

# TRANSFORMING HARMFUL GENDER NORMS IN THE SOLOMON ISLANDS: A STUDY OF THE OXFAM SAFE FAMILIES PROGRAM

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**The Equality Institute, Monash University, Oxfam Australia and Oxfam Solomon Islands**



This paper is based on a process evaluation of a program implemented by Oxfam, called the 'Let's Make Our Families Safe' (also known as *Safe Families*) program, which is part of a ten-year strategic initiative, supported by Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT). The aim of Safe Families is to prevent and respond to family and sexual violence in Solomon Islands. The research was funded by SVRI and World Bank. The research team is made up of a consortium between The Equality Institute, Monash University and Oxfam Australia and SI.

Initially, larger questions arose out of this research, and some of the team's previous projects, around the ethics of doing this type of research. Best-practice ethics and safety guidelines for conducting VAW are outlined in the WHO's Ethics and Safety Guidelines for Research on Domestic Violence against Women. The guidelines play a crucial role in ensuring that research on VAW are conducted in a safe and ethical way. However, when conducting VAW research in small, remote and high prevalence communities – such as in SI or indeed other parts of Asia - the practical implementations of these guidelines can be especially challenging and may require adaptation to suit the local context. So, we're met with a tension between how this works in practice. Do we resist doing important work if it doesn't fall into the WHO guidelines? Or do we, still mindful of broader ethical responsibilities, find ways to

adapt to context? I had hoped to present this for you all, however, this work is still ongoing, and we are currently still generating more research on this for the SVRI conference and papers forthcoming.

Therefore, the subject of today's presentation will be on the topic of prevention of violence against women and social norms change as a strategy for this. I will present the key findings from this study, particularly focussing on the key role Bride Price plays in SI with regards to VAW and the recommendations we have developed around programmatic interventions that utilise the positive elements of BP as a point of entry for positive social norms change.

#### Background to EQI

EQI is a global research and creative agency working to advance gender equality and prevent violence against women and girls. We work with clients and collaborators to develop research, guide policies and programmes, and design creative campaigns to incite social change across the world. Over the past 3 and a half years we have conducted over 50 studies around the world in about 13 countries, including national prevalence studies, program evaluations and systematic evidence reviews. We've also worked with governments to improve government systems that serve women. Some of our clients have been the likes of DFAT, UNWomen, Oxfam, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and Amnesty International and we've worked with academic partners as well such as Monash, The University of Melbourne, and The Global Women's Institute (@ George Washington Uni) and SVRI.

## BACKGROUND



Solomon Islands is a Pacific Island nation encompassing over 900 islands spread across 1,500 kilometres of ocean. It is ranked 152 out of 189 on the UN's Human Development Index (HDI) and the population of approximately 560,000 mostly live a rural lifestyle supported by subsistence agriculture and fishing. The majority of Solomon Islanders are of Melanesian descent. Solomon Islands gained independence from the British in 1978 and is a predominantly Christian country. The Church, along with *kastom* (traditional beliefs and practices), sets an important context for the norms, attitudes, and behaviours of Solomon Islanders. Like most parts of the Pacific, Solomon Island cultures are traditionally collectivist, characterised by deep obligations to family and tribe.

## BACKGROUND: SOLOMON ISLANDS AND VAW

- 64% of ever-partnered women had experienced physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner since the age of 15.
- 37% of young women aged 14-29 reported that they had been sexually abused before the age of 15, and 38% reported that their first sexual encounter was forced.
- Nearly three-quarters of Solomon Islands women think that a man is justified in beating his wife under some circumstances.
- Bride price was a factor which increased risk of Intimate Partner Violence

- *Family Health and Safety Study, Solomon Islands*: <https://pacific.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/SolomonIslandsFamilyHealthandSafetyStudy.pdf>

A comprehensive national prevalence study of violence against women and girls, using the WHO multi-country Study on Women's Health and Domestic Violence methodology (mentioned earlier), which was led by my Executive Director Dr Emma Fulu, was conducted in Solomon Islands in 2009. The *Family Health and Safety Study* found that 64% of ever-partnered women had experienced physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner since the age of 15. The same survey found that 37% of young women aged 14-29 reported that they had been sexually abused before the age of 15, and 38% reported that their first sexual encounter was forced. The same study showed that nearly three-quarters of Solomon Islands women think that a man is justified in beating his wife under some circumstances. The *Family Health and Safety Study* further found that bride price was a factor which increased risk of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV), particularly when it was not paid in full. Women whose bride price had not been fully paid were more than two and a half times more likely to experience partner violence than women whose marriage did not involve bride price.

## SAFE FAMILIES PROGRAM AND STUDY

- Safe Families is part of a ten-year strategic initiative, supported by the Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), to prevent and respond to family and sexual violence in Solomon Islands
- **Mobilising communities to prevent and respond to family and sexual violence (Community Engagement Facilitators)**
  - *Communities mobilisation, Awareness raising, Community Action.*
- **Enabling and resourcing collective action by coalitions**
- **Building the evidence base through research and evaluation**
- **Strengthening national women's institutions, laws and policies**
- **Research Questions**
  - To improve understanding of the context-specific norms that drive family and sexual violence in two provinces in Solomon Islands, and the potential pathways and mechanisms to change these norms;
  - To explore changes which have been achieved through the *Safe Families* program among individuals, communities and agencies, and how these can be addressed in optimising and taking to scale the *Safe Families* intervention;
  - To identify effective and less effective elements of the *Safe Families* program and recommend measures for strengthening these elements and
  - To advance our understanding of how to conduct research on VAW that is ethical, safe and rigorous in the context of small, geographically-disparate island communities where violence is relatively normalised.



[Photo credit: Alice Plate/OxfamAUS.]

Implemented by Oxfam, the 'Let's Make Our Families Safe' (also known as *Safe Families*) program is part of a ten-year strategic initiative, supported by the Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), to prevent and respond to family and sexual violence in Solomon Islands. The first phase of the implementation in six communities in Malaita and Temotu provinces ran for just over three years (March 2015 to June 2018).

The goal of the *Safe Families* program was to shift local attitudes and norms so that family violence will no longer be considered acceptable. The program aimed to contribute to this goal through:

### **Mobilising communities to prevent and respond to family and sexual violence**

The *Safe Families* community mobilisation process was led by Oxfam Community Engagement Facilitators (CEFs), who provided intensive training, and work in mixed gender pairs to build long-term relationships with target communities. Over a 12-month period, the CEFs undertook:

*Communities mobilisation*, which was facilitated with support from community leaders, such as traditional and faith leaders, and other support networks. During this stage, Family Violence Prevention and Response Action Committees (FVPRAC) were

also established to guide the implementation of the program.

*Awareness raising*, which involved a structured process of regular community conversations. Community members learned about family and sexual violence using a gender and power sensitive approach. These conversations were facilitated by CEFs using a toolkit developed by IWDA (International Women's Development Agency).

*Community Action*, in which the communities developed their own Community Action Plans (CAP) outlining their priorities to prevent and respond to family and sexual violence at a community level.

*\*early indications of success are emerging due to training and exposure of CEFs\**

### **Enabling and resourcing collective action by coalitions**

A unique and innovative aspect of the *Safe Families* model was the development of *Safe Families* Provincial Alliances – multi-stakeholder coalitions, which included health services, police, women's organisations, family support centres, church groups and local religious organisations.

### **Building the evidence base through research and evaluation AND Strengthening national women's institutions, laws and policies**

The *Safe Families* program provided core funding to national and provincial women's institutions to ensure voices of rural women were included in the development of national legislation and policies to address family violence. These organisations were closely involved in providing information about the new *Family Protection Act* (2014) to rural populations.

Based on a review conducted in 2017 by DFAT which recommended that *Safe Families* be continued for a second phase, Phase II of the *Safe Families* program commenced in January 2019.

## SOCIAL NORMS

Social norms are the common standards within a social group regarding socially acceptable behaviour in particular social situations. Social norms have two parts:

**Typical behaviour:** A shared belief on what others in a group *actually* do

**Appropriate behaviour:** What people think they *ought* to do .

*Social Norms are held in place by rewards (status, respect) and sanctions (Violence, ostracism)*

**Gender norms** are ideas about how women and men *should* be and act – ‘ideal/good’ behaviour, roles and traits.

**The social norms that drive Violence Against Women (VAW) in Solomon Islands are:**

- Normalisation of VAW (‘discipline’)
- Bride price
- Justification of violence as teaching a lesson (linked to Bride Price)
- Gender norms (Men as boss; Good woman – also linked to Bride Price)

A key component of the research examined the context specific social norms that drive family and sexual violence in Malaita and Temotu. Social norms are the common rules shared by a group regarding socially acceptable behaviour in particular social situations. A social norm is made up of one’s beliefs about what *others* do, and by one’s beliefs about what others *think* one should do. People are inclined to comply with a norm if both these social expectations are in place – that is, if they expect others will conform and expect them also to conform to it (and would disapprove if they did not). Social norms are maintained by the anticipation of approval or disapproval of one’s actions, otherwise known respectively as positive and negative sanctions.

Social norms about appropriate roles and behaviour for women and men are called gender norms. This is oftentimes expressed through local conceptions about how women and men should *ideally* behave. Put more simply, these are the common understandings people have of what characteristics make a ‘good’ man and a ‘good’ woman.

The social norms that drive Violence Against Women (VAW) are:

Normalisation of VAW (That is the extent to which violence is considered an everyday

part of life – in this context ‘discipline’ was considered fine, but VAW was not)

Bride price

Justification of violence as teaching a lesson (linked to Bride Price)

Gender norms (Men as boss; Good woman – also linked to Bride Price)

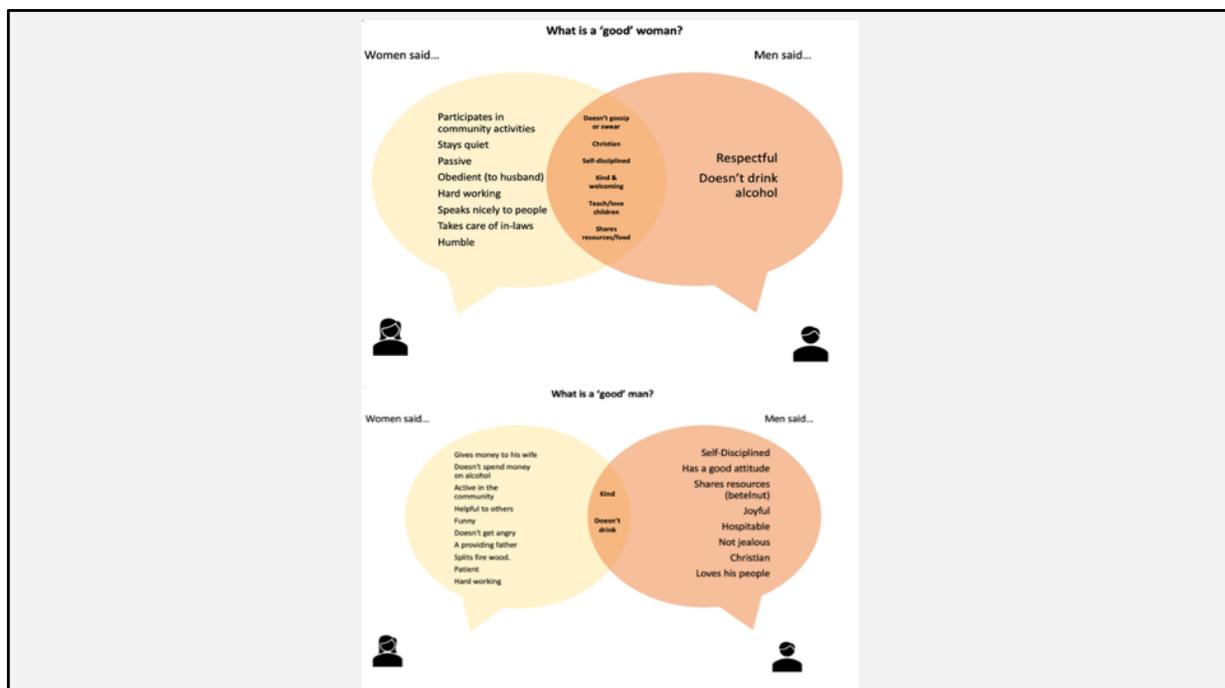
So I’m interested here in the interplay between these four elements, and how they are related will become clear shortly.

Starting with Normalisation - VAW in this context is highly normalised in the form of ‘discipline’; that is women who when they act in ways ‘other’ than how a ‘good’ woman ought to, don’t ‘experience violence’ but are “taught a lesson” (by their husbands).

**Participant:** *It is alright for him to beat her because the wife does some wrong things inside the house, so husband has the right to beat her... it's okay for the husband to beat his wife for her mistakes in order for her to realize the wrongs she did. – Female community member, Temotu*

There are myriad examples where one of the ways VAW was expressed was not through what was seen as “unnecessary” VAW – beating a woman for “no reason” – but it was common for people to say VAW was wrong (which we can presume they mean “senseless” violence, or for no ‘good’ reason) and the instructive, disciplinary action of correcting “bad behaviour”.

So we established this was common and then we needed to find out what traits were considered ‘good’ behaviour for women (and also men) and what happened when they transgressed these idealised behaviours. There were similarities between what women thought of as ‘good’ behaviour for themselves, and what men considered ideal behaviour for women. However, there were some interesting differences between what women considered ideal behaviour for men, and how men viewed ideal behaviour for themselves.



The research revealed that both men and women had similar ideas about what it meant to be a 'good' woman, which included: being kind and welcoming; be responsible for child-rearing; be self-disciplined; not gossip or swear; sharing resources; and being a good Christian. On the other hand, there was greater divergence between men and women's ideas about what it meant to be a **'good' man**. When asked to describe the characteristics of a 'good' man, most female participants highlighted **'relationship traits'**. For example, women commonly said that a 'good' man is someone who gives their wife money, is kind to her and provides for their family. Men more readily identified **positive traits related to community-level connections**, for example, many men said a 'good' man is kind to other community members, shares what they have, and also has a good attitude to others. The only thing men and women agreed on when it came to being a 'good' man was that they should be kind and refrain from drinking.

These different perspectives likely stem from the fact that in Solomon Islands, men are seen as 'natural leaders' and are expected to fulfil leadership roles in both the household and the community. (More research needed). The tendency for women in the study to nominate the relationship traits of 'good' men could be due to the high rates of intimate partners violence experienced by women in Solomon Islands, as well

as the view they are natural caregivers.

It is also noteworthy that some of the features that make a woman a 'good' woman, also could potentially increase her risk to violence. For example, if a woman is overly generous and provides food and hospitality to her relatives and extended family, she risks being seen as giving away too much of the family's resources and this could lead to arguments with her husband.

Understanding social norms around what makes a 'good' woman and 'good' man is important because these norms help to set the community's ideas and attitudes about what kinds of violence are justifiable. It is further key to seeing how men take on the role of 'boss' and are therefore seen as the right person to enforce women's ideal behaviour, usually with violence.

**Interviewer:** *If a man [pays] the bride price, with shell money or whatever, is it ok for him to hit or assault his wife?*

**Participant:** *Yes, for me, in my own thoughts, I paid for you [a woman], so you must 'stay straight' [behave well] for me. So, if you do something wrong against custom, I must teach you a lesson. It doesn't mean I will beat you until you die, just for you to learn a lesson [laughs].*

– Male community member, Malaita

Bride Price.

## BRIDE PRICE VS. BRIDE WEALTH

**Bride price:** is often understood transactionally, as a commodification of women and means to reinforce men's dominance; women are 'paid for', and therefore considered to be 'owned' subject to the control of her husband.

**Bride Wealth:** marriage related exchanges are understood to be embedded in wider systems of reciprocity. More about exchange, value, and social ties.

Bride price is a payment made from the groom and the groom's family to the bride's family at the time of marriage. Most respondents indicated bride price is an important practice in both Malaita and Temotu. More broadly in the Pacific, today the practice is often understood transactionally, as a commodification of women and means to reinforce men's dominance; women are 'paid for', and therefore considered to be 'owned' subject to the control of her husband. This is inconsistent with traditional understandings of bride price, or bride *wealth*, whereby marriage related exchanges are understood to be embedded in wider systems of reciprocity. However, the data in this research suggests that understandings of bride price in Solomon Islands have shifted, and it is a key social norm that enables VAW in a number of ways. The research found it was related to a number of other significant factors, such as implied understandings of good womanhood, when VAW would be justified and whether or not a woman feels pressure to remain in a violent relationship. Therefore, understanding the circumstances in which violence occurs becomes clearer when Bride Price is more fully understood as a cultural practice.

## BRIDE WEALTH

*“It doesn’t necessarily mean that you are paying for the girl’s life. It is about **partnership** between the man and the woman’s families so that they stay together as one.” – Male community member, Temotu*

*“Paying of bride price **builds relationship** between the boy and the girl and both tribes... The purpose of the bride price that has been paid is to **strengthen their relationship**.” - Male community member, Malaita*

*Before, marriage was when you **joined two tribes together**. [...] I remember the elders before, they saw it [bride price] as a good thing, like the tribe or the girl, they saw some **value** in her. For example, she was a hard worker, but not only because of [just the] girl, because there was some value in uniting her tribe or her family with theirs. That’s why they paid, in custom[...] Before, in terms of custom, the elders and parents looked for a woman for the man, because they understood the **value** in the girl and her tribe and how she could benefit them, for example, she might be good at making shell money, that’s how tribes got through [survived] by seeking out the resources they didn’t have through bringing them into their family. – Male community member, Malaita*

### **3.3.1 People’s understanding of bride price is changing**

Participants’ understandings about the purposes of bride price were complex and differed between age groups. This demonstrates that understandings have likely changed over time and had an effect on how it is practiced today. This practice has deep cultural significance related to community ties and the way women are valued. Also known as ‘bride wealth’, historically, it was used as a form of compensation to the bride’s family for the ‘loss’ of a daughter, as she moved from her family home to live with her husband’s family. It also symbolised the formalisation of social ties between two families.

Here are some quotes from the data set that indicate these types of understandings.

## BRIDE PRICE

*“Okay, how I see it, is that woman is under the man. She is under the control of the man, so for him to [beat her], it’s okay, because he needs to teach her a lesson. For him to beat her to death, that’s not okay, because when she was with her family, they kept her well, but in terms of teaching her a lesson, that is his right because he has paid for her.” – Young male community member, Temotu.*

*“That’s the kind of attitudes of Malaitan people, you pay for a girl, then you own her.” – Young male community member, Malaita*

*“It’s like if you pay for something in the store, you own it. You don’t have to return it to the store... it’s your property [laughs]” – Young female community member, Malaita*

The study also found particularly younger age groups, indicated that these days they believed bride price also meant a woman is ‘owned’ by her husband.

This change in understanding is not surprising given the context. Many academics have written on the commoditisation of bride price in the Pacific more widely. Solomon Islands has also not been immune to modern and capitalist influences, and, like other Pacific nations, the arrival of colonial influences and missionaries also likely brought outside influences on these cultural transactions. Previously, Solomon Islanders did not frame the practice with understandings of ‘payment’, but rather local languages described an ‘exchange’ or ‘gift’. As such, bride price was never originally about ownership or property.

Shifts in the practices are also indicated in the currency used for such exchanges. In the past, traditional currency was exclusively used; in Malaita a type of ‘shell money’ and in Temotu ‘feather money’ were given for brides. Nowadays it is common to use both or modern currency, or as one woman from Temotu put it, “Today we use the ‘white man’s money’”. The research suggests that bride price is now becoming competitive and defined in terms of commodification, as indicated by participants who reminisced about the ‘old days’ when bride price was not so expensive and their feelings that “these days people charge too much.” Some wanted to see a cap on BP to prevent the competition getting out of control.

*“I will say is that **the marriage is only respected once the bride price has been settled.** Until that time the woman still belongs to the public... **until then, she is nobody’s wife...** it gives **value and respect** to the woman... And that woman will look upon herself as a married woman. [She’ll say] “I have been paid. People respect me. My husband’s people respect me because they paid for me”. – Male community member, Temotu*

*“The good part is, the first one I have already said, that the **woman must have power** (in her new family) ‘I am married, they paid for me’, when she walks around the community, that’s what she thinks.”*

*[Transcriber’s Note: meaning she is assured that she has a right to exist in that community because she has been paid for, in that sense, the bride price validates her and gives her power in her new community] and she thinks that she must produce children for this ‘line’ /tribe].*

*“A night before the girl goes to her new family, her relatives will spend time with her **advising her about what to do and what not to do.** The boy as well. The purpose of the bride price that has been paid is to strengthen their relationship.” – Young male community member, Malaita*

One part that is quite clear is traditionally speaking the woman is socially more valued once BP is paid for. Imbricated in this are also the features of a good woman, that is, if you are a woman who has been paid for, it is understood that you will behave as a ‘good’ woman.

### **3.3.2 Tying Bride Price to Gender roles and ‘Discipline’**

While the exact rates for VAW in the past, and how these may have also related to bride price, are unknown, the interview and focus group discussion data suggests that these more recent ideas surrounding ‘ownership’ of a woman, are being used as key justifications for violence. However, it is not simply in the idea that a woman is considered to be ‘owned’ that justifies violence, but that bride price places certain social expectations squarely on the shoulders of women.

As a publicly acknowledged exchange, bride price performs an important social function for women’s status and roles in the wider community. When bride price is paid, a woman, recognised now as a ‘married woman’, is granted respect and honour; she is ‘legitimised’ and seen as a woman having ‘value’.

**UNDERSTANDING THE CIRCUMSTANCES IN WHICH VIOLENCE IS JUSTIFIED BECOMES CLEARER WHEN WE MORE FULLY UNDERSTAND BRIDE PRICE.**

- It is not 'ownership' (solely) that justifies violence, but that Bride Price implies certain social expectations.
- Bride Price = woman's *value or status* in the family / community as a married woman, who is 'paid for'.
- This carries expectations (i.e. 'good' behaviour).
- This *directly impacts justifications for violence*.
- This however is *not* viewed as violence but 'discipline'.
- The 'right' to discipline is found in the fact bride price has been paid.

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As a publicly acknowledged exchange, bride price performs an important social function for women's status and roles in the wider community. When bride price is paid, a woman, recognised now as a 'married woman', is granted respect and honour; she is 'legitimised' and seen as a woman having 'value'.

*“He does have the right to do so [hit her] because he already paid for her bride price... To teach her a lesson so she won’t do the same mistake again. – Female community member, Temotu*

*“Sometimes excessive bride price affects our boys like this, they think that because they paid for the bride price they own their wife, and if she doesn’t meet their expectations...that can cause it... [violence] – Male community member, Temotu*

**Interviewer:** *So, what you are saying is that when a woman’s bride price is very high, the man and his family will have high expectations of her...In terms of what?*

**Participant:** *In terms of how much the woman sleeps... works in the house. Or just if the woman doesn’t meet the standard that the man likes. – male community member, Temotu*

## PROGRAMMATIC IMPROVEMENTS?

- **Could the program include the subject of bride price in program messaging and community dialogues on VAW?**

Explore programmatic opportunities for moving away from the commodity related notions of bride price, and reinforcing the positive traditions more closely aligned with 'bride wealth', whereby marriage related exchanges are embedded in larger systems of reciprocity and kinship formation, that emphasise the empowering, positive aspects of it for women, rather than notions of so-called 'ownership'

**Learnings from the field suggest projects are successful when they are:**

- community led, not externally driven;
- focus on changing social norms at the community level, rather than changing attitudes at the individual or family level;
- empower women.

In a process evaluation how do we take this data and create feasible outcomes for a project. We know Bride price is being used as a justification for VAW in many cases, however we do not propose interventions that aim to cease the practice of Bride Price altogether, but that shift attitudes for it's functions and understandings.

**One of the recommendations to emerge from the report is to include the subject of bride price in program messaging and community dialogues on VAW.** We feel there are programmatic opportunities for moving away from the commodity related notions of bride price, and reinforcing the positive traditions more closely aligned with 'bride wealth', whereby marriage related exchanges are embedded in larger systems of reciprocity and kinship formation, that emphasise the empowering, positive aspects of it for women, rather than notions of so-called 'ownership'. These messages and dialogues would be more effective if supported by and engaged local community leaders. Practical approaches to shifting the norms and practices of bride price could draw from the learnings and global evidence on interventions aimed as shifting harmful norms related to dowry or arranged marriages. Tostan is one example, that has had a lot of success in shifting harmful social norms around forced/early child marriage and FGC.

In short, Tostan originally started in Senegal in a village called Malicounda-Bambara with the intention to provide problem-solving skills to rural women. Initially, the Tostan program focused on literacy and teaching women the skills they needed to design their own projects as a means of addressing village needs. But then, Tostan added new modules on human rights and on women's health that included sessions on women's sexuality and FGC. Attendance at these sessions on women's health and women's human rights "broke all records, and lessons were disseminated by word of mouth around a much broader community" (Easton et al., 2003, p. 448). The outsiders who developed the original program thought that the women in the village would use their new collaboration and problem-solving skills to meet village needs by developing small livestock projects, well-baby clinics or improving village sanitation or the local water supply (Easton et al., 2003). However, when the women met to decide which village problem they wanted to address, the women decided that their first priority was to end FGC. They discussed the issues with neighbours, local religious leaders and village elders. Held a press conference in front of 20 Senegalese journalists and declared that they were renouncing the practice of FGC. The declaration was broadcast on national television and radio (Easton et al., 2003). Almost immediately, two nearby villages decided to join and end FGC. Soon thereafter, an imam from a neighbouring community— who initially came to convince the women of Malicounda-Bambara that they were wrong, but eventually decided to support them after discussing FGC with the women in his own household—gave them some wise counsel. He advised the women to go to visit friends and relatives in nearby villages in the inter-marrying community, and said,

"Do not tell the villagers what to do, but rather what Malicounda-Bambara and Nguerigne-Bambara have done, and why. Then let them tell their own stories and make their own decisions. Avoid using graphic terms or demonstrations for taboo activities. Refer to FGC simply as 'the custom,' as everyone knows what is meant ... Avoid condemning ... practitioners ... for practices they have been performing in good faith". (Easton et al., 2003, p. 449)

Now, through these education programs there have been over 8800 community declarations that have ended the practice, as well as child marriage and other harmful practices. Instead of relying on individuals to commit to making a change (and receiving significant backlash) they have found that when the whole community chooses to abandon FGC together, the social norm shifts. This community-led collective action allows the social sanctions that once held FGC in place to be dispelled, and new ones to be written: daughters can now be accepted as uncut, sons can be married to uncut women, and the next generation of girls can remain uncut.

Success = First, they are community led, not externally driven. Second, they focus on changing social norms at the community level, rather than changing attitudes at the

individual or family level. Third, they empower women

Because Safe Families is also a community mobilisation program, that is also showing the early signs of behaviour change on the CEFs (more time and exposure is needed for the wider community) and empowering for the female CEFs, we posit that SF (with more careful planning) could integrate similar learnings from projects like Tostan to empower communities to drive the community dialogue on BP, not with the intention to end it but to tap into the knowledge base of elders and return to its more traditional social functions, whereby women feel respect and value and hopefully men and communities are less inclined to feel ownership is a valid justification for VAW.

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