**Submission to Special Parliamentary Committee on Gender-Based Violence**

**Dr Susan Merrell**

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Dear Parliamentary Committee,

**Introduction**

Firstly, I applaud you for taking steps to remedy the violence against women in PNG – as I believe, women all over the world do also.

I say that because, although I’m Not PNGean, I am a woman, and while we all have many personas in life, assumed and inherent – wife, husband, daughter, lawyer, plumber etc., I am of the firm belief that gender surpasses nationality in that hierarchy. Therefore, while she may be your compatriot that’s being abused, she’s also my sister and it is the broad category “PNG men’ who are abusing her - and I take umbrage at that – and it ought to be stopped.

By making this submission, I am seeking to offer an engaged outsider’s view in the hope that it will help the trees materialise from a forest that often gets in the way when we are too close. In the main, I am addressing point (a) of the ‘Terms of Reference.’

**Who am I?**

I am Dr Susan Merrell BA, MA (with merit), Master Media Practice (with merit), PhD. I am a writer (in many genres) and I live in Australia and France.

I have taken a particular interest in the politics and social issues in PNG for over a decade which is not surprising being that my area of scholarship is political nationalism, so post-colonial countries are of particular interest to me. You are also the country nearest to my Australian home and one to which my government (and via my taxes, also myself) contributes aid

During the last decade, I have met some of you and, no doubt, others of you will have read my commentary on social media and on my blog site *PNG Echo.* More than any other issue, violence against women in your country has both shocked me and sickened me to the core.

**The problem.**

PNG men (and even some women) remind me constantly that violence against women is a global phenomenon and is not restricted to PNG. Of course, they are right, and some of the reasons are very similar too, no matter the dissimilar cultural contexts. But too often the culpable are merely taking comfort in this (they say that misery loves company) and use it to excuse the behaviour. Because while it is everywhere, in PNG the prevalence is many fold that of most first-world countries. It is not for nothing that a global organisation (I forget which one – in fact there is more than one) has called PNG the most dangerous country to be a woman.

I’m not sure that this is totally understood by those who dwell within.

I suspect that many PNGeans would be so used to the status quo (for some it would be the only one experienced) that they have become inured to the suffering and only react when the violence turns to cold-blooded murder, sometimes (too often) involving torture and kidnap.

For example: a recent Facebook post had pictures of a woman who had been savagely chopped with a bush knife. She had been taken to the local hospital only to find that there were no doctors in attendance. The point of the post? The terrible shortage of doctors. No mention of the problem of the violence.

**Payback and Christianity**

Of course, when there does come to light another unnecessary and particularly brutal murder, there is widespread outrage. So much so, that the retribution sought and the anger and violence expressed is breathtaking. It’s all part of a culture in which ‘payback’ plays a big role.

I believe some of the violence against women is often another manifestation of that ‘payback’ culture.

**Too often the husband sees his role as that of enforcer and that his wife (in particular – but not only) is someone that he needs to keep in line. If she oversteps the mark, he has a right to punish her and while he will be understanding of human foibles in other men “he’s only human” that will not apply to women.**

Many PNG men see this as reasonable behaviour as long as he doesn’t go too far (and kill her) and I rather think that the reluctance of the PNG parliament to protect half of its population is because that thinking is prevalent there too (or has been in the past.)

The Christian religion has reinforced this message of man’s superiority as it exhorts women to be subservient. And while the religion has other messages too, the more benign and helpful offerings are often forgotten in preference to the hellfire and damnation on offering which, I suspect, is in line with many traditional practises and beliefs - which was how and why the religion gained such a strong foothold in PNG.

**Replacing the paradigms**

The fact that violence against women is tolerated and seldom punished in PNG makes it a very low-risk crime. Many have opined that more policing and prosecution of offenders is the answer. Partly that’s true.

**But instead of devising ever more gruesome punishments (cut off his penis and shove it in his mouth so he chokes on it, is one that keeps surfacing along with calls for the death penalty) I suggest that prevention, instead, should be the primary focus.**

Recently, I read a posting (Facebook) from one of your exemplary women, Ruth Jewels Kisim, who has dedicated her working life to the problem of gender-based violence, especially in the area of accusation-based violence (sanguma). After another recent atrocity was publicized she wrote:

"Once not so long ago I was told by my elders that being a girl was a beautiful thing. I was assured my fathers would defend my honor, my brothers would avenge me should anything happen to me, my husband would protect me and honor me."

She speaks of being ‘protected,’ ‘defended,’ and ‘avenged.’

To me, this is indicative that there was always a problem with violence against women because I got none of the same assurances in my culture or amongst my elders and that’s because there was no discernible threat. I didn’t need reassurance, the words would have been redundant.

There was another time whilst driving in PNG and talking to my driver that the subject turned to wife-bashing and he assured me, proudly, that although his wife sometimes disrespects him, he, nevertheless, has never hit her. He had shown restraint (although she deserved it was the subtext.)

I am not from a culture that is terribly respectful or obedient (rather we’re rude and rebellious) nevertheless, my husband (not from my culture) has never hit me, neither has he even contemplated that he has the duty or the right. To him it’s a shocking thought that would not cross his mind. He doesn’t need to show restraint – there’s no desire.

**Men should not be the person that governs or enforces how a woman behaves. I believe the belief that this is his role is the paradigm that needs changing in PNG if you are to ever curb the violence.**

It goes without saying that people should be punished for violence and men should use restraint but wouldn’t it be a better outcome to have a society that doesn’t resort to controlling behaviour and have to bottle up their barely suppressed anger and need for vengeance? Remove the need (desire?) for vengeance.e dioesn’t need

**Tradition and progress.**

Many people bemoan the divergence from “tradition” and “culture’ to explain why women need to be disciplined by men. They speak of her abandoning her wifely (motherly?) role and his solution is to beat her back into it.

In traditional society, roles were more clearly defined and people seldom stepped out of these roles because their choices were limited – there were no alternatives. The question is: were these people – women and men – ever really satisfied (or happy) when they learned of the many things that would become available to them with progress?

The short answer is, No. (Sorry, I couldn’t help myself). Human beings are, by their very nature, aspirational.

**Men have embraced progress with gusto, motorised transport, for instance. Women have also become aware of choices that take them away from their traditional roles and many have become dissatisfied. But while men want progress for themselves, they don’t want it for their women. Violence is a way to keep her firmly entrenched in the past – in a status quo that greatly favoured men and kept women subservient.**

In order to combat this entrenched paradigm, it is necessary to raise the status of women in non-traditional roles.

**It is why it is so very important to have women in parliament. PNG men need to get used to women leading and not following**. **In this, the PNG government should lead by example and embrace the change and not use the prospect as a popularity ruse – as it did in 2010/11. (Were you there?).**

**Do women have choices?**

Another short answer: not many.

I have often bemoaned the fact that PNG women seem to be compliant in their own oppression. For while she wants the violence to end, she still does not want to alter the paradigm that led to the violence – her subservience to a man that she hopes will be her protector and provider.

**But my assessment is too harsh because often, to go back to her abuser is her ONLY alternative if she wants to survive. He is her only resource. It’s why women fight so furiously between themselves to keep other women away from this resource and it discourages solidarity amongst women. The competition is fierce even though the prize is, too often, an abusive and philandering male.**

In my work, I have spoken (remotely – through a third person) to a PNG woman who has been beaten so severely by her husband that her injuries are shocking – and he does this on a regular basis. After the beating, she routinely returns to him. She says that, without his protection, there’s every chance she’d be accused of sanguma and tortured, especially with the deformities that his beatings have inflicted on her. What’s more, she does not have the means to survive without him to provide her food and shelter (and her children). Chillingly, she told me that she knows one day he’ll kill her – and there’s nothing she can do except hope that that day will not be any time soon.

This situation is brought about by the lack of government welfare for women like her (of which, I believe there are many). I know that there are *Meri seif hauses,* but I also know they are inadequate to take care of the sheer numbers of women (and children) in need. What’s more, unless the underlying PNG societal paradigm is changed, the problem of police officers sabotaging these safe houses and making them part of the problem (with the women sitting ducks) will not be alleviated.

More is needed. Much more.

In Australia there are governmental allowances for single mothers and a myriad of other help with accommodation etc. Needy women are not left to starve or be beaten to death – what sort of society allows that? These are the alternatives of many (most) battered PNG women.

Women need the means to lift herself from her own oppression. Give her those means.

**Remove the weapons**

The bush knife is often the weapon of choice for assaults.

It is a particularly vicious weapon and men seem to carry with them everywhere. Why? I know that they have uses (other than chopping off the limbs of women) but they ought to be confined to places of use – like the garden. They have no use in the home or on the street except as an assault weapon.

**The problem of the misuse of these machetes is similar to the misuse of guns in the USA. Both the USA and PNG feel it is their God-given right to carry them – it’s not. And while, the absence of these weapons may not stop the violence, without them, the consequences may not be as dire. The pictures of limbless PNG women are far too abundant.**

Did you see that a PNG man, I forget where (but I have the pictures somewhere), chopped off both his daughters hands because she went out on a date when he had forbidden her? It’s almost certain he used a bush knife. Do you know how hard it is to cut off a limb? It’s almost impossible without such a weapon. This father is not a fit person to be carrying around such a devastating weapon. By the way, was any action taken against the father (and the mother, who held her daughter down – I give up!)

**To sum up.**

* **Immediate steps to halt the carnage – policing and prosecution of offenders (including *bikmen*)**
* **Replace the existing paradigms of women’s subservience to men by elevating her status firstly by women’s seats in parliament (please feel free to add your own ideas how to do this)**
* **Welfare for affected women in order for her to become active in the solution rather than a passive victim. Encourage a sisterhood that does not need to compete for abusive men.**
* **Licence the ownership of bush knives, and outlaw the carrying of them anywhere except for in the place they were intended for.**