

Women's Economic Empowerment and Escaping Violent Relationships

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For the last decade, aid donors and international development and non-government organisations have embraced women's economic empowerment as the most effective solution to the problem of women's economic marginalisation and poverty. The Australian aid program, for example, places strong emphasis on addressing women's empowerment and especially their economic empowerment (DFAT 2016). It is important, therefore, to reflect on the methods being used to achieve economic empowerment and, in particular, on what factors may facilitate this objective and what may have a negative impact on it.

Drawing on research in the Papua New Guinea (PNG) highlands as part of the Do No Harm (DNH) project, this In Brief examines some of the challenges women face in escaping violent relationships.¹ One assumption often made is that increasing women's access to economic resources, such as through microcredit, income generation or wage labour, enables women to end their dependency on their spouses and so to leave violent relationships, if they so choose (Vyas et al. 2015:36). However, escaping such relationships is not often so straightforward but is subject to constraints which makes this choice virtually impossible for many women.

The extent to which a woman is able to negotiate for better treatment from her spouse or to stop his violence depends on what alternatives she has. For a woman to leave a violent relationship requires that she has 'credible outside options' which 'must provide a higher level of well-being than that which can be achieved within the relationship ... if one's options put one in a lower position ... such options cease to be credible' (Paterson 2011:143).

In the PNG highlands, gender norms interact with other social and cultural practices to limit the viable alternatives for women if they wish to leave a violent marriage. The ability of women to exit a violent relationship is blocked in three main ways. First, if a woman wants to leave her husband and return to her natal village, he can demand, successfully with the customary support from the community, that any children

from the union remain with him (see also Kyakas and Wiessner 1992:164). To lose access to their children is something few women can contemplate. Second, a marriage breakdown often requires that the bride price transferred in exchange for the wife be returned by her parents and other relatives (see also Strathern 1972:190). Some parents even send their daughter back to a violent husband because they are unable or do not want to return the bride price, which has usually been spent or distributed to others in the community. The husband and his relatives may also demand forcefully that the bride price be returned (see also Reay 1959:178–79).² Third, the patrilineal land tenure system in the highlands disadvantages women by constraining women's ownership of and access to land. In PNG, land is the productive asset through which most people earn their livelihoods. In other words, for people in rural communities it is impossible to live without access to land (see also Eves and Titus 2017a, 2017b).

Women's marginalisation from the key resource of land makes it difficult for a woman to escape a violent relationship because she has no certainty that if she returns to her natal village she will be granted access to land. Whether she is granted access to land really depends on her father, if he is still alive, or her brothers if he is deceased. A woman respondent we interviewed during the DNH research, who had divorced her violent husband, was confronted by this situation when she returned to her natal village. Her brother, encouraged by his wife, only allowed her access to a small amount of garden land and refused to give her a coffee block, which meant it was hard for her to earn sufficient income. Verbal arguments and violent fights with her sister-in-law over the use of land also occurred. To minimise conflict and violence in her relationship with her brother and his wife, she accepted the situation and has not attempted to increase what she has been granted. To reduce the risk of violence she gives her first harvest to her brother and his wife and helps them by sharing what she has. So, although this woman had an exit option which enabled her to escape her violent marriage, she entered into another situation which

was also riddled with conflict and violence. She was released from one relationship of dependency only to be trapped in another relationship of dependency.

Conclusion

Clearly, escaping violence is constrained by gender norms and social customs, which economic empowerment programs do not, in themselves, address. While improving women's economic status may open some options for women, it can be extremely difficult for women to pursue the option of divorce or separation when matters such as bride price, custody of children and access to land limit their ability to live independently. Improving women's access to economic resources without addressing the factors which make it difficult for them to escape violent relationships means that women's economic programming is limited in its capacity to facilitate an end to violence. This suggests that in seeking to promote women's economic empowerment, development programming should also seek to address the contextual factors which impinge on the ability of women to exercise their agency.

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Author Notes

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Endnotes

1. The research was undertaken in Jiwaka, Chimbu and Eastern Highlands Provinces as part of the project Do No Harm: Understanding the Relationship Between Women's Economic Empowerment and Violence Against Women in Melanesia. The project is a collaboration between the Department of Pacific Affairs (formerly State, Society and Governance in Melanesia) and the International Women's Development Agency, and was funded by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, through Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development.
2. Whether or not the bride price must be returned can vary. In Jiwaka, we came across village court officials whose job it is to decide who is at fault in the case of a marriage breakdown (see also Strathern 1972:202). When the fault is the husband's because of his violence, they deem he is

at fault and so they consider that there is no need for bride price to be returned. However, not all village court officials are so enlightened. Some support the demand for bride price to be returned even when the husband's violence is the cause of the failure of the marriage.

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