



PUBLIC POLICY BLOG

Counselling is vital to healing and recovery of survivors of sorcery accusation

William Kipongi

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In response to the overwhelming effects of Sorcery-Accusation Related Violence (SARV) in the country, the Government of Papua New Guinea (GoPNG) established a national committee that drafted the Sorcery National Action Plan 2015. In that plan, counselling has rightfully been identified as one important support service for survivors of SARV and Gender-Based Violence (GBV) in PNG (www.stopsorceryviolence.org). However, there is little or no counselling services for survivors in both urban and rural areas.

The impacts of lack of counselling services for survivors include:

- The emotional, social and psychological impacts which are extremely destructive; yet it is overlooked;
- The survivors continue to face stigma and uncertainty when they return to their communities after they have been displaced because of little or no counselling services available for them;
- Survivors are often isolated in their own homes and their movements are closely monitored by the accusers and perpetrators; and,
- Survivors continue to live in fear of further physical attack in the event of any sickness and death in the communities where they live in and they are often discriminated against.

Experiences shared by survivors of SARV demonstrate the enormity of the situation. For instance, an elderly woman reported that she was re-accused of sorcery when a baby got sick after she visited a particular family. Another survivor could not leave her home to sell goods which are her only source of income to cater for her family because she is

always being monitored and her movements are restricted.

A study conducted by the Australian National University, Divine Word University and PNG National Research Institute (2016-2020) noted that almost 90 percent of survivors of SARV in the Highlands Region of PNG who took refuge in safe houses or health centres have not received any professional counselling.

SARV has an adverse impact on the lives of survivors with evidence that intergenerational accusation is occurring. For instance, a grade 8 student whose mother was accused of sorcery earlier on was locked out of class by his classmates. Also, an elementary school child was warned not to play with other children as they feared that she might pass on the sorcery spirit of her accused parents to other children. Either directly or indirectly, survivors are deprived of their constitutional rights to life (sec.35), freedom (sec.32) and freedom from inhuman treatment (sec.36).

GoPNG plans and response

- A recent Special Parliamentary Committee (SPC) on GBV report dated August 2021, noted that the Family Sexual Violence Action Committee Secretariat (FSVACS) was tasked in 2017 to develop a policy guideline for care and counselling services and safe houses; this has not been developed.
- The SPC reiterated that there is an urgent need for counselling facilities to be set up for survivors of GBV and this also extends to survivors of SARV.
- GBV report stipulated that perpetrators of violence also need counselling to help break the chain of exerting violence on others and address their own trauma.

Conclusion

Counselling is urgently needed to facilitate a change of peoples' views, beliefs and behaviour concerning sorcery. There are two important government documents (SPC on GBV Report, 2021 and SNAP, 2015) that recommend counselling services for survivors of SARV, but evidence shows that the plan has not been implemented in an effective manner. If GoPNG will not prioritise counselling services for survivors, the impacts will continue to generate adverse impacts on the livelihood of the people as well as other developmental plans. GoPNG should consider allocating more funding and providing more professional counsellors to work with safe houses and healthcare facilities to render counselling services to SARV survivors as highlighted in the respective reports.

About the Author

William Kipongi is a Research Officer with the Building Safer Communities Research Program at PNG National Research Institute. He holds a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Social Sciences and Religious Studies from the Divine Word University in PNG. His research interests include social development, law and justice issues and community engagements in developmental issues.