



EDUCATION | HEALTH | EQUALITY | LEADERSHIP

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Dear Hon. Powes Parkop

CC: Permanent Parliamentary Committee on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment

Kokoda Track Foundation (KTF) is an Australian international development organisation working alongside people and communities in Papua New Guinea to improve lives, livelihoods, and futures. KTF works in remote and rural communities to improve access to elementary and primary education, improve access to quality and accessible healthcare, improve opportunities for, and the safety of women along with fostering the next generation of leaders. Over the years, KTF's presence and impact have expanded from its birthplace in Oro Province in 2003, most notable in Oro is the establishment and operation of Kokoda College in Sohe District, support for the operations of the Province's only Safe house for survivors escaping violence, and support for over 15 health facilities in remote and rural locations across Sohe and Ijivitari Districts.

Our geographical focus for our work in Equality is Oro province, a region in Papua New Guinea with low development indicators across many measures and a region with little private sector investment. In 2022, KTF undertook a place-based Gender Equality, Disability and Social Inclusion analysis in Oro Province. This comprehensive analysis involved wide-reaching consultation with community members, leaders, women's group representatives, and our various partners across KTF's Education, Health and Equality projects to understand the experiences of women, girls and persons with disabilities. By seeking primary data due to limited availability of secondary data, significant insights were revealed:

Access to Health Services

The accessing of health services in Oro Province is gendered; often women and girls are restricted by the decision of men, coupled with this is stigma around access and their safety. Notably, a Health Officer mentioned how husbands make the decision of how many children are conceived, naturally increasing the risk of Gender-based Violence (GBV). Young girls are often afraid to visit health services independently due to stigma, assumptions around promiscuity, and safety concerns.

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Access to Education

Access to education for women and girls in Oro Province is profoundly influenced by societal expectations of gendered caregiving roles, responsibilities and division of labour. Young girls who are married off at an early age often desire to continue their education but are hindered by a cultural obligation of fulfilling what their mothers do, such as 'performing chores and duties of a woman' like housework, cleaning, caregiving duties. Similarly, girls who conceive children at a young age (such as during their school years), believe they cannot access education due to having children.

A commonality with girls leaving school is if their family places emphasis on earning through labour, rather than accessing education. Gold mining and the palm oil industry are quite prominent in Oro Province, although remain secretive. A Juvenile Officer noted how alluvial gold mining is physically burdensome work and women and girls are at risk of sexual assault and harassment across various mine sites due to the secretive and covered nature of the local operations.

On a positive note, a teacher from the Focus Group Discussion expressed when young women start studying at KTF's Education Project *Kokoda FODE College*, it gives them power, with husbands supporting them. The teacher observed a shift in attitudes and perceptions towards women within the community. When these women return to their village after studying at KTF's Kokoda FODE College, they are perceived differently, in a positive light, and model different behaviour learned at the college.

Violence Against Women and Girls

Gender-based Violence (GBV) is alarmingly prevalent in Oro Province. Participants voiced concerns about the lack of services to support survivors. Women and girls feel unsafe in the community, particularly when young people are under the influence, they scream, harass, and even chase after women and girls.

Two Educators shared a distressing common occurrence where women and children escape their homes from family violence, they resort to their nearby family homes or hide in the bushes until their husband/or son cools down, so they can safely return home. When the man is intoxicated he may violently damage the house, destroy gardens and attack other family members. However, women face a myriad of challenges when hiding in bushes or resorting to family homes. When hiding in bushes, women must contend with the fear of snakes and endure discomfort due to lack of access to food, bathing and comfortable sleep. Likewise, seeking refuge with relatives often leads to sleepless night and hunger due to overcrowded living conditions.

Another notable discussion pertains to cases where a man marries a woman, and the woman brings younger sisters or female cousins into the family, they are more susceptible to sexual assault, often by extended family members. Unfortunately, this has become normalised. Furthermore, if a woman

has children from another father, the new male partner is more likely to abuse or neglect these children as he assumes controls over the family - particularly with finances, food, resources.

Women expressed fear when reporting cases of GBV, especially when the abuse occurs within their homes or involves sexual abuse. Essentially, this is due to men being the head of the house, they are the decision makers. Women indicated a desire to access family planning services, although their husbands did not want them too. Men often prevent women from accessing health services due to Community Health Workers potentially raising allegations of GBV to village court and police.

From [KTF's recent Project Zero Evaluation](#), Kokoda Memorial Hospital reported 3-4 survivors are admitted to the facility each month with severe injuries from FSV, and a further 5-10 receiving outpatient care. The hospital doesn't have any vehicles available to transport survivors from the facility to their homes, or to the Sohe Safe House (1-to-2-hour drive). Many young, married women are presenting at Kokoda Hospital and other health facilities in the district after experiencing FSV. In many cases, these women have travelled to Sohe to marry older men, and are disconnected from their home communities.

KTF's Equality Program: Project Zero in Oro Province

[Project Zero](#) seeks to address Gender-based Violence (GBV), Family and Sexual Violence (FSV), and Child Protection in remote and rural Oro Province. In 2020, KTF responded to the significant endemic of gender-based violence which was becoming more apparent via KTF's programs and mainstreaming of gender equality approaches. One of the critical impacts of humanitarian crises, including health emergencies like COVID-19, is that women and children become less safe in their homes. However, KTF noticed significant gaps in all spheres of preventing and responding to Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) including institutional capacity to respond, stakeholders working in silos and fragmented responses, lack of skilled professionals to support survivors, and most importantly awareness of the condoning of VAWG. Amid the global pandemic, access to information, referral pathways and support were more critical than ever.

In Oro Province, addressing VAWG was not a focus of the humanitarian and development context, with KTF being one of the first to seek transformation of structures enabling and impeding advances towards gender equality. Consequently, this propelled KTF to design a new project in close consultation with communities, Government, schools, health facilities and project partners to address GBV, FSV and the protection of children. Through KTF's first iteration of Project Zero, the partnership strategy has been a unique testimony of localisation, working with partners Femili PNG, Family Sexual Violence Action Committee, Papua New Guinea Counsellors Association and supporting Oro Province's first and only Safe House, and key stakeholders including the Oro Provincial Government Family and Sexual Violence Unit (FSVU), Oro Provincial Government Department of Community Development, Schools and Health facilities all collectively working

towards one common goal: making Oro Province a safer place for women and girls. Over the past three years, KTF has seen significant impact in the lives and futures of women and girl survivors through a combination of preventative community education and outreach and supporting responsive service delivery. In particular, awareness raising and shifting perceived norms, upskilling first-responders on supporting survivors, advocating with key government stakeholders and gathering service providers, and providing a safe place for survivors at the Safe House where they can receive support to access counselling, justice, health and repatriation services. However, VAWG continues to be a pressing issue and the depth and reach of Project Zero is needed across Oro Province.

Since 2020, KTF's Project Zero has:

- Supported 100+ survivors of FSV at Oro Province's only Safe House, primarily women and children survivors
- Assisted 100+ Community Leaders in undertaking FSV referral pathways training, empowering them as community advocates
- Reached over 6000+ people through FSV and GBV awareness
- Delivered the first-of-its-kind Basic Counselling Course to 24 eager participants dedicated to supporting survivors of violence ([read more about this here](#))

The recent evaluation of Project Zero highlighted the invaluable partnership and collaboration with organisations. Brian* (name changed to protect anonymity of respondent) from Femili PNG's outreach team observed a lot of FSV in Oro upon his first visit there, in particular violence in schools. He said teachers were sexually abusing their own female students, and as a result many young girls were unable to complete their schooling. Brian says Project Zero has brought together partners working on FSV, like Femili PNG, and ensured no one has to work in isolation. "Everyone is coming together now, which is a good sign. This is very important." Brian's colleague Stacey* remarked that prior to Project Zero, there was no effective communication between service providers. Now there is a bridge to coordinate and communicate. Since Project Zero began its outreach program, Brian says many changes can be observed. People in communities are reporting and referring abuse. "The information we provide is allowing people to change their thinking." But Brian says there is still much work to do. Essential services are under-resourced and at capacity, and in rural and remote areas essential services are often not available. Service delivery must be strengthened, and Femili PNG is eager to continue working with KTF to support local institutions addressing FSV in Oro.

The external evaluation identified as a high priority the continuation Project Zero given the strong rationale and evident success, particularly expanding the geographical reach in Oro Province.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in grey ink, appearing to read 'Genevieve Nelson'.

Dr Genevieve Nelson
Chief Executive Officer
Kokoda Track Foundation