

Storying Gender-based Violence (GBV) in Niue

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Abstract

The family space is a crucial and under-researched space in published research on Gender-based Violence (GBV) in Niue. The aim of this research is to examine how to work with the family space in Niue to eliminate violence in social relations in Niue and promote healthy relationships. This research applied family-tree mapping as an innovative method to access stories of GBV within families and how dynamics of disclosure, education, accountability, and gossip play out in practice. The research

involved two parts: twenty-seven fact-finding interviews with thirty-two participants and fourteen family-tree mapping interviews with a woman from each village. This article shares the output of this sensitive research, as a fictionalised dialogue based on careful analysis of interviews and argues that creative writing can be a rigorous method for writing GBV research which can provide useful policy insights while preserving the privacy of research collaborators.

Keywords: gender-based violence, family tree, family violence, domestic violence, accountability

The family space is a crucial and under-researched space in published research on Gender-based Violence (GBV) in Niue (Thomas, 2017). This can be attributed to many factors with the ultimate barrier being the ethical challenges of researching GBV in terms of data collection, analysis, and writing. This research applied family-tree mapping as an innovative method to access stories of GBV within families and how dynamics of disclosure, education, accountability, and gossip play out in practice. In this article, we share the output of this sensitive research and argue that creative writing can be a rigorous method for writing GBV research which can provide useful policy insights while preserving the privacy of research collaborators.

The aim of this research is to examine how to work with the family space in Niue to eliminate violence in social relations in Niue and promote healthy relationships. Guided by a genealogical approach, this family-tree mapping methodology was piloted as a tool for exploring how the family space functions around GBV (Thomas et al, 2021). The research took place over four weeks in Niue in October and November 2019, with interviews led by American researcher Erin Thomas, and with support from co-author Niuean counsellor and Head of Community Affairs/ Services Charlene Tukiuha. The research involved two parts: twenty-seven fact-finding interviews with thirty-two participants and fourteen family-tree mapping interviews with a woman from each village (Thomas, 2020).

Beyond the fieldwork itself, there are numerous methodological and ethical challenges to analysing and writing about highly sensitive issues. In addressing these challenges, I use a creative method inspired by Pacific arts-based research, Niuean Hiapo, and the literary works of Niuean authors. In this article, I share a dialogue of a fictionalised focus group interview with two fictional women who had already participated in family-tree mapping interviews. In these conversations, we explore the ideas about marriage and gender relations that reflect some of the ideas that came out of the family-tree mapping interviews. I suggest that these ideas represent a recognisable reality, in all its sensitivity and complexity, although the conversation presented here avoids directly attributing ideas or actions to any one person. My intention is that this upholds my ethical commitment to collaborators to protect their privacy while ensuring the insights are available for policymakers and community leaders.

Arts-Based Research on GBV in the Pacific

There is a legacy of arts-based research in the Pacific, with several examples from research on GBV. Development researchers Kauli and Thomas (2019) explored how arts-based strategies for research and dissemination can effectively provide alternative narratives to those often produced by

international development projects in Papua New Guinea. Because international development projects often prioritise external knowledge over narratives from the local community, Kauli and Thomas (2019) creatively develop examples of local arts-based strategies that address GBV. The Theatre in Conversation and participatory media practices share a common thread of collective learning and collaborative production. For the Theatre in Conversation, the collaborative script development, community performance, and conversation with the audience resulted in impactful public dialogue while creating a safe space for such discussions among men and women. This has also been demonstrated at the Wan Smolbag Theatre in Vanuatu (Woodward-Hanna, 2014). These methods brought to light nuance to GBV that many community members had not been aware of, as the researchers noted:

“It was not until seeing the character of the woman visibly struggling to make ends meet, while the husband chastised and abused her, that many of the men in the audience realised the demeaning and demoralising ways they treated their wives.” (Kauli and Thomas, 2019: 232)

Heard and her colleagues (2019) used a similar approach to discuss IPV among young people in Samoa through ethnodrama. In a series of drama-based participatory research activities, they developed an ethnodrama based on the qualitative data collected as well as the knowledge and experiences of the five Samoan young people on the cast. In both Heard (2019) and Kauli and Thomas’s (2019) work, the use of an arts-based approach with fictional characters became a safer and more effective pathway to engage the community in conversation about GBV. Even though the situations performed were not *real*, they raised real and important questions around GBV that resonated with the audience because they were grounded in the script-writers experiences and ontological perspectives.

The challenge in my research is the collaborative element because I interviewed women individually. While collaborative elements would deepen these insights, I was bound by the unique challenges of anonymity and privacy that would hinder open collaboration on this topic. While not ruling out performance as a potential transformative space going forward with this work, I needed a written form to represent the nuance of the knowledge shared in the family-tree mapping interviews. Further, in line with Suaalii-Suani and Fulu-Aioluptoea’s (2014) concept of trustworthiness in Talanoa, I decided the only way for me to produce a trustworthy narrative would be to write from my own perspective, highlighting my own interpretations while attempting to be as true to the narratives shared as possible given that my interpretation will always be there as well. As such, in the story that follows, I include my thoughts and emotions as well as my perceptions about the environment, body language, and dialogue of my fellow characters, Lepasi and Natalesi.

Arts-Based Research in Niue

Niuean arts include crafts, performance, and traditional livelihood practices (Tāoga Niue). The painting works by John Pule and Niuean Hiapo provide guiding insights for sharing this research in a meaningful way in Niue. John Pule is a well-renowned Niuean artist, known for his painting, poetry,

and novels. His work continues to raise awareness of important alternative narratives about the transnational identities of Niueans and decolonisation. His early novels, *The Shark that Ate the Sun* (1992) and *Burn my Head in Heaven* (1998) are both fictional characterisations of his own lived experiences. In an interview discussing these early works, he said, “when I write or paint, I am trying to tell a story about something that makes me aware of who I am” (Durrant, 2010). In his earlier novel, *The Shark that Ate the Sun*, he explores moving to Auckland, New Zealand through his family relations while guided by his spirituality. The novel speaks to the broader question of truth in fiction. Pule’s ability to tell a story that presumably made him aware of who he was, simultaneously tells a story about family relations.

Further, his writing style has an ability to tell this story. Pule uses poetry, song, and letters to compose this narrative. The letters in various chapters characterise the contrasting distance and togetherness of families between New Zealand and Niue. In the letters, characters speak of their current experiences, their families, and their hopes and fears. This dialogue format is a powerful way to represent relationality. Far from fantasy, Pule stories his own experiences in this novel. He also covers topics related to this research, including marriage, gender roles, and family relations. For example, this excerpt from the *Shark That Ate the Sun* could be taken from a family-tree mapping interview.

“Puhia talked a lot to me when he was not out in the pubs. We would talk for hours about Niue, women, marriage, fishing and my grandparents... He was in many ways notorious in his passion, he had a way with women. Even grandad had a reputation for his womanising, and his wife often wrote to Mocca in New Zealand, about the things Puhia got up to behind her back, or she heard through the mouths of gossip, or the charming would actually happen right in front of her. Mocca could only say, -- I’m not taking sides, because you are my mother and father. I love you both. At the end, the Lord will decide.” (J. P. Pule, 1992: 192)

For my own writing, the challenge is that in writing this research, I am not writing my own story. Fourteen women have shared their stories with me, and my task was to somehow represent these narratives in an ethical and meaningful way. This was also a challenge as a non-Pacific researcher where, as Vaioleti (2006) reminds us, different ontological assumptions will always destabilise my interpretation of Pacific peoples’ Talanoa. As such, I returned to traditional Niuean barkcloth painting, Hiapo, for further guidance on how to best represent the nuance of these family-tree mapping interviews, while recognising my positionality as a non-Pacific and non-Niuean researcher.

While not commonly made after 1890, Hiapo has inspired Niuean artists like John Pule and Cora-Allan Wickliffe, and draws us to the intersection of history, iconography, Niuean places, and Niuean interactions (J. Pule & Thomas, 2005: 16; Wickliffe, 2020). Hiapo has featured compositional motifs of encounters with European missionaries and traders, and Pule notes that its storage in museums all over the world further represents the relationships between “Niuean people and white people from Europe and New Zealand” (J. Pule & Thomas, 2005: 17). In their book, Pule and British curator, Nicholas Thomas, draw attention to the way Hiapo has been decontextualised in museums. Not only do museums often project a colonial gaze, they ignore the stories, the places, the land, and the

spirituality that is material to Hiapo. To disconnect Hiapo from its context is to disfigure its meaning. In this light, I consider my own art that is the writing of this chapter.

To embed this research back in its context, I have to go back to the living rooms and front decks in Niue, in October and November 2019 where these family-tree mapping spaces were created. The context here is me sitting with Niuean women with a couple of cold coconuts, maybe some juice, talking about families. Given my positionality, this is the context I can draw from to share these stories. Inspired by Pule's dialogue and the significance of context in Hiapo, I decided to write a fictional dialogue between myself and two fictional Niuean women who had participated previously in the family-tree mapping interviews.

Putting it Together

This approach, as with all research, demands a high level of researcher-author responsibility. For fiction as a writing method, Rhodes and Brown (2005) note that the researcher-author must take seriously the complexity of others' narratives as well as be true to themselves and their own narrativity. To effectively do this, I used Doucet & Mauthner's (2008) Listening Guide to analyse the fourteen family-tree mapping interviews, annotating each interview transcript and/ or field notes four times. The first time, I read for reflexivity, marking my immediate reactions and interpretations. The second time, I read for the collaborator's narrative by marking where in her responses, she referred to herself or spoke in the first person. The third time was a reading for relationality in which I marked for the collaborator's relationships and how those relationships were characterised. The fourth time, I wove it all together in my own conceptual narrative making sense of the narratives. This rich analysis helped me emphasise collaborators' own meaning-making while recognising how the transcripts became a web of narrativity including my own conceptual narrative in its preliminary and developed stages.

Being true to myself means recognising my political narrativity that surfaced clearly in the first reading of the transcripts. My reflexive analysis contains commentary alternating optimism about supportive families and the conviction and strength of women in distress about victim-blaming and harmful gender expectations. These all come from value judgments rooted in my own political beliefs about gender justice and liberation. While I cannot write from another perspective, I aim to foster the complexities of my collaborators in writing this narrative. I chose to do this through the story of a fictional dialogue between myself and two collaborators who converse both with me and with each other. This is integral to the concept of relationality that underpins ontological narrativity. I developed two composite personas primarily from the second and third readings of the transcripts.

While these choices narrow down the task, I still had to decide what major themes to focus on. In order to hold the complexity of the narratives, I could not fully explore every theme that came up. My fourth reading which was my conceptual narrative framed several key themes. However, thinking about the broad topic of GBV as well as the insights from the informant interviews, the common denominator in the cases that came up was domestic violence in marriages. Marriage is the crux of family intervention and also an important relational element intersecting with the broader magafaoa, religion, culture, law, and at times, GBV.

Telling It Like It Is

Please note that the following narrative is a fictionalised dialogue derived from the analysis of the interviews in this research and reflects composite characters developed from the experiences of the range of collaborators and not any one in particular.

I arrived at Natalesi's house at the hottest part of the day. As soon as I turned off the car, I realised I made the right call by bringing cold juice.

"Fakaalofa atu Erin. Welcome back," Natalesi came outside to greet me.

"Fakaalofa atu. I think this is the hottest day since I've been here." I grabbed my notebook and goodies and followed Natalesi inside.

"This is nothing. This is cool." She laughed.

She cleared off the table on her front deck and brought over three glasses for juice. A citronella spiral was burning underneath the table, wafting mosquito repellent in the breeze.

"Lepasi said she would be here a little after 2 P.M." I said, adjusting my chair to find the coolest, shadiest spot around the table.

Natalesi sat down at the table across from me. We sipped juice and caught up about the weather, family, and the latest gossip. Lepasi arrived, and rushed out of the car apologising over and over again.

Natalesi stopped her, "Don't worry, we were just gossiping about you."

Lepasi laughed and settled in at the table. I poured her a glass of juice and let her catch her breath. I took a deep breath and started my formal greeting.

"Fakaalofa atu ki a mua. Fakaaue ke he takitaki mafola. He ha talu Iki kua moua e aho nei. Fakaaue lahi."

"Fakaalofa lahi atu." They both smiled. I did too, hoping they were happy with my pronunciation and not pitying it.

"Thank you so much for meeting with me again. I know it can be a lot to talk about these topics, and you were both amazing to talk with before. I'm hoping today we can dig into one of the topics that came up in all of the interviews, that is, marriage. I want to hear the good, the bad, and the complicated."

Natalesi chuckled.

"Obviously, we're still talking about really sensitive topics, so we'll do it the same way we did last time. I know we chatted before about you both participating in the same interview, but I just want to clarify that you are each also responsible for keeping the information that comes up today private. We're creating a space of trust for all of us."

I explained the collaborator information sheet again.

“I won’t have you guys share your family-trees, but you’re welcome to reference cases and examples from your family. You can change names and be as vague as you feel comfortable.”

Natalesi clicked her pen, “Ah, Lepasi already knows everything about me. I have nothing to hide.”

Lepasi laughed, “That’s true. I don’t know if I could hide anything from you if I tried.”

“Well, good. I also know quite a bit about both of you already, so we’re good to go. We’ll go ahead and get started then. My first question is quite broad. What does marriage mean to you?”

Meaning of Marriage

Lepasi leaned on the back of her chair, considering the question.

Natalesi broke the silence, “I’ll start. Well, marriage is the sacred union between a man and a woman. It’s important.”

“It makes families under God,” Lepasi added.

“Yeah, marriage brings religious and family matters together.” Natalesi looked at Lepasi, “what year did you get married?”

“1985.”

“Ah you’re young. We got married in 1967. We had our 50th anniversary a couple years back.”

I interjected, “50 years is a long time.”

“You’re young too, Erin! Ha! I tell you, I got married when I turned 18. My husband and I are only now getting to really know each other. We used to be so busy, but now we sit down and talk.”

Lepasi started, “Oh yes, we’re very busy. But, we do things together. I really enjoy that. Now that the kids are grown, my husband and I go to the bush together. He drinks sometimes, but he’s okay. He’s a happy drunk. We’re good.”

I started scribbling notes in my notebook, *good marriage = togetherness. Different types of responses to alcohol?*

“I’ll let you both confirm this, but it sounds like you both feel you’re in good, healthy marriages.”

Natalesi smiled, “Oh yes, we’re very happy.”

“Yes, yes,” Lepasi nodded.

“Lepasi, you mentioned togetherness and doing things with your husband. How else would you describe a good marriage?”

She leaned against the table, her arms crossed.

“Husband and wife, they love and respect each other. They’re honest. They’re faithful. They love and look after the kids.”

“They help each other, yeah,” Natalesi added.

“What about if there’s a conflict? How is conflict dealt with in good marriages?”

Natalesi started, “You work it out. Like, you’re married, toughen up. We talked about this last time. If you know how to get a husband, you should know how to keep them.”

Lepasi agreed, “No marriage is perfect, but you work it out.”

I wrote, *can everything be worked out? Domestic violence?*

“Does it always work out?”

“Unless you forget your vows! Marriage is a lifetime commitment. There’s nothing they can’t work out.” Natalesi paused, considering possible exceptions.

Lepasi leaned back and crossed her ankles, her hands smoothing out her dress on her lap. I realised I hadn’t brought up domestic violence explicitly in this interview, but I had spoken about it extensively with both Lepasi and Natalesi the week before. Surely, they would mention the exceptions to this rule, I thought.

Lepasi started, paused, and then started again, “I do think about my parents. My Dad would drink a lot. He didn’t help with anything at home. He would just come home drunk and be violent with my Mum. My siblings and I all saw it. My Mum was always providing for us. She kept the peace, but she couldn’t with my Dad. He, um, left. I don’t think they had a good marriage.”

Lepasi stared into her lap.

Mothers/ wives keeping the peace

“Lepasi, I’m so sorry you had to see that growing up. That’s really heavy, especially for a child. We don’t have to dig into your parent’s relationship if you don’t feel comfortable.”

I remembered the tissues in my bag and set them on the table.

Natalesi laughed, “what else do you have in that bag?!”

I smiled and laughed, grateful that Natalesi lightened the mood.

“Lepasi mentioned that her mum was the one providing and keeping the peace. Do you think men and women have different roles and responsibilities in marriages?”

Natalesi picked up the conversation, “The woman is the backbone of the family. She cooks and cleans and does the washing and takes care of the kids. Me, I go to the plantation too though. I can husk a coconut and hunt uga just like my husband and my brothers.”

She continued. “Look, I’m a strong woman. I speak my mind, but I don’t try to control my husband. He’s still the breadwinner, and we have to respect that. I don’t try to be on top of my husband, I just empower him. Yes, I’m a very strong woman, but he could still give me a hiding at any time. He never has, but when he gets angry, that’s my fear. That one day this man will give me a hiding because I’m too strong for him. I know he’s not like that, and he has a big heart, but I speak my mind, and sometimes I say the wrong thing.”

Lepasi was watching her closely. *Gender role transgressions in marriage*, I wrote.

Natalesi continued, “You know, if you look at the Bible, women are created from men. Not less than, but we are created to bear children and do things that men can’t. There’s usefulness in men and in women. No marriage is perfect – you might be the head of the family, but I’m here to do things you can’t.”

Lepasi nodded, “Yeah, I see that. My husband and I do a lot of things together though. I gave birth to our children, but he still changed nappies!”

Natalesi agreed. “Yes, yes that’s true. You still need to share and do things together. It’s the older generation that really sees everything as separate. I remember my mother pulling me aside because I wasn’t treating my husband well. I asked him to do the washing. She said I’d be without a husband if I kept acting that way.”

Lepasi interjected, “Then, I’d be without a husband for years now!”

We all laughed.

“Men have responsibilities too though. They have to go to the bush, work, get money, go fishing, go hunting for uga, and all of that.” Natalesi added.

“Of course, and from what I’ve heard, conflict sometimes arises when the husband or wife doesn’t fulfil their responsibilities or do what they’re expected to. Do you think that’s right?”

Natalesi asked, “What do you mean by conflict? Swearing and yelling happens all the time. Is that what you mean? Or a smack?”

“Whatever you see as a conflict. I’m thinking quite broad here.”

Natalesi leaned back, crossing her arms over her chest to think.

Lepasi began, “I don’t know if this is what you mean, but I think my son and his wife had a problem like that. They live in New Zealand, but I heard this from him. She is always working and going out. She leaves early in the morning and comes back late at night. They have three girls at home, and her sister has to help take care of them. It really upsets my son that she doesn’t act like a mother. They had arguments about it, and I knew something was going on. But I heard from an uncle that he touched her.”

She wasn’t making eye contact with either of us.

“It hurt to hear that because he knows about my Dad and what he did to my Mum. I’ve told him this. He knows better. He’s educated and has no reason to raise a hand to his wife.”

She took a long pause. Natalesi and I both watched her closely.

“What happened after that?” I probed.

“Well, I asked my daughter what I should do. At the end of the day, it’s their marriage, and they need to work it out. She thought I should at least talk to him and support him. Get the story from him. There are always two-sides to the story, you know. So I rang him. I just talked to him. Mother to son.

I asked him a lot of questions, and he was really upset. I called him every couple days after that. I wanted to get him going right. They have three kids. They can't be acting like this."

"What did that incident mean for their marriage?" I asked.

"Well, they decided to get married. That's a lifelong commitment, and they have kids. For the children, they need to stay together and work it out. And they did. They're good now."

"Do you know how they worked it out?"

"No, not really. I just hear him speak differently about their relationship. They seem good. And I haven't heard anything else from my uncle. No news is good news, eh?"

Marriage is a responsibility to work it out, no matter what. Children as additional pressure to stay together

I thought back to my original question about transgressing gender roles contributing to conflict.

Do you know if they share more of the family responsibilities now?"

"I assume so, yes. They're good now. I don't think her sister is helping out anymore, so they must be sharing more of the work."

"Natalesi, do you have any thoughts on this? Men and women not doing their responsibilities or playing the other's role leading to conflict?"

Natalesi paused and thought for a minute.

"Back in the day, men work and get money and spend it all on alcohol. They go for a drink up and come home expecting the wife to put food on the table. With what?! What is she going to cook with no money? When he's drunk and there's no food on the table, he gives his wife a hiding. That was back in the day though. I haven't heard anything like that recently. That was the first time I heard the whole story about Lepasi's son, too. I didn't know it happened like that."

I had a lot of things I wanted to write down, but I was stuck by the concept of Natalesi not knowing this full story. *Gossip – not everything gets around. Often not the whole story.*

"Lepasi, if you're okay with it, I'd be interested to hear what version of the story Natalesi has heard about your son. Is that okay?"

Lepasi nodded, "It's okay."

"Natalesi, are you okay with that?"

"Yes, that's fine. I heard from my family in New Zealand that he was beating her up because he was drinking. She would talk back to him and set him off."

Neither Lepasi nor Natalesi looked uncomfortable, but Natalesi changed the subject.

"That made sense to me though. I never talk to my husband when he's drunk. I always wait until the next day. You never know what will set them off when they're drunk."

I took the hint to move on.

“Thinking about your siblings, are you quite involved in their relationships?”

Natalesi started, “I am with my sister. I only have my sister and brother left in Niue. The rest are in New Zealand. I don’t know much about my brother’s marriage. They seem good though.”

Lepasi added, “I am really close with my siblings. At family gatherings, we talk about our spouses and our arguments and things.”

“In front of them?” I asked.

“Yes, yes, while we’re all together. It’s just a venting session. My Mum is like a counsellor, so she gives advice and keeps everyone in line.”

“Huh. What sort of arguments and venting happens?”

“Oh, like someone will start by complaining about their wife. Usually my brother. Then, *she’ll* complain about *him* and say how much she does for the family. He’ll say how he gives her this and that. We really make a big joke of it. It’s nice. We can all vent and get it out in the open. Mum will tell stories about our Dad, and they’ll realise how good they have it. That they need to just work it out.”

“There are never any serious conflicts raised?”

“No, just little things... Well, my sister-in-law told me once that my brother growled her when she tried to slow down his drinking. I don’t think it was serious, but he can be quite, I don’t know, domineering. It’s not abusive, but he just needs to have his way. He really doesn’t like it when someone messes with his drink.”

“And no one has ever suspected violence?”

“No. No, I don’t think so. Just growls here and there.”

“Did this come up at a family gathering? Did anyone in your family speak with him?” I asked.

“No, they’re good. They worked it out.” Lepasi assured.

She paused, and seemingly remembering some information. She continued, “I think they went to the minister too. Nothing too serious, just talking with the minister and his wife. It can really help. They just remind you to love and respect each other.”

Natalesi jumped in, “We did that once, my husband and I. He was drinking a lot at the time, and we went to see the minister. His wife was there too. It was nice. The minister is a good leader in the community.”

Minister’s role in the community and in marriages

I had been thinking about the idea of accountability for the past few interviews. If everyone is working it out, and I’m still unclear on what that means and who’s making concessions, is the person who caused harm held accountable in any way within the family? I decided to go with a hypothetical.

Hypothetical Domestic Violence Scenario

“We did this last time, but I’d like to do a hypothetical scenario to hear what you both think. I want you to imagine one of your brothers. Let’s say you heard that he was beating up his wife. How would you react? What would you do?”

Both Natalesi and Lepasi nodded

Natalesi started, “He better not be! Ha! It would be my brother in New Zealand, so I would ring him. I would say ‘how’s it going?’ I would ask a lot of questions. Rumours spread a lot, so I would ask him what the story is. If he has a drinking problem, I would help him find help. I would tell him to look after his wife. I would have faith in him to do the right thing. He wouldn’t do that though. I never hear bad things about my brother. We were all brought up here in the Church.”

She clicked her pen, and Lepasi watched her, waiting to see if she would continue. She did.

“I would pray for him. I pray for all my family. I don’t get to talk to them as much because they live overseas, but I see them as much as I can.”

I could relate to this feeling, “That can be really tough. I’m sure it’s really nice to connect when you can.”

Natalesi nodded.

“Lepasi, what would you do? If you found out your brother was beating up his wife, how would you react?”

Lepasi shifted in her chair, “Well, I would be really upset. I know which brother it would be. Same as I mentioned before. I don’t know if I would get into it though. It would be good to ask why it happened and ask questions. Like if he says it’s because she always tells him off, it helps us think again. But when family gets involved, it becomes a big thing... Like Natalesi, I’d pray. If it was really bad, I would tell my Mum.”

I waited, thinking there might be more coming.

She continued, “I would be really upset.”

“You mentioned it becomes a big thing when the family gets involved. What do you mean by that?”

“Well, then it becomes a family problem. It gets so much bigger. Everyone would gang up on him. We would say ‘your Dad is not here, why are you being like this? Why are you being like him?’ After all of that, we would calm down and ask all the questions and get the two sides.”

“In a situation like that, what would be the outcome?”

Lepasi continued, “The family would help them through, but we can leave it to them to sort out. We always look at not just the two of them but the whole family and the kids, you know? In some families, they split and divorce, but not my family.”

“Why is that?” I probed.

“That’s not us. It’s for the kids. Stay together for the kids. You chose this person, so you can work it out with them. It can be hard, but the family can help. The Church can help.”

No divorce. For the kids

“What about you, Natalesi? How does your family feel about divorce?”

Natalesi nodded, “Same as Lepasi. My family is very religious... I told you the story last time about my cousin. We are quite close. She’s like a sister to me. She’s another strong woman, and she lived with her husband and kids in the bush. Not like this house where the neighbours can hear us yelling and arguing and they’ll talk about it the next day. No, they kept to themselves, but she told me about a big fight they were having. They grew apart, and he said he wanted them to move to Australia. Their kids were grown, and two of them lived in Australia. She didn’t want to go. They would argue a lot. She said they weren’t sleeping in the same bed. One day, she came to me and said she filed for divorce! She’s a stubborn woman. I asked her how her children took it and how her husband took it. She said she didn’t need their permission. She did ask me what I thought about it though. I said as long as she’s happy, it’s okay. It did upset me, you know. Marriage is a lifetime commitment. What really happened that they couldn’t sort out?”

I remembered the story and felt genuinely inspired by the idea of a “difficult,” stubborn woman.

“Do you think something else happened beyond what she told you?” I asked.

“You know, there must have been. I asked her, but she would never give me the reasons why. I thought things maybe got aggressive. She’s like me. She’s got a sharp mouth. She would never say though, and no one was talking about it. He ended up moving to Australia. She’s living by herself in that house in the bush.”

Divorce is a lonely decision.

“Well, I hope she’s doing well now.”

Lepasi jumped in, “I didn’t know that story.”

Natalesi dropped her elbows on the table, “And you better not tell anyone!”

We all laughed, and I reiterated the rules of the space we established. I asked if anyone needed a break and set out the cookies that were baking in my bag to help us refuel. Natalesi made a joke about me being Mary Poppins with a bag full of things. I hoped the mood was as it seemed and that they would be comfortable and open enough for our next topic.

Sexual Violence

“Our next topic is the more sensitive one. You were both quite open on this topic before, but please stop me if you’d like to take a break or move on from this topic at any point. I want to hear a little bit about sex in marriages, specifically sexual violence. Do you hear about this at all on Niue?”

Lepasi glanced at Natalesi and looked away. I knew they were friends before this interview, but I was unsure if they had discussed these topics with each other. I recognised we were in uncharted territory.

Lepasi whispered, “Yeah... yeah. A lot of that happens. I’ve heard from my friends that their husbands would want sex and literally force them. Some used to say to keep the peace, they would just open up to them. A beautiful thing like that, that you just give yourself freely to keep the peace. It’s easier to just go along with it than to have it blow up.”

The conversation got much quieter.

She continued, “Some of my friends used to tell me that their husbands would come home late at night and, you know, demand sex. She allows him to do that with no feeling, to keep the peace.”

Marital rape common. Pros outweigh the cons when you don’t know what could happen if you say no

I felt my heart beating in my chest, emotions welling up in my belly. I reminded myself to focus.

“Do you think wives are able to say no? What would happen if she said no?” I asked softly.

Natalesi picked up this time, “Well, I say no! I don’t sleep in the same bed as my husband anymore. Ha! ... I don’t hear too much about that though. If it happens to me, I would be shameful. I would blame myself. I would walk away from the relationship. I would walk away totally, and if he wants to come back, it would have to be without any abuse. You know, it takes two people. Wanting and enjoying it, not I’ll jump you now I need it.”

Lepasi nodded quietly.

Natalesi laughed, “But women want it too sometimes!”

Lepasi laughed too, “That’s true!”

I laughed, “Of course, of course –”

Lepasi spoke up, “I know of someone. We went to school together. She had it really bad. Her husband wanted it all the time. I only heard the whole story about a year ago. When they were together, he wanted sex all the time. It was a hard life. They had a bunch of kids. Even if she was on family planning, I don’t think that could even keep up. I heard from the neighbours they were at it all the time, even when the kids were home. With the door opened! I think that’s really bad. Not while the kids are around! She moved in with her parents, and I think they slowed down, but he would still come to that house whenever he wanted her. I asked her why she didn’t say no, and she said she had to give herself whether she liked it or not.”

Lepasi shook her head and looked at her hands resting on the table. Natalesi stared at Lepasi’s hands too.

“How do you feel about that?”

Lepasi added, “She feels she has a duty to her husband. That it’s just easier to go along with him. Not to make noise about it. Some women feel they can say no to their husbands though. A lot of the young ones.”

Generational differences in thinking about sex in relationships

I couldn't quite pick up on the dynamics between Lepasi and Natalesi on this topic, so I decided to bring it broader for a moment.

"Where do conversations about this topic come up? Do women talk about it in weaving groups? Family or friends?"

Natalesi jumped in, "It depends if you can trust the people. It usually stays between husband and wife, and I think most women don't talk about it at all. We joke a lot, especially with the women's groups. It's never serious though."

Lepasi added, "Friends, sometimes. Yeah, friends you trust. Not family, I don't think."

"I talk about it with my cousin. We talk about everything." Natalesi added.

Trust and humour in spaces talking about sex in marriage

"What about the really serious stuff like if someone is asking for help? Does that sort of thing come up in a different way?"

Lepasi leaned onto the table, "I'm trying to think. Almost all of the ones I know, I didn't hear from the woman. I just knew what was happening. I just knew, you know?"

"Someone told you? Or you could tell from her behaviour?" I asked.

"Well, both. Someone would nudge me that she's having trouble at home... with the husband. And she would just be, I don't know, off. The women in the village, we don't say anything, but we're there for her. We don't need to say anything. We just do things like if we have extra food, we bring some to her. We say nice things to her. Support her."

"So, it's not openly discussed, but all of the women still help support her in different ways?"

"Yeah. They try to keep positive conversations and topics to pick her up. Not singling her out, but just making a happy space for her."

"That sounds like a great way to support her without pressuring her to do anything in particular. If she were to do something about being sexually abused by her husband, what are her options, do you think?"

"What do you mean?" Lepasi asks.

"Like, does she stay? Does she talk to somebody? Does she try to leave the marriage?"

I watched Lepasi's lips pull into a tight, straight line. A torn look.

"It depends. Does she have kids? She could leave him when they're grown. Maybe – does she have family in New Zealand? It's hard because where would she go? Niue is a small place. It's hard, but she could try to work it out. Get someone to talk to him. Maybe talk to the pastor and get him to help, maybe the pastor's wife too."

"Mm. What do you think, Natalesi?"

Surprised, she snapped to my attention. I saw out of the corner of my eye that she had zoned out. It seemed like her mind went somewhere else for a moment.

“Um, I don’t know. I haven’t thought too much about this one. She could talk to a friend, someone she trusts, to sort it out. It depends on the situation.”

I decided to move on, knowing that a lot of things can come up in our heads when talking about sexual violence even if we don’t share it.

“Right, right. Well, thank you both here for sharing on this sensitive topic. I know it’s not easy, and these stories and experiences can be really heavy especially when we bring them up again. So, I thank you for letting me share this space with you.”

I offered up cookies and refills on juice, asking if anyone needed a longer break. Lepasi stretched her arms overhead, and Natalesi leaned back in her chair.

Natalesi interjected, “I feel like we talk too much about gender. People from outside and at the meetings are always talking about gender and women’s empowerment. I think our women are empowered. Women in Niue are very strong. I worry about our boys though. Did you hear about what happened at the sea track? That was three boys. It’s the alcohol and misbehaviour. They’re behind our girls in school too. Just watch at the school prize giving.”

Lepasi nodded. I’d heard this narrative before too.

“Absolutely. That’s one of the reasons I’ve chosen to use ‘gender’ actually instead of women for this project. Gender means all of us, how we relate with one another. Like the expectations we were talking about, they can give men power in the moment, but it doesn’t benefit them in the long-run. Gender-based violence isn’t good for anyone.”

Natalesi nodded, “Balance, we need balance between men and women. I’d like to think we don’t get caught up in all the women’s stuff here though.”

“Lepasi, what do you think?” I asked.

She chose her words carefully, “I don’t think we have perfect gender equality here, but it’s not bad for women here. It’s not like other places like Samoa or Tonga.”

I sensed her answer was diplomatic.

Closing Out

They went quiet. Natalesi shook her head. We continued on talking about a few other topics, and Lepasi and Natalesi shared a few stories about life, love, conflict, and abuse. My notebook was full of notes and scribbles, and my heart was full. I felt honoured to be a part of this space with them. I brought us to a close.

After a laugh – my favourite transition point – I started, “Well, those were all the questions I had. Do you have anything else to add? Or any questions for me?”

Natalesi chuckled, “We can interview you now? You’ve had two with us now, so it’s about time!”

I smiled, “I’m sure we could set that up. Ha! No, but feel free to ask anything. Any thoughts on the second interview?”

Natalesi contemplated.

Lepasi nodded, “I liked it. That was good. It was interesting having Natalesi here. I didn’t think I would share everything I did, but it was good. I feel good. It’s nice to get it all out there.”

“Good, I’m glad. Natalesi, what did you think?” My heart warmed and my shoulders relaxed hearing Lepasi’s response.

“It was good. You know I’ll always tell the honest truth. I hadn’t thought about some of these things until we had our first interview, so it was nice to talk about them.”

Honest truth, telling it like it is

“Great, do you have any feedback or questions for me?”

Natalesi chuckled, “I have a question. You’ve been asking us so much about marriage, but I still don’t see a ring. Are you looking for advice for yourself?”

Natalesi laughed. Lepasi smiled and watched me for a reaction.

I held a smile, laughing, a bit surprised by the very direct question/ joke.

“Ha! You’re right, still not married.” I felt like more information from me might be warranted, but given that my answer would be contentious, I held back.

Natalesi continued, “When you come back married, we can do this again, and you can tell us what you think about marriage, once you’ve walked the walk.”

Lepasi blushed and looked at me sympathetically. I wasn’t sure if I should have been offended or embarrassed. A complex wave of emotions tumbled in my belly. Part of me was happy she felt comfortable to take a dig at me, another part felt exposed, and the other part was scrambling for what to say.

I thought about the conversation we just had about marital rape, divorce, about gender roles in marriage, and also about the togetherness of family and the unspoken support of women in the village. Like a pile of hihi held between my hands, some slipping between my fingers to the ground, I couldn’t hold the complexity of marriage and my own identity at once.

I zoomed out thinking about Lepasi and Natalesi. I’m not the important piece of this. What is important is that the Natalesi and Lepasi keep talking and that they encourage others to talk about these things as well. Married or not, old or young, family or not.

“Better yet,” I smiled, “you can take me out of the picture entirely and talk like this with each other. With your cousins, your sisters when you visit them in Auckland, your kids, everybody. Keep telling that honest truth.”

Conclusion

In this article, I highlighted the challenge of GBV researchers, especially outsiders, in “telling it like it is.” In response to this challenge, I creatively storied the family-tree mapping interviews in a dialogue between myself and two women who I had interviewed before. They are composites of the narratives I heard in the family-tree mapping interviews. I nuanced some of the major themes including the meaning of marriage, gender roles and expectations, domestic violence within marriages, and sexual violence and marital rape. While this story is not as ideal as participating in the Talanoa first-hand, it does show how the family-tree mapping method, even in informal conversations with no family-tree physically laid out in front of you, can lead to rich insights about GBV that can be written about in a way that strikes the balance of protecting collaborators’ privacy and capturing the complexity.

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