

Side Event on the Margins of the 11th Commonwealth Women's Affairs Ministers Meeting
Family Violence in Samoa – A National Inquiry
Hosted by the Human Rights Unit of the Commonwealth Secretariat & the Ombudsman of Samoa
Taumeasina Island Resort
6 September 2016

Family Violence in Samoa – SVSG's Perspective

“A strong, proud and successful community, does not tolerate any form of violence against women and children. It is one of the most basic human rights that members of our community should expect to be protected. They have a right to be protected from any form of abuse and violence. And should violence be done on them, they have a right to voice out the violence done to them, they have a right to be treated properly when they choose to bring their case to the appropriate authorities, and they have a right to expect their community to protect them throughout this process.”

- The Secretary General of the Commonwealth Secretariat;
- Justice Tafaoimalo Leilani Tuala-Warren;
- Ombudsman of Samoa, Maiava Iulai Toma;
- My learned Champions of domestic violence;
- Ladies and gentlemen

I am humbled by the invitation for Samoa Victim Support Group, to be represented, and in my capacity as the President, to be included amongst the speakers of this important forum. In reading the invitation, I saw that this forum is on human rights and therefore my presentation will be linking the work we do and how they are related to human rights.

It is in this respect that I will speak on Family Violence in Samoa, from SVSG's perspective.

The support services provided by Samoa Victim Support Group or SVSG, is centred around Families. As such, SVSG's motto of:

We Support, We Help, We Care, We are your Family

basically mandated the way we do, the things we do, and how we embrace the whole of community as a Family, in addressing Family Violence in Samoa. This is SVSG's Perspective.

As you most likely are aware, SVSG in 2005 was set up with a limited purpose. The purpose was only to provide for victims of sexual offending. It was more specifically focused on victims who were sexually violated within their families. The concern in which SVSG was set up to cater for is that these victim's were re-victimised while awaiting the hearing of their matter in court and when the hearing takes place. Victims would not be getting any support at all, they are pressured within their families to withdraw their cases, sometimes they continue to live within range of the perpetrator, and during the hearing of the matter their families would be sitting in support of the perpetrators and not the victims. They would not have any support at all. I do not have to tell you that in such circumstances the rights of these victims were not catered for by our community. SVSG tries to cater for the rights of the victims and advocate for those rights to be recognised and protected in our community. Shelters were created as a place of safety that these victims can seek refuge. SVSG would provide counsellors for these victims. SVSG would also provide a support person to attend the hearing of the matter with the victim. SVSG also worked to raise awareness with the appropriate authorities on the rights of these victims to be observed and protected as well as raise awareness within the community.

The problem has not been eliminated. There is still a lot of work in this area. Still a lot of human rights of these victims not fully recognised and observed. Even many of the victims themselves are not fully aware of their rights. Even appropriate authorities who work in the area are not fully aware of the rights of the victims in matters they are handling.

These rights are simple:

- (a) the right to be treated with respect when bringing a complaint to the appropriate authority;
- (b) the right to be informed of the status of their complaint and the process undertaken to deal with their complaint;
- (c) the right to have their complaint processed within a reasonable time;
- (d) the right to expect protection from the authorities they seek assistance from or information of how they can be protected;

(e) the right to be treated with dignity and respect during the process; and

(f) the right to be heard not only during the hearing but also at sentencing.

As the country became more aware of the work of SVSG throughout the years, more and more people came to SVSG with a variety of problems, outside the purpose of which SVSG was originally set up for.

It became difficult to turn them away because there was nowhere else for them to go. SVSG therefore expanded its services outside of its original mission, not out of choice, but out of the demands or needs from the community.

One of the extensions of the work of the SVSG was to work in family violence generally and not only on sexual violence within families. This extended the work of SVSG to all forms of violence within families. It is the same rights that must be observed and protected.

These are some of the work that SVSG put in place to recognise and observe the rights of those involved in family violence:

Advocacy in raising awareness:

With funding from the Government of Samoa in 2010, SVSG implemented the nation-wide 'No to Rape & Indecent Act' campaign, taking the message to primary and secondary schools, to village communities, to churches, to workplaces in government ministries, corporations and the private sector. This was the beginning of the transformation process for SVSG and Samoa, in addressing family violence.

The Stronger Communities Approach

The continuous increase in reported cases of domestic violence to SVSG for the period 2005 – 2010, triggered SVSG's stronger communities approach to family violence. SVSG learnt from experience that the solutions to problems in the village communities in Samoa, are found within the community.

With funding from UN Women Trust Fund to End Violence Against Women, SVSG worked with village communities from 2011 to 2013, to establish a stronger communities approach to family violence, by placing the onus of the responsibility for peaceful families, on to the communities.

SVSG believed that a “strong, proud and successful community does not tolerate any form of violence against women and children”, and this was what SVSG challenged the village leaders with, during the ‘Torch of Peace’ journey late 2012. SVSG and its extended family of supporters walked throughout Samoa for 16 days, rain or sunshine, spending the nights with families along the way, to proclaim the peaceful message for our families. The torch was a reminder to all the people of Samoa that you do have rights, and family violence is against our culture. Seeing women survivors of violence running towards the ‘Torch’ just to touch it, to embrace it, for what it represented – Hope – was heart breaking. It challenged SVSG to do more to address family violence.

Engaging the support of village, church and family leaders in the community is SVSG going back to the roots of the problem of violence in the homes, to seek relevant solutions. By bringing people together during this public event, the problems of family violence was viewed as the shared problem of the community, instead of seeing them as the fault of the victim. In seeing family members and village leaders taking a stand together, it empowered community members to challenge attitudes that perpetuate violence.

I remember in the awareness from the Ombudsman office on human rights, trying to explain to our community that human rights is not an individual right but they are community rights. From my experience, this is very true in family violence. When these rights are not observed, our community as a whole suffers. It is why we are approaching this problem as a community problem.

Saving Lives through the Help Line

The right to cry for help; to seek support; and the right to live, came out loud and clear following the Stronger Communities approach, and the Torch of Peace journey, as the memory of women survivors of violence in their working clothes, running towards the Torch, highlighted the need for more urgent action in our fight against violence.

In 2013, accessing support for women survivors of violence was therefore a concern, and as such, SVSG with funding support for 2 years from the UN Women Pacific Regional Ending Violence Against Women Facility Fund, established the 24-hour free Help Line service.

The 24 hour Help Line has now created a whole new work load for SVSG, as the community is now using the Help Line to call in for a variety of matters:

- We have cases where children call in as they are scared of their parents.

- Parents calling in for assistance with their children as they cannot seem to handle them.
- People calling in from the hospital for assistance in dealing with the hospital in getting the appropriate treatment.
- People are also calling for support in dealing with the Police in handling their matters.
- We are also receiving calls from those who witness violence upon women and children in their communities, but rather remain anonymous;
- Calls from attempted suicide victims or families of those attempting to commit suicide;
- And then of course, we received calls from women who are been beating up and running away from their partners, to seek refuge for themselves and their children.

The Help Line has been saving lives, and the project reached close to 85,000 primary beneficiaries during its 2-year implementation. To date, local telecommunication competitors, Bluesky and Digicel, have come together to co-sponsor the sustainability of the 24 hour free Help Line for the people of Samoa. This is SVSG embracing the whole of community in addressing family violence. This is SVSG's perspective.

Family Violence Court and SVSG's Advocacy Role

As per Justice Tafaoimalo's presentation, the Family Court set up by the government in 2014, to deal specifically with family violence matters, was originally outside of SVSG's mandate. This is because SVSG works with victims, not offenders.

However, this is all part of the transformation process SVSG and Samoa went through in addressing family violence.

SVSG's involvement late 2014 with the Family Court is through offenders of violence referred to SVSG's Advocacy Program, for relevant counseling support. There is anger management, stress, alcohol, couple and spiritual counseling available. It started with just men offenders, then in 2015, we had the women and the young offenders being referred from the Family and the Youth Courts. To date, SVSG has counseled and reunited families of close to 200 reformed men, women and young offenders of violence. The latest graduation of reformed men and women from SVSG's Advocacy Program was held last Friday in Savaii. The Judiciary has participated in all these graduation programs, to acknowledge their support of the positive changes in the lives of these offenders, as evidence by the coming together of their families in celebration. This is SVSG's contribution in breaking the cycle of violence in families.

To date, some of these rehabilitated men and women have joined SVSG's awareness team in village communities, testifying on the transformation in their lives from the counseling programs. Sharing their stories is their contribution in addressing family violence. These are offenders of violence taking ownership of their responsibilities to their families, for peaceful home environment.

A Holistic Approach to the Protection Order Process

This is a new challenge for SVSG in the fight against family violence. SVSG is the main applicant for family protection orders on behalf of many victims who come to SVSG for assistance. The Office of the Attorney General has even referred cases of sexual violence by fathers on their daughters where the daughters require a family protection order to protect them from this happening again.

Cases where the Police either do not take action or are very slow in taking action to protect the victim, are referred to SVSG who file for family protection orders for the protection of that victim.

SVSG is now required to appear in the Family Court whenever these applications are called or during main weekly sittings of the Family Court. Counselling is also provided for families where the Family Court asks SVSG for assistance with. SVSG also provides progress reports for the court.

In addition, SVSG's Protection Order process takes a holistic approach to addressing family violence. Paramount to this holistic approach is the safety of the survivor, and that of the family.

While the early days of the Protection Order process was challenging due to the need for more streamlined procedures to ensure immediate safety for the survivors, SVSG continued to comply with the procedure while taking a holistic approach. How?

Following the lodging of the application, we provide shelters for women survivors, and in most cases, the survivors' children as well. We provide their everyday needs while in the shelter. This is to ensure the safety of everyone while giving the Police time to serve the Protection Order.

SVSG is currently operating four shelter facilities at the Campus of Hope:

1. A House of Blessing, a nursery shelter for babies – Why, because these babies are the innocent victims of family violence, who have endured violence together with their mothers. Some of the babies in the nursery are born out of survivors of sexual violence or abandoned babies due to unwanted pregnancies;

2. A House of Hope for children survivors of family violence ages 3 – 12 years old including children with disabilities;
3. A House of Dreams for children survivors of family violence 13 years upwards; and
4. A Ray of Hope shelter for pregnant survivors of family violence.

These shelters were built and are operated through donations from local and international donors, on government leased land.

We are always seen in hospitals, in courts, in families, wherever that we are needed to support and provide assistance for our people.

Next in our services for those applying for Protection Orders is medical. We refer them for medical treatment if required.

We transport them to and from the Court, to the shelter, to the hospital or to the Police when required for more interviews. And we walk with them as their Family in Court.

We have counselling available on hand for the survivor and these sessions continue while in the shelter or when returned home.

In the shelters, the children's rehabilitation programs include the School of Hope, art lessons, music lessons, bible studies and others. For the mothers, they would undertake livelihood lessons lead by reverend's wives and more recently in 2015, with the support of the Women in Business Development Incorporated.

This is the difference between the Protection Order process that SVSG undertakes. This is the extension of the process that I have mentioned. It is a process inclusive of that caring nature, that loving nature, that supporting nature, which SVSG carries through its motto We Support, We Help, We Care, WE ARE YOUR FAMILY.

Addressing Family Violence through Gender Equality

Securing the financial support of UN Women both globally and regionally for SVSG's programs, attest to SVSG's commitment to address family violence.

Just last week, SVSG officially launched the Nofotane project with UN Women Fund for Gender Equality. It is the next step taken by SVSG to address the gender equality issues faced by unemployed married women, who have sought the support of SVSG with regards to family violence cases.

Entitled 'The Economic Empowerment of Nofotane Women in Rural Samoa', what the project aims to achieve is to improve the economic empowerment of women through livelihood programs, and to increase their participation in domestic and community matters.

This is because the capacity of women to bring about economic change for themselves, families and communities, is one of the most important contributing factors to achieving gender equality.

From SVSG's experience, economically empowered women have improved self-esteem and are less likely to tolerate violence. This latest project has therefore taken the advocacy role of SVSG to the next level, by addressing family violence through gender equality.

What Next from this Inquiry?

SVSG long ago realised the necessity of creating good partnerships to meet the needs of the community.

This realisation of partnership is what brings all of us here today for this National Inquiry. And we hope that our partnership with each of your organisations is continually strengthened, to address family violence in Samoa.

On this note, SVSG would like to see more dialogue between the government focal points for family violence and human rights with the government offices that would apply these rights on a daily basis. More importantly, we would like to see these dialogues translate into integrated approaches within the Government to address the rights of those involved in family violence.

I thank you again for inviting me to present in this forum and I hope that my presentation has given many of you enough to think about.