UN Security Council resolutions on the situation, UN presence in the context, humanitarian need, and non-opposition from the Permanent 5 members (China, France, Russia, United Kingdom, United States) on the listing of a situation.

The report each year defines the term "conflict-related sexual violence", as referring to rape, sexual slavery, forced prostitution, forced pregnancy, forced abortion, enforced sterilization, forced marriage, and any other form of sexual violence of comparable gravity perpetrated against individuals that is directly or indirectly linked to a conflict. The link is often evident in the profile of the perpetrator, who is often affiliated with a State or non-State armed group, including those designated as terrorist groups by the United Nations; the profile of the victim, who is frequently an actual or perceived member of a persecuted political, ethnic or religious minority, or targeted on the basis of actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity; a climate of impunity, which is generally associated with State collapse; cross-border consequences, such as displacement or trafficking; and/or violations of the provisions of a ceasefire agreement. The term also encompasses trafficking in persons for the purpose of sexual violence and/or exploitation, when committed in situations of conflict. The rise in political instability and the escalation in violence across many regions, has led to CRSV occurrence rising, not falling. There is a need to prioritise and galvanise states recognition and support in funding, data collection, and accountability.

6 UNSG. 2025. Conflict-related sexual violence: Report of the Secretary-General S/2025/389 https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4086814?ln=en

3. Methodology

As noted above, this report presents the findings from a two-day research dialogue workshop conducted in November 2025 in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea. This dialogue workshop was suggested after the CEVAW Justice Denied conference was convened in June 2025, where the focus was on impunity for conflict-related sexual violence across the Indo-Pacific. It was suggested that Papua New Guinea is an important, yet neglected case of CRSV in assessments of high risk CRSV locations despite documented sexual and gender-based violence in association with tribal conflicts, elections, and land disputes.

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Guided by the experience of the women in the room, the workshop adopted a co-participatory feminist approach, prioritising PNG-centred knowledge practices including relationship building, storytelling, and the co-production of knowledge grounded in participants' lived experiences and frontline practice.[7] There was acknowledgement of the historical injustices of colonisation, while

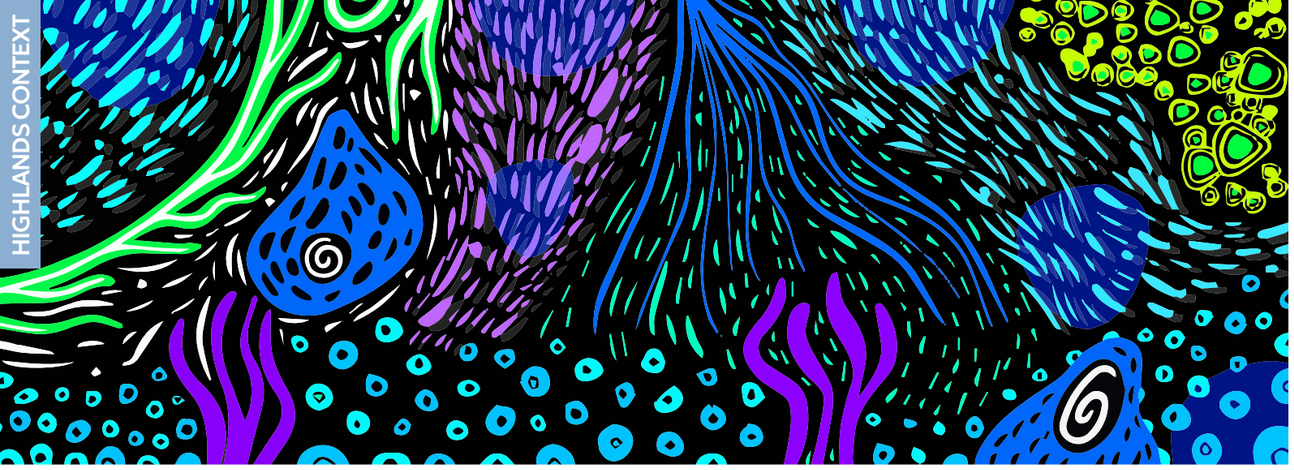
7 Witne, B. D., Thomas, V., Kauli, J., & Spurgeon, C. (2023). Kapori: researching local responses to sorcery accusation–related violence in Papua New Guinea through Indigenous storytelling. AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples, 19(4), 814-823.

acknowledging the power of present leaders and institutions to be accountable.[8] Data collection methods included collective 'roundtable' discussions, small-group storytelling, and collaborative visual mapping exercises. Language support in Tok Pisin was provided where necessary to facilitate clear communication of context-specific concepts. All discussions were audio-recorded with participants' informed consent.

Ethical approval was obtained from Griffith University (GU Ref No: 2025/424). Participation was voluntary, and measures were taken to ensure confidentiality and create a safe space for dialogue, particularly given the sensitivity of the topic.

Workshop recordings were transcribed and analysed thematically. Analysis focused on descriptions of SGBV during localised conflict versus non-conflict periods, participants' engagement with and perceptions of the term CRSV, and the priorities and desired outcomes identified by participants for addressing CRSV in the Highlands. The findings presented in this report integrate workshop discussions with relevant literature to provide a comprehensive understanding of the issue.

8 Copus Campbell S, Cripps K, Davies SE, Fisher J, Flynn A, Mataia Milo SL, et al. Pacific priorities for the prevention of violence against women and girls. BMJ Global Health. 2025;10:e017046. https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjgh-2024-017046



4. The Highlands Context: Intersection of Local Conflict and SGBV

Violence, including sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), is widely recognised as a pervasive feature of social life in Papua New Guinea.[9] A substantial body of scholarship identifies SGBV as deeply embedded within social norms, gender hierarchies, and due to the pressures of socio-economic transition.[10] The widespread acceptance of norms that privilege male authority, combined with practices that normalise violence as a disciplinary mechanism, has contributed to an environment in which violence against women is often socially tolerated.[11]

In this context, men's use of violence is frequently framed as a legitimate response embedded in social and cultural norms. As Eves (2006)[12] notes, failure to perform dominant forms of masculinity may result in social ridicule or loss of status among peers, reinforcing pressure on men to assert control through violence. At the same time, women's internalisation of these norms, shaped by long-standing cultural expectations and limited access to formal justice systems, can reduce reporting and reinforce the normalisation of abuse.[13]

These dynamics, however, cannot be understood solely through the lens of culture. Gender relations in PNG's society are continuously reshaped by broader political and economic transformations.[14]

9 Jolly, Margaret, Christine Stewart, and Carolyn Brewer, eds. *Engendering Violence in Papua New Guinea*. ANU E Press, 2012.; Gabriella Richardson, Gender-Based Violence in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea: A Literature Review (2021).
10 Richard Eves, "'Full Price, Full Body': Norms, Bride Price and Intimate Partner Violence in Highlands Papua New Guinea,", 1; Margit Ganster-Breidler, "Gender-Based Violence and the Impact on Women's Health and Well-Being in Papua New Guinea," *Contemporary PNG Studies* 13 (2010): 17–30.
11 Karen O'Reilly and Jane L. Fowler, "Gender-Based Violence in Papua New Guinea: An Intervention to Change Knowledge, Beliefs and Behaviours," Global Public Health 20, no. 1 (2025): 2523540.
12 Richard Eves, Exploring the Role of Men and Masculinities in Papua New Guinea in the 21st Century: How to Address Violence in Ways That Generate Empowerment for Both Men and Women (report, Caritas Australia, 2006)
13 Ibid.
14 Fiona Hukula, "Conversations with Convicted Rapists," in *Engendering Violence in Papua New Guinea*, ed. Margaret Jolly, Christine Stewart, and Carolyn Brewer (Canberra: ANU Press, 2012), 197-212

Processes such as urbanisation, economic inequality, and social change have disrupted traditional systems of authority and dispute resolution without being fully replaced by effective state institutions.[15] This institutional gap allows violence to persist across both private and public spheres.[16]

In the Highlands region, these structural inequalities intersect with recurring localised conflicts characterised by inter-tribal rivalries, cycles of revenge, and the proliferation of firearms. Conflicts are frequently triggered by disputes over land, theft, and unresolved compensation claims[17], but can also be sustained and expanded through the reactivation of past grievances and obligations of retribution.[18] The cultural tradition of "payback violence" allows individuals to be targeted as members of a clan or community rather than for personal actions, enabling violence to spread and escalate across groups. Recent events illustrate how localised disputes can expand into large-scale conflicts involving multiple tribes and resulting in significant loss of life.[19]

In addition to fatalities and injuries, fighting also results in displacement of (especially) women and children, widespread destruction of property and severe disruption to government services and economic activities.[20] Historically, tribal fighting was more contained, often taking place on designated battlefields and using traditional weapons. This has shifted significantly, with armed groups now able to mobilise large numbers of fighters and access high-powered firearms, increasing both the scale and unpredictability of violence.[21] This shift in violence was often mentioned during the workshop (below). These shifts have also complicated conflict resolution processes, as compensation demands have escalated to levels that can strain local economies and contribute to further cycles of violence.[22]

In this regard, intergroup conflict in the Highlands is often perceived as a normalised mechanism for resolving disputes, asserting identity, and maintaining social order. In some contexts, it is regarded as an expected feature of social life rather than an exceptional occurrence.[23] Electoral processes further intensify these dynamics. Elections are associated with resource allocation and generate intergroup conflict and rivalry.[24] Political competition, particularly in the Highlands, is frequently embedded within existing intergroup tensions, with candidates mobilising and, at times, arming supporters.[25] As a result, elections can trigger new episodes of violence and reinforce cycles of insecurity that extend beyond polling periods.[26]

These overlapping forms of instability have significant implications for women and girls. Displacement has become a persistent feature of conflict in the Highlands. For example, communal violence displaced approximately 12,000 people in 2024, contributing to a broader population of around 84,000 people living in displacement across the country.[27] Many displaced communities are unable to return due to ongoing insecurity, unresolved conflicts, or the destruction and occupation of their

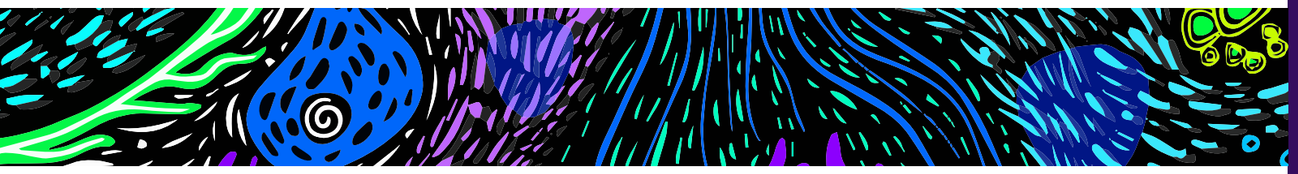
15 Margaret Jolly, Christine Stewart, and Carolyn Brewer, eds., *Engendering Violence in Papua New Guinea* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2012)
16 Sinclair Dinnen and Edwina Thompson, *Gender and Small Arms Violence in Papua New Guinea*, Discussion Paper 2004/8 (Canberra: Australian National University, 2004)
17 Polly Wiessner, "Collective Action for War and for Peace: A Case Study among the Enga of Papua New Guinea," *Current Anthropology* 60, no. 2 (2019): 224–44.
18 Glenn Banks, "Understanding 'Resource' Conflicts in Papua New Guinea," *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* 49, no. 1 (2008): 23–34.
19 Bethanie Harriman, "Deadly Land Disputes in PNG Highlands Leave Population in 'Constant Fear'," *The Guardian*, February 22, 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/global/2024/feb/22/png-highlands-massacre-death-toll-conflict-latest-news-details.
20 Sinclair Dinnen and Edwina Thompson, Gender and Small Arms Violence in Papua New Guinea, 11.
21 David Capie, "Small Arms, Violence and Gender in Papua New Guinea: Towards a Research Agenda," *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* 52, no. 1 (2011): 42–55; Polly Wiessner, "From Spears to M-16s: Testing the Imbalance of Power Hypothesis among the Enga," *Journal of Anthropological Research* 62, no. 2 (2006): 165–91.
22 Nicole Haley and Robert Muggah, "Jumping the Gun? Reflections on Armed Violence in Papua New Guinea," *African Security Studies* 15, no. 2 (2006): 38–56.
23 Starza Paul and Gray Wakani Sali, "Communicating an Integrated Clan Based Approach to Tribal Warfare in the Enga Province," *Journal of Communication, Politics & Society* 1, no. 3 (2020): 1–12.
24 Miranda Forsyth, "The State of Contemporary Intergroup Conflict in the Papua New Guinea Highlands," *Journal of Aggression, Conflict and Peace Research* 17, no. 1 (2025): 19–38.
25 Neryl Lewis, "Conflict Vulnerability Assessment of the Southern Highlands Province," in *Conflict and Resource Development in the Southern Highlands of Papua New Guinea*, ed. N. Haley and R. May (Canberra: ANU Press, 2007), 149–64; Andrew Rumsey, "Social Segmentation, Voting, and Violence in Papua New Guinea," *The Contemporary Pacific* 11, no. 2 (1999): 305–33.
26 Dinnen and Thompson, "Gender and Small Arms Violence in Papua New Guinea.", 15.
27 Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, *Global Report on Internal Displacement 2025* (Geneva: IDMC, 2025).

land.[28] For women, displacement involves not only physical relocation but also the loss of livelihoods, shelter, protection mechanisms, and social networks. In rural settings where access to land underpins food security and economic autonomy, this disruption significantly heightens their vulnerability to various forms of gender-based violence including sorcery accusation–related violence (SARV). SARV is reported across Papua New Guinea as a national concern, but the majority of incidents are concentrated in the Highlands.[29] Women are predominantly the victims of SARV, reflecting broader gendered vulnerabilities within contexts of conflict and social instability. The breakdown of community structures further exposes women and girls to multiple forms of violence, exploitation, and deprivation across different stages of conflict.

State capacity to respond to these challenges remains limited. For many communities, allegiance to tribe and clan continues to outweigh identification with the state, whose legal and administrative systems are often perceived as distant or inaccessible.[30] The uneven presence of state institutions, combined with gaps in service delivery, particularly in justice, education, and healthcare, contributes to conditions in which violence persists.[31] In some cases, tribal fighting is understood as a means of reclaiming local authority in dispute resolution in the absence of effective state mechanisms.[32]

In this context, local actors, particularly women's groups, have played a critical role in responding to sexual and gender-based violence incidents, and supporting women and girls in conflicts. Women's and church-based networks have also led community-level initiatives in mediation, reconciliation, and conflict resolution, often in the absence of formal state support.[33] While these efforts are not always widely documented, local actors are navigating complex conflict environments, providing locally led protection within their communities, sometimes at risk to their own safety.

Within this socio-political context, masculinised expectations of territorial defence, control, and honour intersect with weak institutions, ongoing conflict, and entrenched gender inequalities to shape distinct patterns of violence against women and girls. Despite extensive research on SGBV in Papua New Guinea and a growing body of work on conflict in the Highlands, limited attention has been paid to how sexual and gender-based violence manifests within these localised conflict settings. In particular, the ways in which such violence is experienced, understood, and addressed at the community level.



28 Michael Kabuni, "Enga Tribal Violence: PNG's Top Security Threat Comes from Within," *Devpolicy Blog*, September 24, 2024, https://devpolicy.org/enga-tribal-violence-20240925/
29 Miranda Forsyth, William Kipongi, Joe Barak, Evelyn Malala, Elizabeth Kopel, and Ibolya Losoncz, *Putting Data Around Intergroup Violence and Sorcery Accusation–Related Violence in Papua New Guinea*, Discussion Paper 24-002 (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2024.
30 Sinclair Dinnen, "Fighting and Votes: Violence, Security and the 1992 National Elections in Papua New Guinea," *Current Issues in Criminal Justice* 5, no. 2 (1993): 130–59.
31 Sinclair Dinnen and John Braithwaite, "Reinventing Policing through the Prism of the Colonial Kiap," in *Community Policing and Peacekeeping* (Routledge, 2009), 343–58.
32 Katherine Boris Dernbach and Mac Marshall, "Pouring Beer on Troubled Waters: Alcohol and Violence in the Papua New Guinea Highlands during the 1980s," *Contemporary Drug Problems* 28, no. 1 (2001): 3–47.
33 Richard Eves, "Christianity, Masculinity and Gender Violence in Papua New Guinea" (2012). ; Ruth Saovana-Spriggs, "Bougainville Women's Role in Conflict Resolution in the Bougainville Peace Process," in *A Kind of Mending: Restorative Justice in the Pacific Islands* (2003), 195–213.; Sarah Garap, "Kup Women for Peace: Women Taking Action to Build Peace and Influence Community Decision-Making" (2004).

HIGHLANDS CONTEXT

CONFLICT & WEAPONS

112

An estimated 112 unresolved internecine conflicts across the Highlands provinces of Hela and Southern Highlands alone

(UNDP 2024 - https://www.undp.org/papua-new-guinea/projects/project-addressing-conflict-and-fragility-highlands)

12%

Only 12% of weapons in PNG are licensed and registered

(UNDP nd - https://www.undp.org/papua-new-guinea/peace-governance-and-social-cohesion)

GBV PREVALENCE IN PNG

64%

of women experienced intimate partner violence in 2025

82%

affected by some form of GBV in their lifetime

210%+

surge over the past four decades

Government of Papua New Guinea, National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Gender-Based Violence 2026–2035; UNFPA PNG (2025)

DISPLACEMENT

Displacement has become a persistent feature of conflict in the Highlands.

84,000

total people living in displacement across PNG

of whom

12,000

were displaced by communal violence in the Highlands in 2024

Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, Global Report on Internal Displacement 2025

5. Findings

1 *Conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence as a growing feature of localised conflict in the Highlands*

Findings from the research dialogue indicate that CRSV is embedded across multiple stages of localised conflict in the Highlands. Rather than occurring as an incidental by-product of instability, sexual violence forms part of the conflict dynamics through which conflict is organised, sustained, mediated and resolved. Participants described how sexual violence intersects with practices of retaliation, territorial control, displacement, and compensation, reflecting the gendered drivers of conflict in the region.

Historically, customary norms in many Highlands communities discouraged the deliberate targeting of women and children during inter-group fighting. However, participants noted that these protections have weakened over time. The militarisation of local disputes has expanded the risks faced by women and girls in conflict-affected communities. The proliferation of high-powered weapons and the increasing involvement of armed actors in conflicts have contributed to the erosion of these customary constraints, exposing women to greater insecurity even during routine livelihood activities such as tending gardens, collecting food or fetching water.

As one participant explained:

> *"And then it came a time when we were trying to return back into our homes and to get our food in our garden. But we also had fear in our mind that when we go back we are going to be grabbed and we'll be raped."*

This sense of anticipated violence highlights how sexual violence has become normalised within the broader conflict environment. Women often expect harm to occur but anticipate limited protection or recourse.

Participants also described how armed actors, referred to as 'gun men', are sometimes recruited to support tribal fighting. Wiessner (2010) notes that they are also known as the 'hireman' or 'Rambo' (paid fighters). These individuals are typically skilled in the use of high-powered weapons and are recruited by clans to participate in tribal fighting in exchange for cash, goods such as pigs, and sexual access to women.[34] The presence of these external fighters can significantly intensify conflict dynamics and further increase risks of exposure to various forms of SGBV against women and girls, particularly sexual violence. Participants noted that these armed actors "establish relationships" with local women during periods of fighting, often through coercion or forced arrangements that are framed as entitlements or rewards for fighting in the conflict.

Kelly-Hanku et al. (2016) noted in their study that sexual violence is often used in retaliation against the enemy tribe. It is "a way of destroying men's property, both in the sense of a woman being used by a man other than her husband and, for unwedded women, their worth in future bride wealth exchanges".[35]

34 Polly Wiessner, "Youths, Elders, and the Wages of War in Enga Province, Papua New Guinea" (2013).
35 *Angela Kelly-Hanku et al., "Transgressive Women Don't Deserve Protection: Young Men's Narratives of Sexual Violence against Women in Rural Papua New Guinea," Culture, Health & Sexuality 18, no. 11 (2016): 1207–20, 1212.*

Traditionally, women and girls have been incorporated into compensation arrangements used to resolve inter-group disputes. In some contexts, they have been given in marriage between groups as part of efforts to restore relationships and secure peace, reflecting their role within systems of exchange and reconciliation. While such practices may be resisted in some cases[36], they have not disappeared. Participants reported instances in which young women were given in forced marriages as part of compensation payments, reflecting the gendered hierarchies embedded within customary conflict resolution practices.

As one participant explained:

> *"Girls are given as compensation payment… as part of top-up compensation."*

These practices demonstrate how women's bodies are treated as negotiable resources within conflict settlement processes, reinforcing the unequal valuation of women within conflict dynamics.

The research further indicates that CRSV is not confined to the immediate conflict. Sexual violence frequently occurs during displacement and in host communities that accommodate internally displaced families. In these contexts, women and girls may face exploitation, coerced labour, and forced marriage, often justified as informal compensation for the use of land and resources.

A participant described these dynamics as follows:

> *"Women and girls… in host communities are used as cheap labour. They're exposed to rape and forced to get married… without any bride price because they say you are living on our land."*

Research indicates that women returning to their home communities after conflict face an elevated risk of violence, including killings, due to ongoing cycles of revenge.[37] These experiences illustrate how violence against women becomes embedded within the broader political economy of conflict and displacement, where women's bodies are used as mechanisms for negotiating access to land, resources, and revenge.

Despite the severity of these experiences, sexual violence occurring during conflict rarely results in formal accountability. The limited presence of state institutions during periods of active fighting, combined with the framing of violence within customary narratives of conflict, contributes to a permissive environment in which perpetrators face little legal consequence. Participants described how perpetrators are often able to continue committing abuses without fear of punishment.

As one participant explained:

> *"Rape can be okay; no one will take you to court because it's freely done and the perpetrator is still on the run during conflict."*

36 Andrew J. Strathern and Pamela J. Stewart, "Problems of Peace-Makers in Papua New Guinea: Modalities of Negotiation and Settlement," *Cornell International Law Journal* 30, no. 3 (1997): 681–700.
37 Wiessner, "Youths, Elders, and the Wages of War in Enga Province, Papua New Guinea", 28.

Another participant highlighted how impunity can reinforce cycles of violence within communities:

> *"It's during the conflict time and the perpetrator is encouraged to do more… he can do anything and he's free. He becomes the hero. No one talks about it. There's no justice."*

Participants further suggested that local mediation processes intended to resolve disputes may sometimes fail to address underlying drivers of violence. In some cases, mediation focuses on immediate settlement rather than accountability or structural causes, allowing gender-based practices to persist and conflicts to re-emerge.

As one participant noted:

> *"The cases are not handled properly. When somebody goes into mediation, they do the blanket cover… they don't really look at the real issues. So it builds up over time, and then it spills out."*

These findings suggest that CRSV in the Highlands is embedded across multiple phases of conflict, from active fighting and displacement to post-conflict settlement practices. Sexual violence operates not only as an act of individual harm but also as a mechanism through which power, retaliation, and social hierarchies are reinforced within conflict settings. Women's bodies become sites through which broader struggles over territory, authority, and compensation are enacted.

2 *Male territorial control and gendered hierarchies as structural drivers of CRSV*

Findings from the research dialogue indicate that conflict-related SGBV in the Highlands is closely linked to deeply embedded gendered hierarchies and systems of male territorial authority. Participants described how social norms, customary practices, and expectations of masculinity collectively reinforce male dominance over women's bodies, labour, and decision-making power. These dynamics shape both everyday gender relations and the forms of violence that emerge during periods of conflict.

Existing scholarship provides important context for these patterns. Scholars have linked this violence to marital relations characterised by perceived male superiority, often reinforced through the use of force, and to the broader social expectation that men embody the status of "big men."[38] Big men command respect through leadership, wealth accumulation, kinship networks, and the defence of land and community interests.[39] Historically, during colonial times, women's peripheral place in the public sphere was legitimised, and colonial powers subordinated women to men in domestic and community decision-making processes.[40]

38 Olivia Barnett-Naghshineh, "Shame and Care: Masculinities in the Goroka Marketplace," *Oceania* 89, no. 2 (2019): 220–36; Paul Sillitoe, "Big Men and War in New Guinea," *Man* (1978): 252–71; Richard Eves, *Exploring the Role of Men and Masculinities in Papua New Guinea in the 21st Century*, 7
39 Ibid.
40 Maurice Godelier, *The Making of Great Men: Male Domination and Power among the New Guinea Baruya* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

Changing social and economic conditions in the modern world have reshaped patterns of gender subordination, producing both gendered violence and heightened insecurities among women, girls, and marginalised groups. Men's inability to acquire the resources needed to achieve ideal masculine power generates status insecurities.[41] In this context, increased women's agency, including greater access to education, employment, or community leadership, can provoke violent backlash, as men seek to reassert authority.[42] Such anxieties over women's advancement have prompted reinterpretations of what constitutes a "good wife" or "good woman," invoking past notions of female propriety.[43] These norms reinforce the idea that violence is an acceptable means of asserting authority or responding to perceived disrespect.

Research in the Eastern Highlands Province, for instance, frequently described as a site of endemic violence against women, reports extremely high prevalence of intimate partner violence.[44] Within intimate relationships, these norms may also manifest in expectations of sexual entitlement. Studies across multiple regions of PNG indicate that refusing sex is commonly perceived as a challenge to male authority and can trigger violence within marriages.[45] As one participant explained:

> *"The main thing is that they believe they have the right to do anything with their wife. They do not seek consent… they can rape during the marriage."*

Gendered power relations also intersect with sorcery accusation-related violence (SARV). Participants highlighted how women accused of sorcery may face repeated cycles of suspicion and punishment within their communities. One participant explained how accusations can become entrenched within community narratives:

> *"The sorcery accusation-related violence is very complex… once a family is accused, the community remembers. Whenever there is another death, they point back to that family again."*

As gendered hierarchies shape broader social systems, it has significant impacts on localised conflicts and their resolution processes. Participants noted that the deaths of men during tribal fighting typically trigger compensation claims between groups, while the deaths of women are not always recognised as warranting equivalent restitution. Such practices signal a lower social and political value placed on women's lives and contribute to the normalisation of violence against women within conflict settings.

Participants also highlighted the powerful role of social stigma and silence in sustaining these patterns of violence. Women experiencing abuse frequently avoid disclosing incidents due to fear of blame, shame, or retaliation from family members and community leaders. In many rural communities, survivors may remain silent even when violence occurs during periods of conflict.

One participant described this dynamic as *"Many women face gendered violence silently."*

41 Anne-Sylvie Malbrancke, "Making the Baruya Great Again: From Glorified Great Men to Modern Suffering Subjects?" *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 30, no. 1 (2019): 68–83, https://doi.org/10.1111/taja.12305
42 Ibid. ; Jo Chandler, "Violence against Women in PNG: How Men Are Getting Away with Murder" (2014).; Richardson et al., "Gender-based violence in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea", 3.
43 Malbrancke, "Making the Baruya Great Again", 35
44 Richardson et al., "Gender-Based Violence in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea: A Literature Review," 37; Chandler, "Violence against Women in PNG: How Men Are Getting Away with Murder," 36.
45 Richard Eves and Asha Titus, *Women's Economic Empowerment among Coffee Smallholders in Papua New Guinea* (2020).

Another explained that women who experienced rape would not share their experience with anyone due to stigma. She said that:

> *"The victim is afraid and does not talk about the incident to her husband or families… because she is afraid and ashamed. So during the conflict, when they come back, they say nothing."*

Participants further noted that when incidents are disclosed, survivors may face victim-blaming responses from family members or the wider community.

> *"Sometimes they say, 'you went there and that's it, you deserve it'."*

In some cases, disclosure may even trigger further victimisation within the household.

> *"If the husband finds out… sometimes the relatives continue to victimise the survivor when she's already in that situation."*

These responses illustrate how deeply embedded gender norms shape community perceptions of sexual violence and contribute to an environment in which survivors face significant barriers to seeking support or justice.

These structural and social inequalities intersect with other forms of marginality, including age and disability, shaping distinct vulnerabilities for women *and* men informed by gender hierarchies. Participants highlighted that certain groups face heightened vulnerability during conflicts, including women with disabilities, widows, pregnant and breastfeeding women, and elderly women. They emphasised that these groups are often excluded from support systems and may experience violence within both public and private spaces. One participant noted that after local conflict:

> *"Internally displaced women and children are discriminated against and not given food… pregnant women and breastfeeding mothers suffer the most. Many children are malnourished and sick."*

Such dynamics illustrate how gendered hierarchies, social stigma, and community power structures interact to produce multiple and intersectional forms of violence against women and children.

These findings suggest that violence against women in the Highlands cannot be understood solely as an 'outcome' of conflict. Rather, violence against women is rooted in broader systems of gendered power that shape social relations, male authority structures, and expectations of masculinity. These structural dynamics create conditions in which violence against women becomes both normalised and instrumentalised during periods of conflict.

3 *Arms proliferation and the weaponisation of CRSV*

Existing research demonstrates that the widespread availability of firearms has significantly reshaped the dynamics of localised conflict in the Highlands. Many Highlands villages reportedly own multiple high-powered weapons, while homemade firearms are commonly kept for household protection.[46] High-powered firearms have replaced traditional measures of individual wealth, such as pigs, as central indicators of political authority and leadership within communities.[47] Consequently, they have fundamentally transformed intergroup conflict, making it more violent and destructive.[48] Findings from the research dialogue affirm this shift.

Participants indicated that the proliferation of firearms, including small arms, has significantly transformed the nature of localised conflict in the Highlands, with direct implications for the scale, severity, and forms of CRSV. Participants consistently described a shift from earlier forms of conflict, which relied on traditional weapons such as spears and bows and arrows, to highly militarised violence enabled by the widespread availability of firearms. The presence of firearms has fundamentally altered how conflict is experienced, particularly for women and girls. They described how the use of guns generates immediate fear and displacement, forcing families to flee without preparation or resources. This transition has not only increased the lethality of conflict but has also reshaped power relations within communities, consolidating authority in the hands of armed actors.

As one participant explained:

> *"When it came to using the high-powered guns… it terrified us. When there is a gun, we drop everything and we just go… we just grab our children, and we flee with empty hands."*

Participants emphasised that the consolidation of power among armed men has enabled the systematic use of sexual violence as a tool of control, reward, and coercion. Armed actors, often referred to as "gun men," were described as exercising authority over communities with limited restraint, including the ability to target women and girls with impunity.

Access to weapons reinforces entitlement, power and dominance, creating a pattern in which sexual violence can be accelerated to gain greater conflict advantage. Participants described instances where armed men selected women and girls for sexual exploitation, framing such acts as acceptable within the context of conflict.

> *"Gunmen forced young girls and women to go and sleep with them… they select the girls and women to have sex with them."*

Participants reported that women and girls may be exchanged or forced into marriage in connection with the acquisition of firearms or as part of compensation arrangements linked to conflict. Weapons also lead

46 Capie, "Small Arms, Violence and Gender in Papua New Guinea: Towards a Research Agenda,", 16; Haley and Muggah, "Jumping the Gun? Reflections on Armed Violence in Papua New Guinea," 17; Paul Roscoe, "The End of War in Papua New Guinea: 'Crime' and 'Tribal Warfare' in Post-Colonial States," *Anthropologica* (2014): 327–39.

47 Kate Higgins et al., *Conflict Challenges and Opportunities for Building Peace in Hela Province, Papua New Guinea* (UNDP/DFAT Report; North Melbourne, AU: Conciliation Resources, 2022).

48 Forsyth, "The State of Contemporary Intergroup Conflict in the Papua New Guinea Highlands," 19; Sarah Garap and John Kai, "Case Study 1: Inter-tribal Conflict and Small Arms in Southern Highlands Province," in Elke Le Brun and Robert Muggah Occasional Paper 15, *Silencing Guns: Local Perspectives on Small Arms and Armed Violence in Rural Pacific Islands Communities* (Geneva, Switzerland: Small Arms Survey, 2005), 7–18.

to complex relations where, participants noted, armed perpetrators are often perceived as protectors of the community rather than offenders which legitimises their actions and discourages accountability.

As one participant observed:

> *"The perpetrators with guns are seen as protection for the community… they can walk around freely, they can do anything."*

Consequently, in some cases, extreme acts of violence, including the killing of women, were described as 'normal' within community narratives. One participant recounted a conversation with a man in a rural community who stated, *"I killed a woman already."* When asked how he felt about this, he responded, *"It's normal to us."* This statement reflects the degree to which violence against women and widespread impunity have become socially normalised and legitimised.

As participants in the workshop indicated, the proliferation and possession of firearms have significantly contributed to the normalisation of gender-based violence and the reinforcement of impunity. The absence of effective law enforcement during conflict allows armed actors to operate without fear of consequences. Such dynamics highlight how militarisation not only enables violence but also reshapes social attitudes towards it.

The cumulative impact of firearms proliferation is reflected in the long-term insecurity experienced by women and girls. It has not only intensified direct violence, including sexual violence, but also the broader humanitarian consequences of conflict, including displacement, loss of livelihoods, and prolonged insecurity. Participants described ongoing displacement, fear, and instability as defining features of life in conflict-affected Highland communities.

> *"Some of us are still internally displaced… we are not back to our village… women live in fear."*

These practices illustrate how sexual violence becomes embedded within the political economy of conflict, where women's bodies are used as resources to sustain fighting, secure alliances, or access weapons. It underscores how the presence of firearms extends the temporal and spatial boundaries of conflict, creating conditions in which violence, and the threat of violence, persists well beyond active fighting.

Participants also highlighted the role of weak regulatory frameworks and limited state presence in enabling the proliferation of firearms. The absence of effective gun control measures, licensing systems, and enforcement mechanisms contributes to the widespread availability of firearms at the community level.

One participant explained:

> *"There is no policy around guns… guns are still in the village. And today women live in fear."*

Failure to address the proliferation of small arms and light weapons undermines both provincial peace and security, and it must be a priority for the PNG WPS agenda. The continued circulation of firearms not only sustains cycles of local conflict but contribute to the risk of sexual and gender-based violence across all stages of violence, from active fighting to displacement and recovery.

4 *Constraints to survivor-centred responses and the critical role of women-led frontline response*

Findings from the research dialogue indicate that delivering survivor-centred responses to CRSV in the Highlands during conflict is constrained by disruptions to formal systems, entrenched social norms, and resource limitations. In this context, WHRDs and women-led CSO networks operate as essential frontline responders, often filling gaps left by state institutions. However, their (high-risk) contribution remains insufficiently recognised and supported.

Periods of active conflict and displacement significantly weaken the functioning of formal institutions, including police, health services, and courts. Participants reported that victim-survivors face multiple barriers to accessing justice, including ongoing insecurity, stigma, distance from services, lack of transport, and reduced institutional capacity (police stations and courts may close during periods of conflict).

Even where specialised units such as Family and Sexual Violence units exist, their ability to respond is constrained by limited mobility, staffing, and resources. Cases are frequently delayed or abandoned due to logistical barriers or threats against survivors. As one participant noted, survivors may initiate complaints but withdraw due to intimidation or prolonged processes.

Access to health services is similarly constrained. Survivors in remote or conflict-affected areas are often unable to reach medical facilities within the critical timeframe required for evidence collection. This weakens legal cases and further discourages reporting.

Survivor-centred approaches are further undermined by deeply embedded gender norms that normalise violence and shift blame onto survivors. Disclosure of sexual violence can expose women to stigma, shame, and further abuse within their own families and communities. Participants described how survivors may be blamed for their own victimisation, particularly if they were outside the home for livelihood activities such as collecting food or water during conflict. In some cases, husbands and relatives respond to disclosure with additional violence:

> *"If the incident was reported… sometimes they continue to victimise the survivor… the husband and the relatives will get on her."*

Fear of such responses leads many survivors to remain silent. As one participant explained, women often choose not to disclose violence due to shame and fear of social repercussions. This silence reinforces cycles of impunity and limits the effectiveness of formal and informal response mechanisms.

Displacement further complicates survivor-centred responses, as they must navigate new unsafe environments. Participants reported that internally displaced women and children often face discrimination in host communities, including limited access to food, shelter, and healthcare. In some cases, access to services is actively controlled by local leaders or community gatekeepers in the interest of protecting their own community from the ongoing conflict, preventing survivors from seeking medical care or counselling during conflict. Movement restrictions and restricted access to basic services can expose women to additional risks, such as prostitution, to gain access to water, food, or shelter.

In the absence of, or limitations on, formal systems, women-led networks, including WHRDs, church groups, and CSOs, function as the primary providers of survivor-centred support in many

communities. These actors are often the first point of contact for survivors and play a critical role in identifying cases, providing immediate assistance, and facilitating access to available services.

They draw on local knowledge, kinship networks, and relationships with community leaders to navigate sensitive contexts, negotiate protection, and discreetly support survivors. Participants highlighted that these networks are already established and active across the Highlands:

> *"We already have the churches' network, the women's network, the youth network… they can become the frontline service providers."*

In addition to direct service provision, these actors will travel to villages to engage in community awareness, mediation, and prevention efforts. They work with village courts, church leaders, and local authorities to resolve conflict and reduce violence, even during ongoing conflict situations.

Participants highlighted the important role of women as mediators in conflict-affected communities. Despite operating within deeply gendered hierarchies, women leaders are often respected and 'trusted' as neutral actors who can initiate collaborative mediation. Their engagement in peace mediation reflects not only their social legitimacy but also their ability to navigate both customary and formal systems of justice. One participant indicated that:

> *"When we go out in the very remote areas to do the peace mediation and men listen to the women's talks that we are in here in this room and they are respected. So when these women go out in the community and we make decisions, we involved with the men, we involved with the government, they take and learn justice and the village court, the church leaders come together."*

Despite their central role, women-led frontline systems operate under severe constraints. Participants consistently identified a lack of funding, infrastructure, and institutional support as major barriers to effective service delivery. Many organisations rely on informal structures and voluntary efforts, with limited access to transport, safe shelters, or dedicated facilities. Efforts to establish coordinated response mechanisms remain under-resourced and only partially functional.

Frontline responders also face significant personal safety risks. Engaging in mediation and responding to victimisation cases in conflict settings can expose them to threats and violence. As one participant noted, high-risk situations can result in loss of life. Despite these risks, women's networks continue to operate due to their commitment and community trust. One participant stated:

> *"Our safety and security is not recognised… we need to be recognised and supported by the government."*

While there are examples of collaboration between CSOs and state actors, including police, these partnerships are often ad hoc (dependent on personal relationships and networks), and constrained by resource limitations (police may not have fuel to travel or protective equipment to enter a conflict zone). Participants emphasised that strengthening coordination between community networks and formal institutions is essential but requires sustained will and investment. There is also a clear demand for greater government ownership, including funding, policy implementation, and integration of frontline actors into formal protection systems. Without such support, the sustainability and scalability of these responses remain limited.

These findings demonstrate that survivor-centred responses to CRSV in the Highlands are shaped by a combination of structural constraints and community-level challenges. Formal systems are frequently inaccessible or ineffective in conflict settings, while social norms discourage disclosure and reinforce impunity.

In this context, women-led frontline systems provide critical, and often the only, forms of support available to survivors. However, their capacity to respond is constrained by limited resources, a lack of formal recognition, and significant personal risk. Thus, strengthening responses to CRSV, requires not only improving formal service delivery but also investing in and institutionalising the role of women-led networks as core components of the formal protection system. The formal protection system itself, including police need specialist support and training in the particular services specific to conflict-related sexual violence.

6. Recommended Actions Proposed by Research Participants

Across the discussions, participants identified significant gaps in coordination, implementation and prioritisation. Participants consistently emphasised the need to strengthen, connect, and operationalise existing mechanisms at community, provincial, and national levels. However, these discussions also reveal that many of these gaps are not just technical but reflect deeper structural constraints, including uneven state capacity, limited resourcing, and variable political commitment across provinces, which shape how and whether these actions function in practice.

1 *Strengthen coordination between civil society and state actors*

Participants identified a longstanding disconnect between CSOs and government institutions, particularly at the provincial level. While government structures such as Provincial Community Development Offices and Gender-Based Violence Action Committees are in place, their functionality varies significantly across provinces, often depending on local leadership, resourcing, and political will.

Participants reported fragmented links between police and CSOs, inconsistent referral networks across provinces, and limited engagement with existing support mechanisms (e.g. Family and Sexual Violence Units). While relationships between government and CSOs exist in some areas, they are often informal, inconsistent, and dependent on individual initiatives/relationships rather than institutional arrangements. Participants stated that in some provinces, formal arrangements with government departments, such as signing Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) and forming rapid response teams, are already showing success.

Participants emphasised that an effective response to SGBV in local conflict settings requires consistent coordination among CSOs, police, community development offices, and other state actors. At the same time, coordination challenges are not only due to inconsistency but also to institutional fragmentation and limited state presence in remote areas, where CSOs often operate in the absence of government engagement.

With these constraints in mind, they proposed the need to:

1. Formalise partnerships through MOUs between CSOs, police (especially Family and Sexual Violence Units), courts, and community development offices to clarify roles, strengthen accountability, and enable resource sharing during local conflict situations. This requires a specific partnership designed and enforced during ‘peacetime’ in preparation of conflict periods.
2. Establish or strengthen “Rapid Response Teams” within police stations, linked effectively with frontline CSOs for survivor rescue and case referral, particularly in remote areas. While promising, the sustainability of such mechanisms remains contingent on staffing, funding, and operational capacity within police systems in cooperation with provincial government.
3. Integrate engagement with CSOs in state planning, budgeting, and implementation of violence against women action plan work so that government actors can be regularly informed of ongoing community-level activities, and mobilise resources for joint response in conflict situations.

2 *Strengthen victim-survivor-centred response practices sensitive to conflict and political conditions*

In addition to the major disconnects between government departments and frontline service providers, participants highlighted a significant concern about the limited capacity of police and other state actors, as well as the limited infrastructure to respond appropriately to SGBV cases. They cited inconsistent practices of responding to incidents, limited capacity of police on gender and human rights training, and absence of trained trauma counsellors, all leading to weak survivor protection and inconsistent service quality. In some cases, participants described harmful practices, including the mistreatment of survivors in custody, which further undermines trust in formal systems. These accounts point not only to capacity gaps, but also to deeply embedded institutional and gendered power dynamics that shape how survivors are treated within formal systems.

They also noted that survivor support pathways and localised practices were not fully coordinated, creating risks of secondary trauma among survivors. Additionally, participants expressed concern about limited accountability for perpetrators of CRSV. In many cases, incidents are resolved through informal mechanisms, such as family compensation and forced marriage, rather than formal legal processes, reflecting both cultural norms and limited enforcement of state law.

On this aspect, they propose:

a) Prioritise immediate access to healthcare and safe accommodation, recognising that in practice, access to these services remains uneven across provinces.

b) Enhance coordination of survivor referral protocols to reduce repeated interviews and re-traumatisation.

c) Promote standard practices across provinces through shared training for police, health, and CSO actors on survivor-centred approaches and trauma-informed interviewing, while acknowledging that standardisation may be difficult in contexts with highly variable resources and institutional capacities.

d) Upskill police and local officials on gender, human rights, and confidentiality to address cases of misconduct and improve survivor-centred responses.

e) Engage community leaders and churches as accessible first responders and counsellors by providing targeted training and including them in reporting and referral networks, recognising their existing influence at the community level.

f) Reinforce existing laws and promote justice and accountability as a core component of response efforts, although participants' experiences suggest that enforcement remains a significant challenge.

3 *Improve data collection, data management, and translation of data to action*

Participants acknowledged that while substantial response work is being carried out by women CSOs, evidence of their work is not systematically documented or utilised. They highlighted limited capacity for data collection and database management, such as the absence of designated database officers, fragmented data across CSOs, churches, and community groups, and risks of data loss due to inadequate storage infrastructure.

At the same time, discussions revealed that data challenges are not only technical, but also relational and political. Historically, many CSOs have not shared data with government systems, reflecting limited trust, weak coordination, and uncertainty about how data will be used. This has contributed to parallel data collection systems that remain disconnected from formal decision-making processes.

Participants acknowledged that strengthening data systems is essential for evidence-based advocacy, securing government and donor funding, and informing policy and programme design. However, this assumes that data will be effectively utilised by decision-makers, which participants' experiences suggest is not always the case.

To strengthen the evidence-based data availability, they proposed the need to:

a) Develop a consolidated provincial database for SGBV in collaboration with the Highlands Human Rights Defenders Movement (HRDM), CSOs, community-based organisations (CBOs), and churches. Important to also consider the data ownership, long-term sustainability, and governance of such a system.

b) Build data management skills of CSO and government staff through training on recordkeeping, case documentation, confidentiality, and digital tools.

c) Institutionalise quarterly coordination meetings (through Provincial Gender-Based Violence Action Committees) to review and validate data before public release.

d) Develop a shared platform to share the database with provincial and national government departments (such as Community Development Offices) through structured data-sharing agreements, while ensuring safeguards for confidentiality and survivor protection.

e) Use data for advocacy and resource mobilisation, presenting evidence to government and donors to direct funding toward conflict-affected and high-risk areas, although the link between data and resource allocation remains contingent on political and institutional priorities.

f) Pursue access to additional institutions, such as the UN Human Rights Council and the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) Committee, as alternative sites where reports can be received and validated to ensure a variety of reporting conditions and sources are being heard at the highest political levels.

7. Conclusion

This research has generated context-specific insights into CRSV in the Highlands, demonstrating that such violence is embedded in the dynamics of localised conflict. It has examined the features and drivers of violence that target women and girls, highlighting the roles of male territorial control, displacement, and the proliferation of firearms in intensifying risk and harm. The findings also illustrate the critical role of community-based women's organisations in mediating conflict, sustaining local protection and response efforts, despite operating under significant constraints.

Building on these insights, women from the Highlands have identified key priorities for policy and practice. These actions provide concrete, context-specific entry points for advancing national and global commitments on women's peace and security and violence against women. As Papua New Guinea is committed to eliminating gender-based violence through the National Papua New Guinean Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Gender-based Violence 2026-2035 and progresses in developing a National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security (WPS), there is a clear opportunity to recognise women's organisations as core actors in conflict mediation, protection of women and children, and responding to CRSV, and to ensure their meaningful engagement in policy discussions and implementation.

The findings further suggest that strengthening survivor-centred responses requires locally grounded approaches led by women's CSOs, alongside improved linkages between government services and community-based actors. Importantly, effective CRSV responses must be embedded within the local conflict dynamics, mediation and resolution processes. However, the lack of consolidated data on CRSV continues to limit understanding of its prevalence and patterns, the identification of early warning triggers, and the design of effective prevention interventions. As indicated by women from the Highlands, addressing this gap will require a context-sensitive, collective approach that prioritises survivor safety and confidentiality, while engaging local women's organisations as trusted partners in data collection and interpretation. It also suggests the need for more locally grounded research that captures local conflict dynamics across locations, and how these dynamics shape the risks and drivers of SGBV, in order to inform context-specific prevention and response strategies.

At the same time, the findings point to important areas for future research. Further investigation is needed to understand the role of local women CSOs and their security in conflict settings; the extent to which the safety and security of women and children are considered during conflict prevention, response, and peace-building efforts; the contributions of women, families, and extended kinship networks in mitigating conflict; and the experiences of internally displaced women. Addressing these knowledge gaps will be essential for developing contextually grounded and effective strategies to prevent and respond to CRSV.

Finally, these findings reinforce a central conclusion of this research: women's CSOs in the Highlands are key actors in knowledge production, prevention, and response to CRSV. Supporting their role through sustained investment, and meaningful inclusion in policy processes will be essential to ensuring that national efforts to eliminate SGBV are both implementable and effective in preventing and responding to CRSV in the Highlands.

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Traditional Custodians
The Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for the Elimination of Violence Against Women acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the lands on which our various nodes stand and whose cultures and customs have nurtured and continue to nurture these lands. We pay our respects to Elders past and present. We extend our respects to all Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander, and other Indigenous peoples around the world.