

LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE IMPLEMENTATION OF A VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN SURVEY IN PALAU



kNowVAWdata
measuring prevalence of violence
against women in asia-pacific



*“We gotta
get this!”*

September 2018

Lessons learned from the implementation of a violence against women survey in Palau

About kNOwVAWdata

kNOwVAWdata is an initiative that aims to develop sustained regional capacity for the measurement of violence against women in Asia and the Pacific. This is done—in partnership with the University of Melbourne—through the development and implementation of a sound training curriculum on the measurement of violence against women in Asia and the Pacific, by building a committed pool of trained professionals and researchers, and through technical support to national violence against women prevalence studies in the region. The initiative is funded by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT).

More information

Website: asiapacific.unfpa.org/knowvawdata

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Attributions

All photos by Dr Henrica A.F.M. (Henriette) Jansen/UNFPA

All quotations by Ms Umerang Imetengel, edited for clarity

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The team of violence against women survey interviewers in Palau

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This ‘lessons learned’ document was developed by the kNOwVAWdata initiative under the leadership of Dr Henriette Jansen. Through the use of real life ‘lessons’, the document intends to inform and inspire donors, planners, organisers and coordinators of violence against women prevalence studies around the world on how to overcome practical and ethical challenges they may encounter when implementing such a study.

The contributions of a number of people made this document possible. Many thanks go to Ms Umerang Imetengel, coordinator of the Belau¹ Family Health and Safety Study, for sharing her time and insights. We also thank the field interviewers who worked on the Belau Study; we can learn a great deal from their experiences.



Ms Umerang Imetengel, Belau Family Health and Safety Study research coordinator

Dr Henriette Jansen, international consultant for the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) Pacific Sub-regional Office at the time of the study, provided technical support to the Belau Study implementation, including the interviewer training where this ‘lessons learned’ document was conceived. Ms Debbie Gray, who was with the World Health Organization (WHO) Pacific Regional Office at the time of the study, and Henriette conducted a series of video interviews with Umerang to document these lessons learned during the data analysis phase. All quotes in this document are attributed to Umerang Imetengel. Dr Henriette Jansen took all photos used in this document, mainly during the field worker training, and obtained consent for their use.

Ms Tomoko Yatsu, UNFPA Asia and the Pacific Regional Office intern, transcribed the interviews with Umerang and collated the first drafts of this document. Ms Clare Hoenig, UNFPA Asia and the Pacific Regional Office intern, provided composition and editorial support. Ms Maia Barmish, UNFPA Asia and the Pacific Regional Office communications consultant, edited and laid out the document.

¹ ‘Belau’ is the Palauan name for the country that is known in English as ‘Palau’.

PURPOSE OF THIS DOCUMENT

Collecting reliable, comparable and comprehensive data measuring the prevalence, nature of and other factors associated with violence against women (VAW) is essential to ending this violence. VAW is an extremely sensitive topic that requires specialised research methods to ensure both the quality of the data collected and the safety of the researchers and interviewees. This document contains lessons learned from Umerang Imetengel's experience as a research coordinator implementing the Belau Family Health and Safety Study in Palau, as documented in a series of interviews conducted after the data collection had been completed. Umerang shares her experiences in establishing good partnerships with stakeholders, recruiting and managing an effective team of interviewers, preparing for and conducting the field work, and her plan for translating the results into action. All quotes and testimonials reflect Umerang's own words. This document is designed to help other researchers interested in undertaking VAW surveys anticipate and address some of the challenges they may face.

CONTEXT

Palau—historically **Belau**, **Palaos** or **Pelew**, and officially the **Republic of Palau**—is an island country located in the western Pacific Ocean. The country contains approximately 340 islands, forming the western chain of the Caroline Islands in Micronesia, and has an area of 466 square kilometers (180 square miles). The most populous island is Koror. The capital, Ngerulmud, is located on the nearby island of Babeldaob, in Melekeok State. Palau is divided into 16 administrative divisions called 'states', which were previously called 'municipalities' until 1984.

The Belau Family Health and Safety Study was managed by the Republic of Palau Ministry of Health between 2012 and 2014. The study used an adaptation of the methodology developed for the WHO Multi-country Study on Women's Health and Domestic Violence against Women. In the same period, similar studies were implemented in Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Republic of Marshall Islands and Nauru. These studies were locally referred to as 'Family Health and Safety Studies' to ensure that nobody in the household or community would find out about the topic of interest as that could compromise the safety of interviewees or interviewers. The Family Health and Safety Studies, including the one in Palau, received financial and technical support from UNFPA and funding from the Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT). The fieldwork in Palau was conducted in 2012 and 2013, under the supervision of the research coordinator, Ms Umerang Imetengel. The interviews with Umerang for this document took place in October of 2013, after the data collection had finished but before the survey report was written.

1

Managing buy-in and support for the violence against women research project

Key lessons learned

- Establishing ownership and buy-in from stakeholders early in the process is essential to successfully implementing the survey
- Interviews with key persons during background research can serve as an effective mechanism to develop strong relationships with and increase engagement from key stakeholders
- The process of building ownership of the survey can serve as a model to increase coordination between similar organisations and ministries working on similar projects, and lead to a more effective use of limited resources beyond the survey
- The use of external technical support can be valuable and is often necessary

Establishing stakeholder engagement early on

As part of the formative contextual research necessary for designing the survey, interviews were held with the key people involved in VAW work in the community. As Umerang describes, she used this opportunity at the very beginning of the project to start building strong working relationships with these key stakeholders, and to drive their long-term investment in the project.

“One way I was able to get buy-in from stakeholders was by interviewing key people, most of whom later became part of my stakeholder committee. During these interviews, I gathered background information and acted as an insurance seller. I was basically selling the project and asking questions. In doing so, I realised how these key people’s work tied in with my project and I sold that to them. So my working relationship with the survey’s stakeholders really developed in the first part of the survey design.”

Increasing coordination between similar programmes to create stakeholder buy-in and ownership

The stakeholder committee included people from government agencies (e.g. Ministry of Health, National Statistics Office, Ministry of Community and Cultural Affairs), members of non-governmental organisations, and other individuals who had been involved in similar types of VAW work. Prior to establishing the stakeholder committee, Umerang observed a distinct lack of coordination between these stakeholders, many of whom were unknowingly working towards the same goal. To build ownership of the VAW prevalence survey, Umerang encouraged key individuals to join the stakeholder committee in hopes that collaboration and management of limited resources would help the stakeholders more effectively achieve their shared goal.

“One of the biggest things I noticed when I first started the project and talked with the individual programmes separately was the lack of coordination. There was no formal coordination between programmes working on [violence against women issues], meaning a lot of them were doing the same thing without knowing it. At the first [stakeholder committee] meeting, I briefed them on the project and explained that coordination will really help them in what they are already doing and alleviate some of the stress they face from a lack of resources. In other words, this group could help one another, and in order to achieve our shared goal, we needed to be coordinating. That helped get the interest and buy-in to the programme.”



Violence against women survey interviewers in Palau

Securing external technical support

Conducting large population household surveys and in particular surveys on VAW requires very specialised technical capacity. The technical capacity to conduct this survey and perform the data analysis was not present in Palau before the study's initiation. Umerang found that the guidance provided by UNFPA throughout the project was invaluable, and that contracting an international consultant to conduct the data analysis was the best option in the Palau context, to compensate for gaps in locally available capacity.

“Thank goodness for Henriette [Jansen, UNFPA Technical Advisor on VAW, Research and Data], or else I would have been inclined to quit! Seriously, my best feedback is you have to have somebody like Henriette advising the countries [on their VAW prevalence surveys].”



“In Palau, because the statistics office is very small, four people, there are not a lot of specialists. After [Dr Henriette Jansen] explained the data analysis I said, ‘no, I don’t think anybody can do that here; it will have to be somebody that we contract because I can’t do it since I don’t have that training and capacity’.”

2 Designing the field research

Key lessons learned

- Translating the questionnaire from the original language to the native language of the country is important to avoid misunderstanding or misinterpretation of the questionnaire by the interviewers
- Translation of the questionnaire needs to be done carefully, by someone who understands the purpose of the survey, to ensure that the nuances of the questions are not lost in translation
- Adaptation of the questionnaire to the local context needs to be carefully considered and discussed with a selected group of women from the community
- The survey should be designed to be inclusive of all women living in the country, including foreigners and migrant workers, not only nationals of the country
- If the latest census is out of date, it may be necessary to update the census to create a valid sampling frame and increase the statistical credibility of the sample
- The pilot study is an incredibly valuable tool for determining the best way to approach the community, refining the interview questions and process, and identifying where interviewers need the most guidance
- Unforeseen circumstances can cause delays in the project timeline, and are a reality of field work



Interviewer training for the Belau Family Health and Safety Study

Translating the questionnaire to Palauan language

While in Palau the target population can speak English as a second language, translating the questionnaire into Palauan was still vital because it helped the interviewers really understand the details of the questionnaire.

The Palauan language is a complex language that uses different words to describe particular actions in specific situations. Umerang noticed that if the interviewers had to use their own words to clarify questions for the participants, then the nuances of the questions would change, decreasing the consistency of the survey.

To ensure that the meaning of the questions was not lost in translation, Umerang herself, with the help of a colleague in the statistics office and a group of retired women, translated the questionnaire rather than using a formal translator.

“In the beginning, I did not think we would need to translate the questionnaire into Palauan because people in the survey’s age group, 15 to 64 years, spoke English as a second language. But then I saw the importance of translating the questionnaire into Palauan for the interviewers, because the details of some of the questions got lost when the interviewers tried to explain the questions in their own words.”

Adapting the questionnaire to the current context

Adapting the questionnaire is a delicate balance. Making as few changes as possible to the proven methodology preserves the quality of the survey and comparability of the data, but if something is important in a certain context, it should not be excluded. Adaptations should be made with careful consideration and in consultation with the relevant parties.

Umerang utilised a group of retired women to help with the survey questionnaire translation and adaptation; while they were not official translators, they represented and understood their local communities. Umerang found that her discussions with these volunteer translators—even if they were not always in agreement—allowed her to appropriately adapt the questionnaire to the current cultural context in Palau.

“Initially Kyonori from the Statistics Office did the translation, but then we also got women from a non-profit group of retired professional Palauans to help. We spent three days going through the whole questionnaire together, and the volunteer women helped us translate it to the local context. I thought that if we used a formal translator, it would not make sense—not like when you are having a discussion with someone.”

STORIES FROM THE FIELD: Discussion on adapting the questionnaire

“We inserted a question into the survey for the local context about the tradition of exchanging money and food at a marriage ceremony. The husband’s family gives money—called ‘*Bus*’—and the woman’s family gives food. Theoretically the amount of *Bus* and food exchanged should be equal. So there is a question in the survey that asks whether the *Bus* amount had any significant positive or negative impact on the marriage.

I can’t wait to see the results. That was the question I was fighting for. Some of the older women said ‘you wouldn’t see [an impact on marriage]’, but I said ‘no, for our generation I could see it, so I want it in there’. I am so happy it’s in there, and I hope there will be something there.

When we were doing the translation there was some resistance, especially with the older women, because they didn’t see the significance of [the *Bus* and food exchange] and whether there would be an impact on [marriages]; or they were denying it. I think they deny it, but maybe before it was really an equal exchange. Nowadays it’s so different.”

“The methodology encourages you to pre-test the questionnaire, so we did some pre-tests. But I think where I received a lot of resistance or acceptance of certain changes to the questions was from the translators, because they were women in the community.”

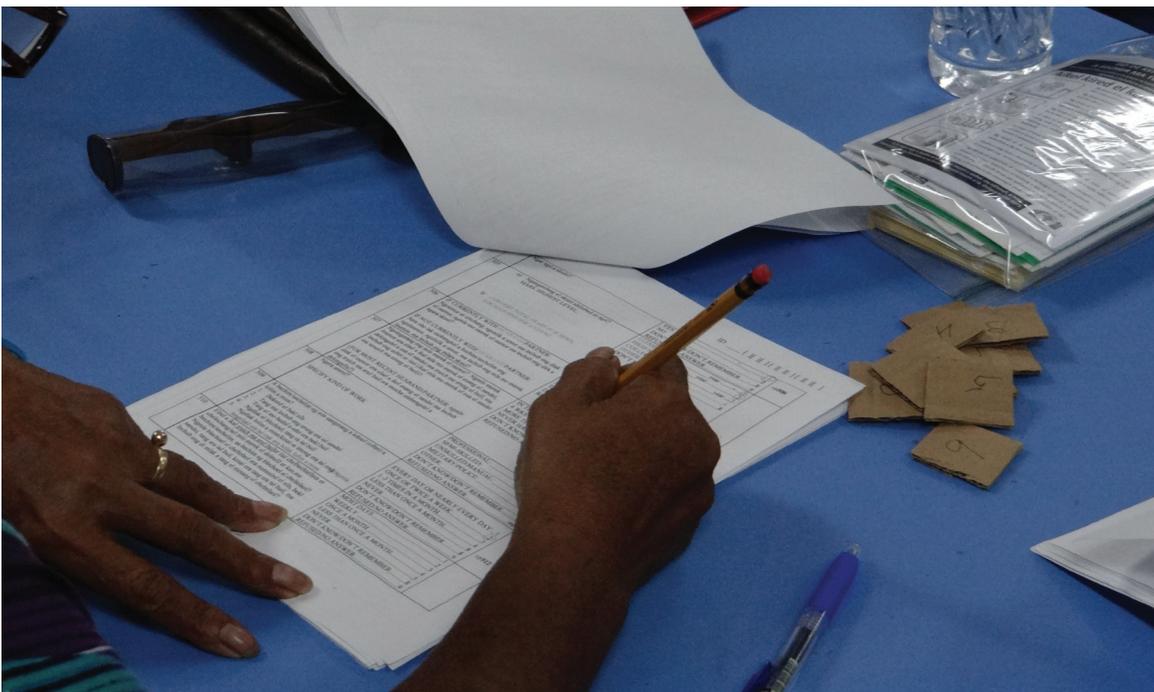


Violence against women survey interviewers practice interviews in Palau

Inclusion of foreigners and migrant workers in the sample

In Palau, there is a large proportion of foreign workers and it is important to include them in the survey to reflect their voices and experiences. Umerang ran into some misunderstanding and confusion around this point when designing the survey, as some people thought the foreigners should be excluded because they felt that the survey was specifically for Palauan women and families. She had to reiterate that the services that come out of a VAW survey will be for all women living in the country, not just Palauan women. In the end, the survey was designed to include the foreign workers. However, if the women could not speak English or Palauan there was no practical way to interview them, leaving an acknowledged limitation to the survey design.

“Our survey sampled ‘households’, but we also have group quarters in Palau where most of the foreign workers live. Some people thought we should exclude the foreigners and their barracks [from the sample] because it’s for Palau. Our justification to include foreigners was that the services coming out of [the survey recommendations] are for all women in Palau, not just for Palauan women specifically. That was the misunderstanding we had. The foreign workers are the people who do the work, unfortunately, that a lot of people don’t want to do. So we [should use this survey] to figure out what they need too. But there were a couple [language issues] during the field work with the migrant foreign workers; if they couldn’t speak English [or Palauan] then we wouldn’t do the interview.”



A violence against women survey questionnaire is completed in Palau

Mini-census before the survey

The sampling frame used for the survey is typically based on the most recent census. The most recent census completed in Palau was done in 2005, seven years before this study, making it too outdated to provide a proper sampling frame. Umerang and her team conducted a mini-census, supported by UNFPA, to increase the statistical credibility of the sample frame.

“We were able to get the support from UNFPA to conduct a mini-census before doing [the VAW survey] field work, because we needed to establish a new sampling frame. This actually was a great opportunity for Palau, because the [mini-census] actually showed a major change in the population [since the last census]...so it helped.”

Importance of the pilot study

The pilot study is one of the most important steps in the survey preparation. Umerang found that it really helped her understand the areas she needed to work on with her team throughout the whole project, it helped her determine the approach she needed to take with the communities, and it helped her finalise the questionnaire and interview process. For example, she realised the importance of how the survey is presented to the households, and the need to approach states differently. The pilot study also identified which questions were accidentally being skipped by the interviewers and the importance of having editors/checkers in the field.

“The pilot is so important. Some [interviewers] skipped part of the questionnaire because they thought [the interviewee had already] answered the questions, but they hadn’t. And the checking at the end [of the interview] is really important. The pilot helps you realise the things you need to focus on with your interviewers and the whole project, some things you need to change, and how to approach the community. For example, the pilot made us change the way we approached each state. For the state of Koror, I had to write an official letter to the governor. The other states [responded more along the lines of] ‘okay, come in, let us know when and we will provide the place’. [The pilot also identified] a change to the first page of the questionnaire, which said ‘We’re a project from the Ministry of Health and Statistics Office’. I switched that around to ‘Statistics Office’ first and then ‘Ministry of Health’ because there was a negative connotation of research involving the Ministry of Health. The feedback was ‘Oh no, another interview or survey by the Ministry of Health; what will this do to me? How will this help me?’”

Delays in the survey

The VAW survey in Palau experienced some delays. Umerang cited various unforeseen factors, including political and administrative changes, competing priorities, the need for the mini-census, and the time it took to translate the questionnaire. These types of unexpected delays are an unfortunate reality of field work that should be considered during survey design and planning.

“Palau [had just gone] through an election and administration changes. We were scheduled to do field work around October or November [2012], but at the same time the campaign was heating up. November 4th was Election Day, so it was difficult to go out in the field. The interviewers wouldn’t have been welcomed; they would have been looked at as campaigners. Also, support from the [political] leaders wasn’t solid because many were going out and a lot of new people were coming in.

[Another complexity] was working with other [people], because I couldn’t force them to come back with the things I needed. So really the timeline changed and extended.”



Boats sitting in a marina in Palau

3 Recruitment, selection and training of field workers

Key lessons learned

- The most successful interviewers were the ones recruited from personal knowledge and through recommendations, rather than newspaper or radio ads
- The most successful interviewers were passionate about women's health issues, and not just interested in the money
- More interviewers than needed should be recruited because during training some will prove to be unsuitable or drop out
- If possible, the interviewer training should be held in a location where the field workers all stay together for the duration of the training rather than going home at the end of each day, to help build relationships and trust among the field team
- Training field workers on how to maintain confidentiality of the survey topic is vital
- Selecting supervisors can be done during the interviewer training by observing those who most fully understand the questionnaires, are mature enough to handle the sensitive content, and who can communicate well with the other interviewers
- Hearing the experiences of field teams from previous VAW surveys in other countries was particularly helpful in training the research coordinators
- Training on project management, particularly management of complex UN-funded programmes, should be provided to the research coordinators



Violence against women survey interviewers in Palau

Recruiting interviewers

Interviewers for VAW surveys have to be women, care about women's health issues, and have the ability to handle this sensitive and difficult topic. Umerang put recruitment ads on the radio and in the newspaper but found that most of the women who ended up becoming interviewers came through recommendations. She recruited 25 women to start the training, and only 20 successfully became interviewers.

“The ones I rejected had mostly [heard about the survey] from the newspaper or radio ads. Most of the good interviewers who stayed with the training and actually finished field work were the women I knew or other people knew would be able to do the work. I also worked with our Statistics Office for recommendations. The survey would involve learning about women's health issues. As one of the first surveys tailored for women, a lot of [interviewer candidates] were interested in that part of it. Of course, others were just interested in the money. But the women who became interviewers—the really good ones—wanted to be involved in this kind of topic.”

Training the field workers

Umerang explained how the training for her field workers took place as a full-time day-training, where the interviewers went home each night. She would have preferred to run the training in a retreat style, with all the interviewers staying together in one place. She noticed that it took much longer for the women to develop a strong bond through this format of training, as compared to retreat-style trainings. Team spirit and bonding is important for motivation, mutual support, coping with difficulties and stress, and problem solving, all of which impacts the quality of the data.

“I really wish the training took place somewhere the women could have stayed overnight for three weeks. I think if we did that, it would have created the bond sooner. The women did trust each other and were able to share as [the training] went along, but it took a while to develop. At the [research coordinator] training I went to in Fiji [a regional workshop where core coordinating teams for five different Pacific Island country studies were trained in the VAW study methodology], a couple of us coordinators really bonded in a short amount of time—a week. If I could do [the training for the Palau VAW-survey field workers] differently, I would have the women stay somewhere remote so they can be fully devoted to the whole training. That would also emphasise the importance of confidentiality.”

Furthermore, for confidentiality reasons the women were not allowed to take their training books home, but if they were in a hotel they would have been able to study in the evenings. This early emphasis on confidentiality is vital. Umerang also found that role-playing with the interviewers on how to discuss the project and talk about it in their own homes and work contexts, from the very beginning of the training, enabled the interviewers to successfully keep the survey topic confidential.

“[An interviewer’s] co-workers were sort of interrogating her [about the survey topic], so [the interviewer] made up stories like ‘it’s about women’s health and menstruation’. After that, people said ‘Oh okay, we don’t want to hear about it’. [The interviewers] got pretty good at that, so the [role playing] was one of the biggest tools that helped us.”

Selecting field supervisors

Four of the interviewers were also field supervisors. To select the most appropriate supervisor candidates, Umerang observed the interviewers in the training. She was looking for women who really understood the questionnaire, were able to handle the sensitive content well, and were able to communicate effectively with the other interviewers.



Palau violence against women survey interviewer

“When we did the training, we observed the different interviewers. I knew most of them, but I didn’t really know how they worked, especially as a group, so it was a natural way for us to select the supervisors. The supervisors we picked really knew the questionnaire and were very comfortable with it, and they were mature enough to handle the [survey’s] content. But also, the supervisors had to be able to talk to the field interviewers, who had a wide range in age.”

Research coordinator training

The UNFPA Pacific Sub-regional Office had organised a regional workshop in May 2012 in Fiji to train the core coordinating teams from five different island countries that were about to start a VAW survey with UNFPA support. In the second week of the workshop, participants from other countries that had already done such studies shared experiences. Umerang was one of the participants at this regional workshop. Overall she had a positive experience with the training and felt one of the most valuable aspects was hearing the stories about conducting VAW surveys in other countries and learning from their experiences. She did, however, wish the training had better prepared her to manage a complex UN programme. She also hopes there will be an opportunity to gather again for further exchange of knowledge and experience.

“The second part [of the research coordinator training in 2012] was lessons learned with the countries [that had already conducted VAW surveys]. That’s what motivated us; it really helped me as a new coordinator.”



Above: Sidewalk sign in Palau
Left: Ms Umerang Imetengel reviews survey materials



“The [research coordinator] training was more focused on the [field] work, which was the most important part. But I wish they had another week focused on actually managing a programme because I’d never managed a UN programme before. We use completely different terminology so I had to learn as we went, and it was a headache.”

4 Arrangements during the data collection

Key lessons learned

- Setting interview appointment times can be helpful for logistics and time management for the interviewers
- Having each interviewer set their own appointments helps initiate the important personal connection between the interviewer and interviewee
- Having a supervisor approach reluctant households can increase participation from those households, and efforts to include them are extremely important because households that are hard to reach often have more cases of violence
- There should be an editor in the field to check the questionnaire immediately after it is done so any errors can be detected and corrected while already on site
- Some women will not disclose their experience of violence until after the interview is completed or when they see the face card
- Regular debriefings help interviewers manage their stress from conducting interviews and help to identify and solve common difficulties, improving the quality of the survey
- Holding full group debriefings as well as smaller group and one-on-one debriefings helps interviewers be more open about the challenges they are facing
- Maintaining confidentiality is incredibly important for the ability to conduct the survey properly and to ensure the safety of the interviewers and interviewees
- Interviews where violence is disclosed can be a very powerful experience for both the interviewers and the interviewees
- Interviewers can be a great source of support for interviewees, however they should understand they are not guidance counsellors



Arranging interview appointments and ensuring participation

Selected households in the sample were randomly assigned to interviewers. In the case of Palau, which is such a small country, the interviewers would have to trade households if they knew the people personally, to increase the likelihood that the interviewees would give honest answers. Umerang found that having the interviewers arrange interview appointments beforehand helped to manage interviewers' time, and also the initial contact between the interviewer and the interviewee helped generate the personal relationship that would allow the women to open up about their experiences. However if the households were reluctant to set up an interview, sometimes having a supervisor contact them instead worked better. It also became clear that the most difficult households to reach almost always had cases of violence, so it was really important to be persistent about including them.

“We randomly gave [interviewers] the households [to interview]. But of course being a small country, when [the interviewers] went through their household listings, they knew people so they would just switch between themselves because some [interviewees] were acquaintances or relatives. Yeah, it’s a really small country. There were certain situations where an interviewer would go to a household once or twice [to set up an interview], and they would get ‘the cold shoulder’ or the [interviewee] was not quite willing to participate. [In these cases] we would ask the supervisor to go and talk to [the interviewee] or call them [to encourage participation in the interview]. Or if one of the other interviewers knew the [interviewee], they would go and talk to [the interviewee] or call them up. That helped.”



Above and below: Violence against women survey interviewers in Palau



“I really didn’t want [the interviewers] to just mark ‘no response’ [if they could not set up an interview]. There was one household where [the interviewers] tried 10 times. [The interviewers] said, ‘Come on, we gotta get this [household]’ and I said, ‘You guys are being selective’. But all the interviewers said the households that were the hardest to get always had some kind of [violence], even the smallest issue like a slap, but there was still a bit.”

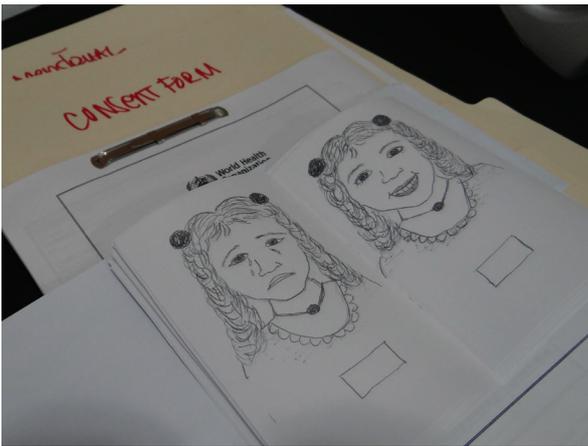
“ We gotta get this ”



Urban area in Palau

Editors in the field

The field teams consisted of a supervisor, the interviewers and an editor. Umerang found that having the editor on the team to check the questionnaire in the field was really important for correcting and minimising errors, and to make sure they did not have to go back to the field site again to recollect data. Because there are complex skip patterns built into the questionnaire design, if an interviewer missed certain questions, or asked them wrongly, then it could mean skipping whole sections of the questionnaire. When these types of errors are caught in the field, it is easy to go back and complete the missed questions while already on site.



Face cards, a tool used to indicate childhood sexual abuse in a concealed way

“[The editors] did the checking at the site before we came back into town so we wouldn’t have to go back. Some of the areas [the interviewers] went to required driving on a really rocky road. So if there were any errors, we didn’t want to go back.”

Disclosure after the interview

Umerang found that it was actually quite common for interviewers to get through the entire questionnaire with no reports of violence, but then at the very end, women would suddenly start talking about their experiences of abuse. If a woman discloses violence to the interviewer at this final stage, the interviewer should—with the respondent’s consent—go back and correct the answers previously given. Umerang also had multiple cases of women reporting that nothing had ever happened to them on the questionnaire, but the ‘face card’ exercise at the end of the interview said something completely different. It may be helpful for interviewers to be aware of this possibility. The face card, which depicts the faces of a crying girl and a smiling girl, is a tool used to indicate in a concealed way whether an interviewee had experienced childhood sexual abuse.

“A bunch of [the interviewers] said that during the whole interview, the women answered ‘no, yes, no, yes’. But then at the end [the interviewee] would say, ‘Oh my God, you know what...’. There were a couple scenarios where the questionnaire showed nothing happened to [the interviewee]. But I didn’t believe that, and then the [face] card said the complete opposite story.”

Interviewer debriefing sessions

Interviewer debriefing sessions were a very important tool to help manage interviewers' stress and to acknowledge and address issues that were occurring in the field. To create a safe space for the women to share their experiences and be honest about the issues they were having, Umerang first had to earn their trust and respect and establish good personal relationships with her team. As one of the younger members of the team, being in charge of a group of older women presented challenges in the Palauan setting.

Through one-on-one sessions, Umerang found she was able to convey that she knew what she was doing, helping to gain her team's respect. She also found that it was really important for the interviewers to see her as more than a pay cheque. They needed to trust Umerang, or they would not be honest about issues happening in the field.

Many of the interviewers still felt uncomfortable discussing in the larger group the difficulties they faced. Umerang managed this by arranging both full team debriefings and smaller group meetings. She also encouraged individuals to speak with her or their supervisors individually about any issues.

The debriefings also helped interviewers manage the stress they felt from conducting these types of interviews. While there was a professional counsellor available to the interviewers, Umerang found that just talking to each other was the most beneficial thing for the interviewers.

"It was not a formal setting so they knew I wasn't their boss. But in the beginning I think they felt I was a means to a pay cheque, and if they didn't listen to me or if they told me they [made a mistake] they wouldn't get paid. So I established that this is not that kind of relationship, and they need to let me know when there is an issue before everything else fails. That helped them open up to me and share those issues."

"I wasn't getting through to [the interviewers] in certain ways, because I was young and they're older women. In Palau, the culture is such that if you are young, you sit and you listen to the elders. I had to prove myself. The only thing I found helped was talking to them one-on-one and getting them to realise that I knew what I was doing. It also helps to have people in your group who know you and what you are able to do."

"They opened up to me and said, 'Sorry, I didn't want to say anything in a bigger group'. So after that I had big debriefings and then supervisors talked to their smaller groups afterwards. That worked because the supervisors would come back with feedback. The bigger debriefings helped with [more general or logistical] things, but the smaller debriefings identified what was really going on and what needed to change."

"They could always talk to me and call me, but I found they were much more comfortable talking to each other. There were also other services available, like a counsellor in the Ministry of Health. Everybody knew how to get in touch with her, but at least [the interviewers] haven't told me they contacted her. [The interviewers] really contacted their supervisors and mostly, they talked to each other."

Maintaining confidentiality

If the topic of a VAW survey becomes known, there is a possibility that survivors of violence would refuse to be interviewed, thus biasing the data. Confidentiality also helps avoid putting women at greater risk of violence. Umerang and her team maintained this confidentiality by presenting the survey topic as 'women's health'. Because Palau is such a small country, it was really important that the interviewers were taught how to discuss the topic of the survey with everyone, including their families and each other, to prevent the topic from becoming known.

"I think of course there would have been situations where we wouldn't have been welcomed or it would have been harder for us to come into the area and do the survey [if people knew it was about violence]. To ensure it remained confidential, we kept saying, 'It's a women's health survey and it's on women's issues and health involving menstruation and giving birth'. Those kinds of topics are very taboo in Palau, and men don't ask questions about it."

Being a small country, it is easy to determine who people are, even with very little information. It was somewhat difficult to maintain this confidentiality while also allowing the interviewers to share their experiences during the debriefings. It was vital that all the interviewers knew to keep what they had heard within the group confidential, and they all took an oath stating that. Umerang also placed a strong emphasis on not sharing any details or identifying information even in these sessions, and she found that quick private reminders to the women who were sharing too many details helped enforce this.

"I stressed with [the interviewers] that when sharing [with the other interviewers], give no names and no other identifying information. Because Palau is such a small place, you could just say, 'I went to this house with a woman living with her mom and twins' and [everybody] would know it's me. They even took an official oath with a notary public [to maintain confidentiality]. I kept stressing that it is really important not to tell, and there was a point where I was worried because they were really sharing stuff like, 'I went to this house...', and some people were getting uncomfortable with that. So I would text them, 'This is just a reminder' and they would come back saying, 'Okay, yeah sorry, I won't talk about this thing anymore'."

STORIES FROM THE FIELD: A Filipina woman and her husband

“One of the interesting, biggest things to happen—and I never thought it would—was when an interviewer went to this household with a Palauan guy and his Filipina wife and their child. The Filipina lady was a bit timid and didn’t really want to talk. It was hard for her to get the interview going. When they started the interview, the guy kept coming and checking, ‘What’s going on? What are you guys talking about?’ so it was a bit hard to get the interview done.

But they got it done, and after they prayed [together]. They had this long prayer and [the interviewer] said, ‘If you ever need to pray or anything, call me’. She gave her number to the [interviewee]. We encourage [interviewers] to do so if they want to and feel comfortable; it is okay to let [interviewees] know [the interviewers] are there if they want to talk.

The next day [the interviewer’s] phone rang and she answered the call. It was the husband, so she was really worried. The husband said, ‘After you left and I talked to my wife, she kind of explained about the women’s issues and I really need help’. So he reached out to the interviewer. The guy said, ‘Can you pray with me on the phone?’, so they prayed on the phone. Then he calls again and says, ‘Can you come over to our house? I really need help’.

Our plan was to refer people to the guidance counsellors, but the interviewees felt more comfortable with the interviewers since they had developed that bond already. So I told [the interviewer], ‘If you are comfortable with it go ahead and talk with them, but you’re not a guidance counsellor!’ That’s one of the things I kept saying: ‘If you’re needed, be there for them, but you are not a guidance counsellor; don’t give any official support’.

So he invited her over to his house and they prayed: the interviewer, the lady and the man. They talked, and then the lady said it seemed like the guy was much more open. I am not sure; I need to find out whether he had any abusive tendencies; there might have been some. But it was interesting how the guy actually turned and asked for help.”

A powerful experience for both sides

The interviewing process can be highly meaningful to both the interviewer and the interviewee—a very important part of VAW surveys. Umerang often found the women who disclosed violence were in need of some support, or just someone to talk to. The interviewers were able to provide this basic support and then refer women to a guidance counsellor and other services, as appropriate. Often a real bond had developed between the interviewers and the interviewees, but it is important to remember that interviewers are not counsellors.

“[The interviewer] comes back [from an interview] and says, ‘I’ve been talking about [the interviewee’s] stories for the past however many hours’. And really, the interview might have taken 30 minutes to an hour, but [the interviewee] was just talking, talking, talking. Most [interviewers] just let them talk, I think because we are a smaller population and the [interviewers] realised there was a big need for support out there. Just being able to talk to other women.”



The team of violence against women survey interviewers in Palau

STORIES FROM THE FIELD: Interviewing a blind woman

“I am so glad that Salli went to her. Salli, the interviewer, was about 50 years old; she is a very mature, kind woman. She went to do the interview at this household, and I think it was the mother and a lady in her late 20’s who is blind, and then the dad and kids.

[Salli] was explaining the scenario [to me] because it was really interesting to her. We emphasise that nobody should be around the area of the interview. But since [the interviewee] was blind, she has a certain place in the house that’s her spot where she knows everything around her. So they were allotted that space [for the interview], and the mom and dad were just hanging around in the house.

The blind woman had two kids. She lost her sight [during the second childbirth]; it wasn’t because of abuse. She’s never seen her daughter, but she said the saddest part was that she’s starting to forget what her son looks like. He was around 7-years old.

And she’s been through an abusive relationship so she was sharing a lot of those things. And the interviewer said for somebody in [the interviewee’s] position, where she is unable to do normal stuff, she is very strong. [The interviewee] was also very happy that somebody came and talked to her because nobody comes to talk to a lot of people in these situations. So they exchanged numbers and wanted to become friends. This is a 50-year old and a 25-year old. The interviewer said she later called to check if [the interviewee] was okay.

The interviewer used the end [final section] of the questionnaire to write down this story. I mean, we were crying from reading it [during the debriefing]. We were all crying. Especially about how it would feel to never see what your daughter looks like, and to start to forget what your son looked like. I was like, ‘Oh my God’. There were a lot more stories.”

5 Report writing and development of recommendations

Key lessons learned

- The stakeholder committee should be involved in the interpretation of the results and writing the report
- To ensure recommendations are realistic, they should be written by the people responsible for implementing them; this will also help establish ownership
- The transition to the implementation phase should be accounted for in the initial project budget, and existing resources should be used effectively

Interpretation of the results and writing recommendations

A key part of any VAW survey is translating the research into action, including programme implementations. When we interviewed Umerang to document these lessons learned, the analysis and report for the survey still had to be developed, so we documented her reflections on these forthcoming steps. She suggested that the writing of the report and its recommendations be done with careful consideration of the practicality of implementing changes.

After the survey's data analysis and the write up of the qualitative sections is done, Umerang plans to reconvene the stakeholder committee to interpret the results and write the report with policy and programme recommendations. She plans to divide the report into major topics and have the most interested and relevant individuals be responsible for writing the recommendations and then eventually implementing them. That will ensure ownership by the responsible parties to implement the recommendations.

“Looking ahead to writing the report and implementation [of its recommendations], I plan to have the stakeholder committee convene for a couple of sessions to understand the data and come up with recommendations for the report, as a big group. Then we will divide those recommendations into major blocks, issues or topics and the stakeholders will sign up for the ones they are interested in or most tied to their work. When we start to write the report, the smaller groups can work individually with me to write the recommendations. The people who write the recommendations will then be responsible for actually implementing them, which helps ensure they don't write recommendations nobody can [realistically implement].”

Resource management

It is important that the initial budget for the VAW survey accounts for the report writing and implementation phases of the project. Umerang hopes that with the results from this study she will be able to rechannel and more effectively use existing resources from ongoing programmes as a means to implement the recommendations.

“We really kind of look at ongoing programmes and how we can rechannel their resources so we won’t have to ask for more resources to [implement the report recommendations].”

Final words

Umerang found the entire experience of running a VAW survey very rewarding. From doing a survey like this, she learned a lot about the issues it covers and about herself as a Palauan woman. Umerang says she would absolutely do it again.

“It was fun...And stressful; I gained eight pounds. But it’s so rewarding. I would totally do it again. When it first started I thought, ‘Oh my, this is going to be the most intense, saddest thing. I’m just going to be crying’. But I realised there are some moments that are really fun. It was really fun. I learned a lot about being a Palauan woman. The things we shouldn’t do or should, and some of the myths that have been perpetuating this kind of behaviour: domestic violence and not empowering the women.”



Women join hands in Palau

USEFUL RESOURCES

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