



SPECIAL PARLIAMENTARY COMMITTEE ON GENDER BASED VIOLENCE

STATEMENT TO PARLIAMENT ON THE INQUIRY INTO GENDER BASED VIOLENCE IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA

BY HON. CHARLES ABEL, CHAIRMAN

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INTRODUCTION

Mr. Speaker,

I am very pleased to present to you and the House the first report of the Special Parliamentary Committee on Gender Based Violence. This report constitutes Part 1 of our findings from this Inquiry into Gender Based Violence in Papua New Guinea.

BACKGROUND TO THE INQUIRY

Mr. Speaker,

This Special Parliamentary Committee on Gender-Based Violence was established in 2020 by the National Parliament. The membership of the Committee comprised of myself and six other members - Hon Allan Bird, Hon Powes Parkop, Hon Michael Dua, Hon Aiye Tambua, Hon Ginson Saonu and Hon Allan Marat.

I wish to thank this House, and specifically the Government headed by Prime Minister Marape, for supporting the establishment of this Special Parliamentary Committee. It showed very powerful leadership to recognise that the problem of gender-based violence has grown into a critical threat to our national development – and to set up this Committee on response.

I also want to thank the United Nations Development Programme, which responded to our request for technical and financial assistance through the UN-EU Spotlight Initiative. They supported the National GBV Summit in 2020, which led to the establishment of the Committee, as well as supporting the convening of our May 2021 public hearings.

Mr. Speaker,

We are grateful for the mandate we have been given. We have done our utmost to discharge that mandate in a transparent, inclusive and accountable manner, to ensure that the Government, but also the public, can understand the approach we have taken and the findings we have made.

Our mandate as a Special Parliamentary Committee is time bound. Once we submit our Final Report, our mandate comes to an end. Let me take this opportunity to ask members to consider making this Committee a permanent one – so that this work can continue through to the 11th Parliament and beyond, to ensure that a watchful eye remains on this issue.

Mr. Speaker,

Before going through the recommendations the Committee has brought to the House and to the Government for consideration, **I want to first reflect on the**

stories of violence that our Committee heard and that we are all aware of in our role as leaders of communities across our great country.

I am deeply concerned at the rising rates of violence that we are facing now in PNG. Every day in the newspapers, we heard stories of GBV, but we are also hearing constant stories of tribal violence, communal violence, rascal violence, knife violence, and even gun violence. Why is this so?

What has become of our country that violence now seems to be the first resort for so many people, when they have an argument or when they become angry? Why are we not showing respect to each other – respect to our families, to our communities and to our country’s laws?

We are a Christian country which claims to live by Christian values – but the teachings of Jesus were of love, kindness to others and forgiveness. We must go back to these teachings and find our humanity to our fellow people once more. We must show more patience – more tolerance – more respect.

Mr. Speaker,

These reflections on respect bring me back to this terrible problem of gender-based violence in our country. The impact of GBV on women, men, boys and girls is devastating. I worry that there is a growing feeling amongst communities across the country that violence is increasingly raging out of control, with perpetrators facing little accountability.

At the outset I want to note – **I know that we use the term gender-based violence, but as a man speaking in this House to a Parliament filled only with other men – I must make this clear – GBV in our country is primarily perpetrated against our women and children.**

I know that you may have stories about men suffering violence – and I agree that violence against anyone is simply unacceptable.

But if we are to tackle this problem effectively we must be honest with ourselves – too many men in our communities still think that they have the right to hit their wives and their children with impunity. But when men hit women and children we know the result. We are bigger and stronger – our fists can do enormous damage. I am absolutely horrified at the brutal stories we hear every day of women and children who have been brutally beaten – sometimes to the point of death.

Mr. Speaker,

Our report collects together many very disturbing statistics on GBV in our country. I implore every member of this House to read our Report, but let me provide a quick snapshot here.

The **2020 Human Development Report states that Papua New Guinea is ranked 161 out of 162** country on the Gender Inequality Index. This ranks us just above war-torn Yemen which is ranked 162 and conflict-affected Chad which is ranked 160.

But what does this mean on the ground, for women and children in PNG? PNG's 2018 Demographic and Health Survey shows us. **That Survey found that 56% of**

women aged 15-49 have experienced physical violence, and 28 per cent have experienced sexual violence. 18 % of women experienced violence during pregnancy.

The Demographic and Health Survey data also indicated that **28% of adolescent girls aged 15-19 years had experienced sexual violence. Data from the National Health Information System Data Base states that from 2018-2020 medical care was provided to a total of 18,759 sexual violence cases. Of these, boys under 16 years old accounted for 2,279 cases – or 12%.** In one study in the National Capital District (NCD), around 60 per cent of children who went to a women’s shelter in Port Moresby had been abused.

All of these statistics are horrible, and they make me feel ashamed that we have not done more to protect these vulnerable people from the harm of gender-based violence.

Mr. Speaker,

I am even more worried that among the women who reported any form of physical and/or sexual violence – and who sought help from anyone – only 5% sought help from the police, 5% from medical services and just 3% from social services.

Why are GBV survivors not willing – and very often – not able to seek help from government services? Do they not feel safe? Are the services not accessible? Do the services simply not exist where they live? These were some of the questions we sought to answer through our inquiry.

HOW THE INQUIRY WAS CONDUCTED

Mr. Speaker,

The Committee conducted our inquiry in an open and transparent manner. The inquiry was advertised through the local newspapers and included an invitation to the public to send us written submissions on topics covered under our Terms of Reference.

Mr. Speaker,

As many of you here today will know – including a number of the Ministers who graciously participated – as part of our inquiry we also held the first ever public hearings on GBV, on Monday 24 and Tuesday 25 May 2021.

The focus of the hearings was on trying to better understand the challenges currently impacting the national effort to address GBV, in order to identify concrete recommendations for improvement.

In advance of the public hearings, the Committee agreed that our focus would be on:

- **Examining the amount and use of funding provided by the Government to address GBV;**
- **Understanding the delay in establishing the National GBV Secretariat and how to activate that body to be more effective;**
- **Identifying the challenges with investigating and prosecuting GBV cases across the country and how to address them;**

- **Clarifying the Government of Papua New Guinea’s current proposals to implement women’s reserved seats, as part of a broader commitment to ensure women can co-lead the national GBV response.**

Mr Speaker,

A report of the public hearings is attached to our Committee Report, as an annex. We wanted to document these historic hearings for posterity. On behalf of the Committee I want to extend our thanks to the community representatives, government officials and Ministers who participated in the hearings, namely:

- Minister for Religion, Youth and Community Development, Hon Wake Goi;
- Minister for Police, Hon William Onglo;
- Treasurer, Hon Ian Ling Stuckey;
- Minister for Corrections, Hon Win Daki; and
- Minister for Information and Communication Technology, Hon Timothy Masiu.

The information we gathered from the hearings was extremely useful to our inquiry. Contributions from NGOs painted a worrying picture of the many problems that GBV survivors continue to face in accessing services – and accessing justice.

We also heard from many earnest officials, who I honestly believe want to do more to help vulnerable people in need. That said, what we heard almost across the board was a story of GBV services across the country which are simply still not good enough. I will speak about that in more detail shortly.

Mr Speaker,

After the inquiry, the Committee also received a **total of 36 written submissions from individuals, interested groups, government departments, private sector agencies, and from community-based organizations**. I also wish to extend my thanks to the many people who took their time to write to us, to share their insights. Those submissions were extremely useful and have been used to inform the report I have tabled here today.

So Mr Speaker – let me move on to a summary of our most important findings which I put before this house for discussion – but also for action.

KEY FINDINGS

Mr Speaker,

When the Members of this House go through our Report, you will see that we have tried to be comprehensive, in reviewing the many different areas of GBV prevention and crisis response which need to be addressed.

As a result, we have come up with 71 recommendations for action. I know this is a lot of recommendations, but they are directed at many different parts of the system and a number of different Ministries.

Mr Speaker,

I ask Ministers here to go through the Report to see which areas your departments could take action to address. We have not made these recommendations lightly – they are each directed at a specific issue which is deficient and which needs to be addressed.

In particular, there are many recommendations to be considered by Treasury, the Department of Justice and the Attorney General, the Royal PNG Constabulary, the magistrates and national courts, the Ministry for Health and HIV/AIDS and of course, the Ministry for Religion, Youth and Community Development, which has primary responsibility for driving the National Gender Based Violence Strategy which was endorsed in 2016.

Mr. Speaker,

I do not intend to go through every recommendation here, but our Committee wanted to focus specific attention of the House today on a number of the most critical and urgent recommendations that we want action taken on.

Firstly – the Committee recommends that Treasury urgently allocate more funding to support the implementation of the National GBV Strategy.

Our inquiry has shown that insufficient funding has been provided by the Government of PNG to support GBV, despite the National GBV Strategy proposing a budget of approximately PGK 57 million over 10 years, back in 2016.

We are aware that the Department for Community Development and Religion – which has been responsible for driving the National GBV Strategy since 2016 – has not produced strong budget documents to date. This is disappointing.

However, we are also aware that last month the Department produced a proposal for funding from the Government's Public Investment Program asking for Kina 37 million over 5 years, or Kina 7 million per year.

Mr Speaker,

We strongly urge the Treasurer and the NEC to give this proposal serious consideration. The PIP proposal seeks funding to coordinate better GBV prevention and crisis responses across the country. Money for counselling – funding for more safe houses – funding for community-based prevention activities – and funding to address the Sorcery Accusation Related Violence National Action Plan. All of this is vital and must urgently be ramped up – but this cannot be done without proper funding.

Mr Speaker,

The PIP funding requested will also be used to address the second major recommendation the Committee wanted to highlight, namely the **immediate establishment of a well-staffed and well-resourced National GBV Secretariat.**

The establishment of the National Gender Based Violence Secretariat was approved by the NEC in 2016, but even to this date, the Secretariat is not in operation and does not even have a permanent director.

In relation to this issue of staffing, we specifically call on the Government to go outside the public service to recruit a dynamic team of GBV specialists who have specific expertise on these issues. The Secretariat cannot be a place where long-term generalist bureaucrats are posted. We need good networkers who have a solid knowledge of GBV practice and partners, who can bring their GBV knowledge to the job and hit the ground running.

We need the Department for Personnel Management to immediately approve the 10 staff positions that have been identified for the National GBV Secretariat. DPM then needs to immediately run recruitments to identify qualified specialists who will be capable of really driving change across the country.

Mr Speaker,

The Committee believes that setting up a well-staffed National GBV Secretariat will also help to address some of the other problems in the system, namely poor coordination. The Secretariat should be empowered to coordinate with provincial level service providers, across all sectors.

The Secretariat should also better coordinate with NGOs and churches who are working diligently in this space. NGOs have filled the gap in Government funding for GBV by providing a range of GBV support services across the country, including crisis response, safe house, counselling, legal advice and other support to GBV survivors. Let me take this opportunity to publicly thank them – not only on behalf of the Committee but on behalf of a grateful public.

Mr Speaker,

The work community organisations are doing to address GBV across our country brings me to the third issue prioritised by the Committee, which was raised by a number of NGOs during our May parliamentary hearings - and that is, the worrying increase we are seeing in relation to **Sorcery Accusation Related Violence**.

SARV is a growing problem in our country, with a team of researchers estimating that from 2000 to 2020 there have been over 6000 SARV cases, resulting in an estimated 3000 deaths nationally. Their research data estimates the national harm caused by SARV – and suggested that 12 people are killed and a further 14 suffer serious harm as a result of SARV every month.

We must do more to address this problem. The brutal violence we hear about as a result of sorcery accusations is truly shocking. Our Committee wants the SARV National Action Plan to be properly funded and implemented.

Our Committee also wants the police to do more to investigate and bring charges in SARV cases. We also want DJAG to look into the laws related to *glasmen* and *glasmeri* to see if they are fit-for-purpose and are being properly used to stamp out the role of these community instigators. Everyone involved in committed SARV must be capable of sanction – and must indeed be punished.

Mr. Speaker,

This issue of sanctions and enforcement brings me to our fourth set of recommendations – namely, that **the justice institutions which are mandated to investigate, prosecute and adjudicate GBV cases must immediately strengthen their capacities to do their jobs and protect GBV survivors.**

Our report has more than 20 recommendations which are specifically directed at improving law enforcement and access to justice in relation to GBV. Unfortunately, that is representative of how deficient these services currently are – too many GBV survivors will tell you that they simply cannot access justice.

Mr. Speaker,

The Committee was disappointed to hear at the public hearings about how many GBV victims have to wait a very long time for their cases to be investigated and prosecuted, with many cases not coming to a conclusion at all. We heard at the public hearings that in the last year, the RPNGC registered approximately 15,000 cases – but only 300 were prosecuted and there were only 100 convictions.

In fact, the Committee was quite shocked at our public hearings when both the Minister for Police and the Police Commissioner spoke honestly to us about the current capacities of the police service to address GBV. When asked the direct question “If a woman comes to a police station seeking help for GBV, can you assure us that you can protect them?” – the answer from both was “No, unfortunately we can’t”.

Mr Speaker,

I commend them for being honest, but this response simply must change. I want to take the opportunity I have today to speak – through you Mr Speaker – to police officers around the country.

I say to them: “YOU have a duty to the public to protect them and to serve them. That duty is sacred. When someone comes to you for help – when a woman or child comes to you, beaten and battered – your job is to HELP THEM. Do not make any more excuses. Do not pretend that our culture accepts this behaviour. Do your jobs. Investigate. Arrest. Prosecute.”

Mr Speaker,

We plan to hold a second set of hearings before the budget parliamentary session and I am putting the RPNGC on notice – in fact, I am putting all parts of the justice system on notice – that we will be asking about the recommendations we have made in our report and we will want to know what has been done to address them.

Mr Speaker,

There are two more recommendations that our Committee prioritised which focus more on preventing GBV than just responding once it is happened.

Firstly, the **Committee wants the Government to put more resources into offering counselling services across the country**. Counselling can offer a safe space that allows both GBV survivors but also GBV perpetrators to stop, reflect on what is happening, and decide what to do next. Counselling can also be an important way of helping people who are locked into a negative cycle of violence to sit down, reflect on their behaviour and try to make change. We must try to stop violent acts before they manifest – one way is by providing people in distress with counselling.

Longer term, our second recommendation focuses much more holistically on **building families environments which are more stable and secure, by focusing more Government resources on family planning**. We all must commit to making change in our own lives – to be more respectful of our spouses and our children. Family planning must be part of our home lives too.

Family planning fundamentally empowers a woman, probably more than any other factor. She furthers her education, marries later, has less children, is healthier. It strengthens the family unit, the children are better loved and educated and the cycle of violence is disrupted. We must address family planning at the personal level, but also at the government level, by properly funding family planning education and related health services

Mr Speaker,

Let me now come to the last major substantive recommendation from our Report that I want to bring to the House's attention today. It is last – but let me clear that is by no means the least of our recommendations. In fact, it is my hope that this recommendation can be address in this very parliamentary session.

Our Committee Report calls on the Government to urgently progress the proposal to reserve seats for women in the National Parliament. This is a strategy to promote gender equality at the highest levels – and will ensure that in the next parliament, women can co-lead the National GBV response.

We understand that the Government has a proposal under development to reserve 5 regional seats for women is a work in progress. The policy has been approved by Cabinet in principle, but the details of the legislative process still need to be determined. At this stage, it is not clear whether the 5 reserved seats will be legislated in time to be implemented at the 2022 national election.

Mr Speaker,

With no women in the 10th National Parliament, reserving seats for women now appears to be the most viable option ensuring that women are included in the next Parliament. This will ensure that women’s voices can be heard within Parliament regarding addressing GBV.

Legislation must be brought to the House in this session, so that it can be passed in Three Readings in time for implementation in advance of the 2022 National General Election. There is simply no time to waste.

CONCLUSION

Mr Speaker,

I now come to my conclusion and I thank you for the time you have given me to make this Statement.

GBV is one of the most critical issues holding back our national development. Until we can ensure the protection and safety of every single member of the PNG community, we will never be able to harness our full development potential. We simply must take more action to end GBV – and the time for that action is now.

We are a big country, with our people sprawling across a beautiful, unique landscape. But we are also a small country – where we all know our neighbours and our communities. We know when a woman or child is being hurt – and we surely know that we must do something about it.

Mr Speaker,

Today I call on my fellow MPs to do something with us. Let us debate this Report in the spirit in which it has been tabled – as a roadmap for all of us to use to guide our own efforts.

We are each leaders of our home communities – we can use our voices – and even our own community development funds – to do more. You will see that we have recommended in our report that MPs use our PSIP and DSIP funds to immediately support GBV responses in our home electorates. Please do consider going home and doing just that as a sign to your people that you have taken this Report seriously – you have taken GBV seriously – and you have taken their needs to seriously.

We can all do more. stand here to make my commitment to doing more, and I look forward to working with every member of this House to do more together. Let us work to end GBV and ensure a safe and prosperous PNG for every man, woman and child.

With that, I commend this Report to you Mr Speaker and to the House.

Thankyou.