DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND SEXUAL ASSAULT IN THE PACIFIC ISLANDER COMMUNITY

Understanding the Pacific Islands

Asian/Pacific Islander Domestic Violence Resource Project
Erin Thomas
2017

"our Pacific
they entered her and scoured her
for gold and silver
they named us and translated us
into their own way
of seeing the world"
        Paradise Pasifika / Leilani Tamu

The objective of this guide is to provide an overview of the diversity in the Pacific Islands and to orient the reader on the geographical, historical, ethno-linguistic, and cultural diversity of the Pacific Islander community.

With regard to social justice and activism, Pacific Islanders are most commonly grouped in the Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) umbrella. Considering that Pacific Islanders account for 0.5% of the U.S. population, this grouping is understandable. However, the balance between inclusivity and disaggregation is a tricky one. Due to the geographic nature of island societies developing in relative isolation, there is massive diversity among sub-regions, countries, and islands within the Pacific Islands. This is not to mention the deep cultural differences between Pacific Islanders and Southeast Asians or Pacific Islanders and East Asians. Certainly similar historical contexts with regard to colonization and immigration render all Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders marginalized in American society, and collective action for the AAPI community benefits the community as a whole. However, the lack of disaggregated data and attention is an important area of focus. With regard to domestic violence and sexual assault, UN Women estimates that 60-80 percent of Pacific Islander women and girls experience physical or sexual violence by a partner or other in their lifetimes.[1]

This rate is higher than any other region in the world. Few countries in the Pacific Islands have laws against violence against women. These trends are reflected in other gender disparities including representation of women in government, which stands at 3.6% of national parliament seats in the region.[2]

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[1] "Violence Against Women (VAW) in the Pacific." UNFPA Pacific Sub-Regional Office. January 8, 2013.

[2] "Evidence, Data and Knowledge in the Pacific Island Countries." *Ending Violence Against Women and Girls*, August 2010.

Status of Pacific Island countries aside, these cultural contexts are relevant for Pacific Islander Americans. Although histories of colonization and trauma are generally shared among the AAPI community, Pacific Islanders bear different stereotypes and challenges in the U.S. For example, Pacific Islanders do not fit the "model minority" mold often associated with Asian Americans. By improving our understanding of the Pacific Islands and Pacific Islanders, we can build on our skills in cultural humility and provide better support to Pacific Islander survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault.

GEOGRAPHY

The land amid the Pacific Ocean has many different names to include different sub-regions, countries, and territories. The following are the most common names used to describe parts of this area.

Australasia = Australia, New Zealand, and the island of New Guinea (Indonesia Papua province and Papua New Guinea)

Oceania = Australia, New Zealand, and all the Pacific Islands

South Pacific = sometimes used to describe Pacific Islands in just the South Pacific Ocean (excluding Micronesia and Hawaii)

Pacific Islands = all islands in Micronesia, Melanesia, and Polynesia to exclude Australia (see fig. 1)
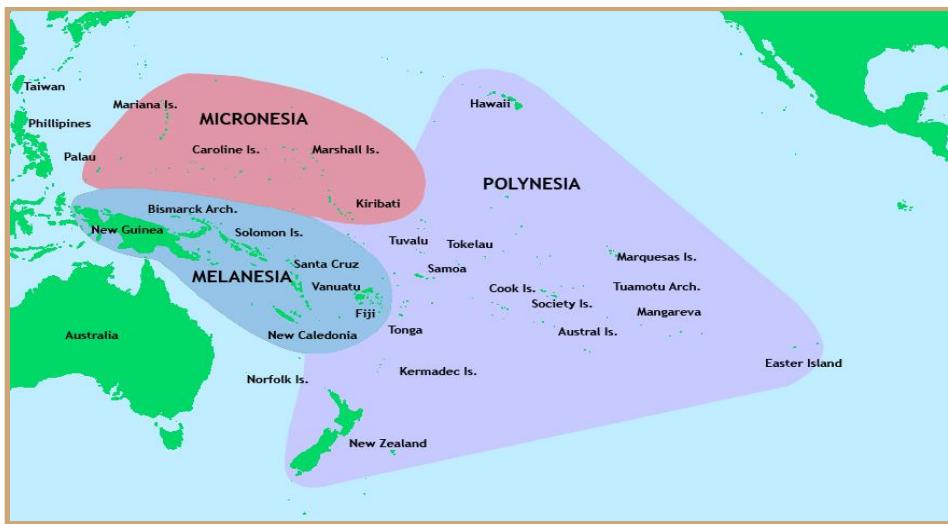

Fig. 1: Vaka Moana, Voyages of the Ancestors: The Discovery and Settlement of the Pacific, ed K.R. Howe, 2008, p57.

For inclusivity of minority groups, the term Pacific Islands and Pacific Islander is used most commonly in terms of social justice with regard to immigrants from the region. The Pacific Islands consists of 14 sovereign states and 11 special collectives. It was broken down into sub-regions by a French explorer in the 1830s mainly ethno-linguistically. These regions are Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia. Although they are not an exact match ethno-linguistically or anthropologically, these are the generally agreed-upon regions of the Pacific Islands.

Pacific Islands
- 14 sovereign states and 11 special collectives
- Broken down into three regions by a French explorer in the 1830s mainly ethno-linguistically
  - *Melanesia*
    - Countries and territories: Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Fiji, and New Caledonia
    - Developed the earliest, clan-based society for over 30,000 years, many different languages
  - *Micronesia*
    - Countries and territories: Federated States of Micronesia, Palau, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, and Nauru, Northern Mariana Islands, Guam, and Wake Island
    - "Newest" region to develop consisting of Melanesians, Polynesians, and South East Asians - primarily Filipino
  - *Polynesia*
    - Countries and territories: New Zealand, Cook Islands, Niue, Samoa, Tonga, Tuvalu, American Samoa, Easter Island, French Polynesia, Hawaii, Norfolk Island, Pitcairn Islands, Tokelau, Wallis and Futuna
    - Same language family, developed after Melanesia
- At present, the UK, France, New Zealand, Australia, and the U.S.[3] maintain spheres of influences in a variety of ways.

LANGUAGES

Languages in the Pacific Islands can be broken down into either the Papuan or Austronesian language families. Papuan languages are spoken in Papua New Guinea and other parts of Melanesia while both Micronesia and Polynesia use languages in the Austronesian language family specifically Malayo-Polynesian. Because of the similarities among the Malayo-Polynesian language, cross-cultural communication often involves pidgin language variations.

In the U.S., most Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders are English proficient (see fig. 2). As of 2012, 14% of the Pacific Islander American population had limited English proficiency (LEP). At the same time, 43% of Pacific Islander Americans speak a language other than English at home.[4] Pacific Islands languages are used at home and in Pacific Islander communities, but English proficiency is common.

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[3] The U.S. maintains six jurisdictions in the Pacific Islands region including three territories and three independent countries in free association. The U.S. territories in the Pacific Islands are American Samoa, Guam, and the Northern Mariana Islands. The independent states in free association with the U.S. are the Federated States of Micronesia, the Marshall Islands, and Palau.

[4] Ramakrishnan, Karthick, and Farah Z. Ahmad. "Language Diversity and English Proficiency." Center for American Progress, May 27, 2014.

In comparison, Pacific Islanders in the U.S. are highly English proficient. When broken down, groups with the greatest proportion of LEP individuals speak Micronesian languages other than Guamanian/Chamorro, Tonga, Melanesian, and Samoan.

Fig. 2: Ramakrishnan, Karthick, and Farah Z. Ahmad. "Language Diversity and English Proficiency." Center for American Progress, May 27, 2014. Page 4.

FIGURE 3.3a
Group differences in limited English proficiency (Asian American)

Vietnamese	53%
Chinese	46%
Korean	45%
Thai	45%
Cambodian	44%
Bangladeshi	43%
Laotian	42%
Hmong	41%
Indonesian	36%
Malaysian	30%
Pakistani	27%
Sri Lankan	25%
Japanese	24%
Filipino	22%
Asian Indian	22%
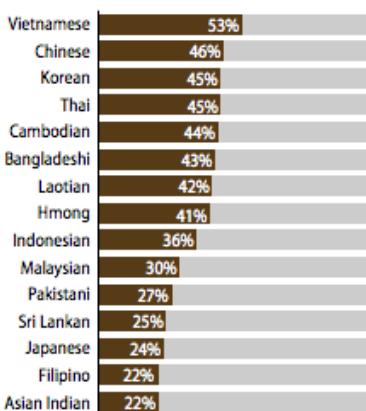
FIGURE 3.3b
Group differences in limited English proficiency (Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander)

Native Hawaiian	3%
Samoan	16%
Tongan	22%
Other Polynesian	12%
Guamanian/Chomorro	8%
Other Micronesian	40%
Melanesian	21%
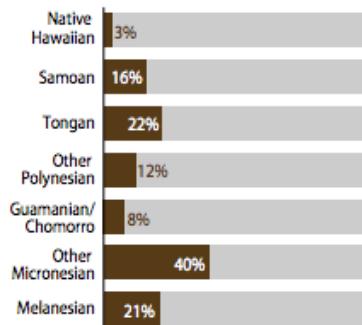
Note: Data are provided for those identifying with one national origin group and ages 5 and older.
Source: Authors analysis' of Public Use Microdata Sample from Bureau of the Census, "American Community Survey 2008-2012 American Community Survey 5-year Estimates," available at http://www.census.gov/acs/www/data_documentation/pums_data/ (last accessed May 2014).

MAIN ETHNICITIES

Ancestry	2010 U.S. Census	2010 % of Pacific Islander American Population
Native Hawaiian	527,077	43.0%
Samoan	184,440	15.1%
Tahitian	5,062	0.4%
Tongan	57,183	4.7%
Tokelauan	925	0.1%
Other Polynesian	9,153	0.7%
Guamanian or Chamorro	147,798	12.2%
Mariana Islander	391	0.03%
Saipanese	1,031	0.08%

Palauan	7,450	0.6%
Carolinian	521	0.04%
Kosraean	906	0.07%
Pohnpeian	2,060	0.2%
Chuukese	4,211	0.3%
Yapese	1,018	0.08%
Marshallese	22,434	1.8%
I-Kiribati	401	0.03%
Other Micronesian	29,112	2.4%
Fijian	32,304	2.6%
Papua New Guinean	416	0.03%
Solomon Islander	122	0.01%
Ni-Vanuatu	91	0.01%
Other Melanesian	222	0.7%
Others	240,179	19.6%
Total	1,225,195[5]	100.0%

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[5] "The numbers by detailed NHPI group do not add to the total Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander population. This is because the detailed NHPI groups are tallies of the number of NHPI responses rather than the number of NHPI respondents. Respondents reporting several NHPI groups are counted several times.For example, a respondent reporting "Samoan and Tongan" would be included in the Samoan as well as the Tongan numbers."
Hixon, Lindsay, Hepler, Bradford B., and Myoung Ouk Kim. *The Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander Population: 2010.* Washington, D.C.: U.S. Census Bureau, 2012. p14.

HISTORICAL TRAUMA

"Lives are lived in specific historical times and places…if historical times and places change, they change the way people live their lives."[6]

Historical trauma results from the subjugation of a population by a dominant group. It typically involves elements of segregation or displacement, physical or psychological violence, economic destruction and cultural dispossession.7 This trauma response in the primary generation is then passed down generationally. This results in an intergenerational trauma response that can span any number of the following manifestations: physiological, genetic, environmental, psychosocial, cultural, legal and social discrimination. Historical trauma leads to public health disparities including gender-based violence. Understanding the historical trauma of a population and the ramifications of the trauma response through subsequent generations is important to providing culturally-sensitive care for survivors in addition to informing primary prevention efforts.

Almost all Pacific Island countries and territories have experienced colonization in at least one sense. Beginning in the 16th century, European explorers began charting the Pacific Ocean and its various atolls and archipelagos. They also began trading resources and interacting with Pacific Islanders. After Australia was settled, the Pacific Islands became a new avenue for European competition for resources. This coincided with the spread of Christian missionaries in the 18th century. Over time, trading communities were built, and the European concept of land ownership caused clashes with many Pacific Islanders. Additionally, the lack of centralized indigenous rule was an opportunity for European governments to construct colonial rule. France, Germany, Great Britain, and the U.S. had the largest claims to territory in the Pacific Islands, and competition among them fueled stronger authoritarian rule and greater exploitation of resources.

After WWII, the UN encouraged self-determination among colonies in the Pacific Islands. Without organization and lack of nationalist movements, many colonies took time to finally gain independence. Post-colonial countries and territories are still fraught with paternalistic, controlling development programs. Additionally, colonial legacies have left numerous political issues, resulting in conflict from lack of compatibility with indigenous institutional structures. For example, the wantok system in the Solomon Islands, which ensures local political accountability, has developed a system of vote buying and political corruption because of the parliament electoral process. At the same time, climate change and the increasing frequency and intensity of natural disasters further threaten fragile democracies in the Pacific Islands.

Colonial legacy plays an important but not comprehensive role in understanding violence against Pacific Islander women. Through ideas of ethno-cultural superiority, the creation of the "other," and the employment of all forms of violence, colonization has exacerbated gender-based violence. In the Pacific Islands, this has often taken place through the stereotypes of "exotic" women who exist to serve foreign colonizers.[8] Colonization and historical context is important to understand gender-based violence among Pacific Islanders, although it should be noted that this is just one part of oppression that contributes to the issue.

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[6]Sotero, Michelle. "A Conceptual Model of Historical Trauma: Implications for Public Health Practice and Research." Journal of Health Disparities Research and Practices 1, no. 1 (Fall 2006): 93-108.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Kanuha, Val Kalei. "Colonization and Violence Against Women." Asian & Pacific Islander Institute on Domestic Violence, 2002.

Each country, territory, atoll, and archipelago in the Pacific Islands has a different history; however, many overlap. Here are some examples of specific country histories to better understand historical trauma among Pacific Islanders.

FIJI: HISTORICAL SLAVERY, MODERN-DAY POLITICAL UNREST

Fiji attracted a lot of commercial interest due to opportunities for trade of sandalwood and sea cucumber. Due to the soil and geography, it also became attractive for plantations. Fiji became a British crown colony in 1874, and the British began bringing over indentured laborers from India to work on the sugar plantations.[9]

During WWII, the British recruited Indian indentured laborers to aid the Allied Forces while offering political rights after the war. Although this freed many Indo-Fijians at the time, the political unrest the British left in 1970 caused long-term problems. Racial tensions between indigenous Fijians and Indo-Fijians has been the source of two coups resulting in violence and political instability. The 2006 military coup has been linked with higher rates of violence against women by intimate partners and strangers. In fact, between 2003 and 2007, sexual violence increased by 155%, and other reports demonstrate that violence against women increases during and after coups.[10] The political, emotional, and financial stress from this form of instability exacerbates the already prevalent issue of gender-based violence.

SOLOMON ISLANDS: REALITIES IN THE WWII PACIFIC THEATER

The Pacific Islands became strategically important during World War II when fighting became particularly intense between U.S. and Japanese forces. Solomon Islands and Micronesia were particularly important because of their proximity to Japan and their location amidst maritime trade routes. In 1942, Japanese forces occupied the Solomons. U.S. military forces met the Japanese forces on the island of Guadalcanal, and the most intense fighting in the Pacific theater ensued.

The U.S. and Allied forces were supported by islanders, but they left a legacy of violence and unrest. This history has contributed to political unrest and violence through post-colonial development. Additionally, environmental damage from remaining munitions and explosives is a lasting reminder of violence.

MARSHALL ISLANDS: NUCLEAR TESTING IN WWII

The Marshall Islands was also a part of the Pacific theater in WWII. After being seized by Japan during WWI, it fell under the authority of the League of Nations and was named under the United Nations Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands under the jurisdiction of the U.S. Under the U.S. authority, the Marshallese population was moved away from the Enewetak and Bikini atolls to make space for nuclear testing.[11]

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[9] Foster, Sophie, and Barrie K. Macdonald. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, s.v. "Fiji." Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2017.

[10] Taylor, Charlotte. "Domestic Violence and its Prevalence in Small Island Developing States - South Pacific Region." Pacific Journal of Reproductive Health 1, no. 3 (2016): 119-27.

[11] Kirste, Robert C. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, s.v. "Marshall Islands." Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2017.

Between 1946 and 1958, the U.S. military conducted 67 nuclear tests including Castle Bravo, which is estimated to be 1,000 times more powerful than the bomb that decimated Hiroshima in 1945.[12] These tests resulted in lasting environmental and health damage for the Marshallese people. It also has major implications for trust of the U.S. government by Marshallese people. The U.S. government failed to compensate many islanders who were harmed or relocated because of the nuclear tests and many Marshallese people suffer health problems due to the radiation.[13]

PAPUA NEW GUINEA: THE RESOURCE CURSE

Bougainville is a province of Papua New Guinea known for copper mining and its rich resources. Resource extraction, as it has in other Pacific Island countries, has led to violence and conflict. Fueled by corruption and the quest for independence, the Bougainville Civil War broke out between the Bougainville Revolutionary Army and Papua New Guinea from 1988 to 1998.

In many extractive industries, cash flow goes directly to the man of the household, meaning men have more control over how the benefits are used.[14] This makes economic manipulation easier, and also reinforces gender roles. The economic destruction from the extractive industries and violence from the Bougainville Civil War persist as historical trauma for many Melanesians.

NEW ZEALAND: MUSKETS

New Zealand's temperate climate and larger size allowed for the development of a substantial indigenous population pre-colonization. When the British arrived, they began trading with Maoris for pigs and potatoes in exchange for their muskets. These muskets were inculcated into intertribal conflict resulting in the Musket Wars, which killed about 20,000 Maoris from this new fire power.[15] In addition to dividing Maori tribes and intensifying conflict, the Musket Wars redrew tribal lines making the confiscation of land by the British much easier.

Large-scale land confiscation and purchase is a common route to subjugation through environmental and economic means, and the Treaty of Waitangi allowed for the British to take almost everything. Additionally, cultural assimilation to Christian patriarchal practices has caused psychosocial and cultural historical trauma.[16] This pattern of subjugation is similar to that of Australia and the U.S. with regard to colonists and the indigenous populations.

VANUATU: CLIMATE CHANGE AND NATURAL DISASTERS

Due to climate change, natural disasters have increased in intensity and frequency including earthquakes and cyclones throughout the Pacific Ocean. Now, on average, there are four hurricane-strength cyclones a year in the South Pacific. Sea level rise and coastal flooding threaten infrastructure

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[12] Brunnstrom, David. "U.S. examining Marshall Islands' nuclear lawsuits, defends record." Reuters. April 25, 2014.

[13] "Historical Background: Colonization of Pacific Islands." Ethnogeriatrics. Web *Stanford School of Medicine*. 18 March 2014.

[14] Heller, Katherine C. "The gas and mining industries take on gender-based violence in Papua New Guinea." East Asia & Pacific on the rise. December 5, 2015.

[15] Keane, Basil. "Musket Wars." Te Ara Encyclopedia of New Zealand. June 20, 2012.

[16] Wirihana, Rebecca, and Cherryl Smith. "Historical Trauma, Healing and Well-being in Maori Communities." Mai Journal 3, no. 3 (2014): 197-210.

and communities while most Pacific Island countries and territories lie on or around the Pacific Ring of Fire. There were three times as many natural disasters between 2000-2009 than there were between 1980-1989.[17]

Vanuatu is not the only Pacific Island country harmed by natural disaster, but UN Women has data on the relationship between natural disasters and gender-based violence. The effects of climate change often emphasize gender disparities and result in greater violence against women.[18] For example, there was an increase of 300% in new domestic violence cases reported by the Tanna Women's Counselling Centre after two tropical cyclones hit Tafe Province in Vanuatu in 2011.[19]

STATISTICS AND TRENDS IN GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

The Pacific Islands is a difficult region to study for several reasons. With the diversity of cultures, languages, countries, and territories, there is not much data available on any topic, let alone gender-based violence. Where data does exist, variables are measured independent of other research in the region, leaving little room for comparison. Furthermore, there is almost no data on Pacific Islanders in the U.S. with regard to gender-based violence. What data does exist is aggregated with Asian Americans. However in the context of immigration and future climate refugees, data from Pacific Island countries and territories can provide insight into culture and trends.

There are several trends that affect gender-based violence in the Pacific Islands as a whole. Due to climate change, natural disasters have increased in intensity and frequency including earthquakes and cyclones throughout the Pacific Ocean. The effects of climate change often emphasize gender disparities and result in greater violence against women.[20] Additionally, political turmoil, violence, and poverty in many areas of the Pacific Islands increase the prevalence of gender-based violence.[21]

Prevalence studies have shown that gender-based violence is very high in the Pacific Islands. According to UN Women, 68% of Samoan women have been abused by their husband, parents, or other women. The data is similar in Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu. Another report from UN Women released that nearly half of the 10,000 men interviewed admitted to using violence against a female partner. Of that group, nearly one in four admitted to having raped a woman or girl.[22]

In Papua New Guinea, a study found that 67% of women had been beaten by their husbands, and in the Highlands region, that number is close to 100%.[23] In Kiribati, two-thirds (68%) of married women reported experiencing at least one act of physical or sexual violence, or both, by an intimate partner.[24] Figures from the Fiji Women's Crisis Centre show that 80% of women have witnessed some form of

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[17] "Climate Change, Disasters and Gender-Based Violence in the Pacific." UN Women. 2014.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid.

[20] "Climate Change, Disasters and Gender-Based Violence in the Pacific." UN Women. 2014.

[21] "Evidence, Data and Knowledge in the Pacific Island Countries." Ending Violence Against Women and Girls, August 2010.

[22] Fulu, E., Warner, X., Miedema, S., Jewkes, R., Roselli, T. and James Lang. "Why Do Some Men Use Violence Against Women and How Can We Prevent It? Quantitative Findings from the United Nations Multi-country Study on Men and Violence in Asia and the Pacific. Bangkok: UNDP, UNFPA, UN Women and UNV, 2013.

[23] "Evidence, Data and Knowledge in the Pacific Island Countries." Ending Violence Against Women and Girls, August 2010.

[24] Ibid.

violence in the home; 66% of women have been physically abused by partners and nearly half repeatedly abused; 26% of women have been beaten while pregnant; 48% of married women have been forced into sex by their husbands; and 13% of women have been raped.[25] Statistics on violence against women like these are shockingly high in almost all Pacific Island countries.

There are several cultural factors that contribute to perpetuating violence against women and particularly domestic violence. In Polynesian cultures, there is a common understanding of the family in a broad sense to include immediate family, extended family, clan, land, and sea. Paired with colonial legacies and deep gender disparities, issues like domestic and family violence are often covered up or quieted through shame. For example in Samoan culture, "when you are married, you are married to the whole family. You are not married as an individual to another individual . . . Your family ties are even married. If I will be beaten, if I will be verbally abused, that will be on my . . . 'aiga, my [extended] family too."[26]

Additionally, gender equity in justice systems in the Pacific Islands is low.[27] Sentencing practices and hurdles for survivors discourage reporting and promote gender-based violence as a cultural practice. In many cases, these beliefs are pervasive. For example in Papua New Guinea, the Law Reform Commission found it common among men, women, and sometimes officials responsible for support services to believe that men are superior to women, that wife-beating is customary and legal, and that domestic violence is a private matter that should not be interfered with.[28]

Gender-based violence in the Pacific Islands is horrifyingly prevalent. Research in the Pacific Islands is lacking, and the need for disaggregated data for Pacific Islander Americans is apparent. However, we can educate ourselves as service providers for these communities. With a basic understanding of geography, language, history, and culture of the Pacific Islands, we can build on our skills in cultural humility to provide meaningful support for survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault.

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[25] "Evidence, Data and Knowledge in the Pacific Island Countries." Ending Violence Against Women and Girls, August 2010.

[26] Wurtzburg, Susan J. "The Pacific Island Community in New Zealand: Domestic Violence and Access to Justice." Criminal Justice Policy Review 14, no. 3 (September 2003): 439.

[27] Christie, Emily, Hansdeep Singh, and Jaspreet K. Singh. "An Analysis of Judicial Sentencing Practices in Sexual & Gender-Based Violence Cases in the Pacific Island Region." December 16, 2015.

[28] Counts, Dorothy Ayers. "Domestic Violence in Oceania: Conclusion." Pacific Studies 13, no. 3 (July 1990): 225-54.

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Asian/Pacific Islander
Domestic Violence Resource Project

Washington, DC

Phone: 202-833-2232

Website: www.dvrp.org

Email: info@dvrp.org