Fostering Youth Leadership to Address Gender-Based Violence in Papua New Guinea: Insights from Emerging Champions for Change

Sabitra Kaphle[1*], and Rhonda Wohemani[2]

[1] School of Health, Medical and Applied Sciences, Central Queensland University, Australia
[2] Faculty of Health Sciences, Divine Word University, Papua New Guinea

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ABSTRACT

Gender-based violence is a critical public health issue impacting individuals, families, and communities across the world. This paper shares insights gathered from action research aimed at harnessing the aspirations of young people in Papua New Guinea (PNG) to initiate community-based actions against gender-based violence (GBV). The intervention model, co-designed and implemented with 25 university students who were engaged in a series of leadership sessions, was evaluated over six months in 2023. These 'champions for change' cultivated the confidence to leverage their influence for social transformation and to empower others in their communities. The findings highlight the significance of education and awareness initiatives and reveal gaps in resourcing and support to enable access to information, services, and opportunities among young people across the country. Achieving sustainable development and enhanced gender equality necessitates concerted efforts to upgrade educational infrastructure, augment teacher training, and advocate for inclusive curricula that respect the diverse cultural and linguistic contexts of PNG. This should be complemented by broader structural reforms, legal enforcement, and policy interventions in order to address chronic systemic inequalities.

1. Background

Gender-based violence (GBV) is a pervasive and deeply entrenched issue with global ramifications, affecting individuals across diverse socio-cultural contexts. Defined as any harmful act perpetrated against an individual based on socially ascribed gender roles, GBV encompasses a range of physical, sexual, emotional, and economic abuses (Dlamini, 2021). The prevalence of gender-based violence is alarmingly high worldwide, transcending geographic, economic, and educational boundaries, and the consequences of GBV are severe, perpetuating cycles of trauma and hindering social and economic development (Wanjiru, 2021). Rooted in unequal power dynamics and societal norms that perpetuate gender

inequality, GBV reflects broader structural issues that necessitate comprehensive interventions (Sweeney, 2020). The global discourse on gender-based violence has gained momentum, prompting international organizations, governments, and advocacy groups to collaborate on strategies aimed at prevention, protection, and prosecution (Stark et al., 2021). Despite progress, challenges persist, emphasizing the urgent need for sustained efforts to dismantle the pervasive norms that sustain gender-based violence and ensure justice, protection, and empowerment for all individuals, regardless of gender.

Papua New Guinea (PNG), celebrated for its cultural diversity, is grappling with persistent gender-based disparities impacting its young population. The country ranks 169th in the Gender Equality Index, and 58.3% of women experience lifetime physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence, with child marriage still a common practice (UN Women, 2023). The rampant issue of GBV in PNG reflects deeply entrenched societal norms and structural inequalities, with cultural factors such as traditional gender roles and expectations contributing to the prevalence of violence against women and girls in both urban and rural settings. The impact of GBV extends beyond physical harm, encompassing psychological trauma and hindering the overall well-being of affected individuals across society (Spencer et al., 2022). Limited access to justice, exacerbated by factors such as underreporting and a lack of comprehensive legal frameworks, further compounds the issue. While international organizations, local NGOs, and the government are gradually recognizing the urgency of tackling this issue through collaborative initiatives, sustained commitment is essential to fostering a culture of gender equity and eliminating the root causes of gender-based violence in PNG, where the common underlying factors contributing to GBV include socio-economic complexities and relative disparities.

Gender disparities in education remain a pressing issue in PNG. Despite efforts to improve access to education, girls often face barriers such as cultural expectations and limited resources (Smith & Johnson, 2020). Similarly, discriminatory practices and societal norms contribute to the underrepresentation of girls in educational institutions (Brown, 2018). The workforce in PNG is characterized by significant gender imbalances, with young women facing challenges in accessing employment opportunities. Research indicates that cultural stereotypes and biases often limit the career choices and advancement of young women in the workforce (Jones, 2019). The government and private sector must collaborate to create a more inclusive job market that addresses gender-based discrimination and promotes equal opportunities for all young individuals.

Health disparities between genders persist in PNG, affecting access to healthcare and overall well-being. Women may encounter challenges related to reproductive health, maternal care, and infectious diseases (Black et al., 2021). Cultural dynamics play a pivotal role in perpetuating gender-based disparities among young people in PNG. Traditional gender roles and expectations may limit the agency and autonomy of young individuals, particularly young women (Wong, 2022). Comprehensive and targeted interventions are required to address these disparities. Collaborative efforts involving the government, non-governmental organizations, international aid, and the community are crucial to dismantling the structural barriers that perpetuate gender inequality.

Most Pacific countries, including PNG, grapple with substantial gaps in services and policies aimed at addressing Gender-Based Violence (GBV), reflecting a systemic failure to provide appropriate support and resources. Despite the higher prevalence of GBV, there is a notable lack of comprehensive and coordinated support and services for survivors, with limited access to safe housing, counselling, and legal assistance (UNDP, 2016). The scarcity of resources allocated to addressing GBV, both at the national and local levels, hampers the effectiveness

of initiatives aimed at prevention and response. Additionally, the enforcement of existing legal frameworks is undermined by institutional weaknesses and a lack of political commitment (Eggington, 2018). Consequently, the absence of culturally sensitive and targeted interventions further exacerbates the challenges, as strategies often fail to account for the diverse cultural contexts within PNG, hindering their relevance and efficacy (Arunachalam, 2017). Evidence-informed policies are essential for creating a more equitable and inclusive future for women and girls in PNG. Additionally, a concerted effort to allocate resources, strengthen legal mechanisms, and develop culturally sensitive interventions tailored to the unique context of communities is critical to address GBV.

We co-designed and implemented culturally tailored, community-based interventions to address the associated factors leading to gender-based violence in a culturally complex social setting. This paper explains the process undertaken for this research and provides a case study based on the results of an intervention program, 'champions for change,' conducted with young people in PNG.

2. Methodology

This research aimed to understand the complexities that young people are experiencing and identify their aspirations to enable culturally appropriate social actions for improving their sense of confidence and well-being. Using an action research process, based on the aspirations of young people, an intervention model was designed, implemented, and evaluated to measure the change and impacts of the interventions to initiate youth leadership for community-based actions.

Action research is a participatory and iterative research methodology aimed at addressing real-world problems through collaboration between researchers and practitioners. The intervention design within the action research framework involves the deliberate planning and implementation of interventions or changes in a specific context to bring about improvements or solutions (MacDonald, 2012). Action research emphasizes a cyclical process of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting, where interventions are strategically crafted based on a thorough understanding of the problem or issue at hand, drawing from existing literature and theories (Chevalier & Buckles, 2019). It is anticipated that the design of interventions should be responsive to the unique characteristics of the context and involve stakeholders in the decision-making process (Bradbury, 2015). The use of interventions allows researchers to answer research questions, assess the effectiveness of proposed solutions, and refine strategies based on ongoing feedback. By integrating these interventions into the research process, this research seeks not only to generate knowledge but also to facilitate meaningful change in society.

Leveraging local strengths through collaboration has been the recommended practice in community development to create social change, and capacity building has been known as a sustainable approach (Lofton et al., 2022). Researchers from Australia collaborated with local researchers working in a university setting to design and implement a context-specific intervention model for young people in PNG. The 'Champions for Change' model was implemented to measure changes and impacts among the young people who were currently studying at the university before taking it to the wider community settings.

This research not only provided an opportunity to demonstrate the value of collaboration and capacity building to initiate positive social actions, but it also further enabled the environment to advocate for matters concerning the community in PNG. In this research, the following process was undertaken to implement the 'Champions for Change' intervention.

Figure 1. Champions for change intervention process
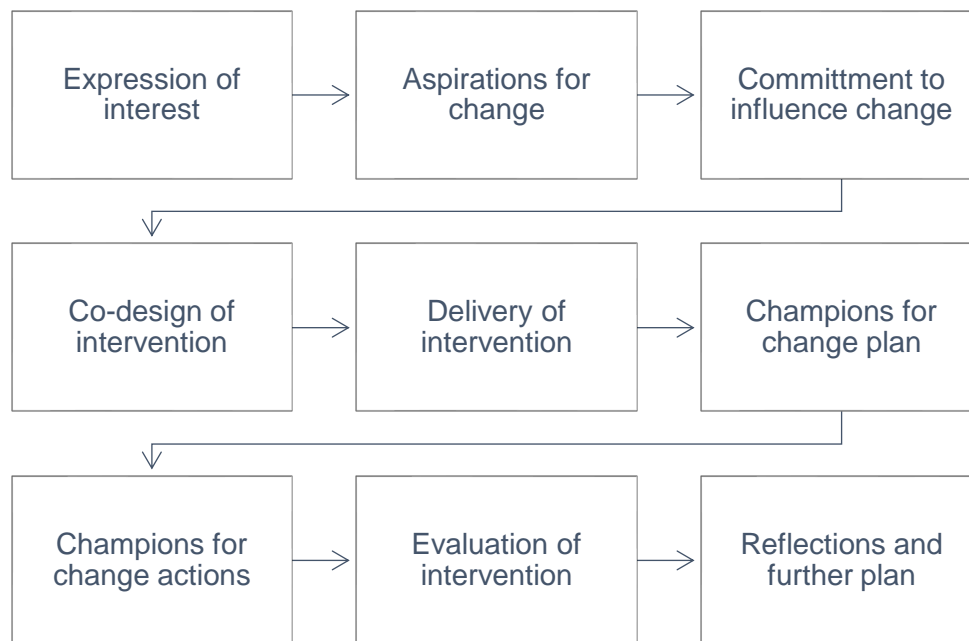
2.1 Expression of Interest

A call for expression of interest to participate in the program was send out via emails to the currently enrolled social sciences and health sciences students at the university. As a part of the expression of interest process, participants were asked to answer the following questions.

1. What do you aspire [interested] to become in your life and why?
2. What are the common social issues that you experience which might act as barriers to achieving what you would like to become in your life?
3. If you are a Minister for Women and Youth in your country right now, what three things you would like to change to make life better for young people? Why are they important to you?
4. Thinking about young people in general, how do you think that you can influence to create positive social and university environment?
5. List your five hobbies that makes you happy!

We received 26 completed expressions of interests, and out of those, 25 participants were recruited for the participation in the champions for change intervention.

2.2 Aspirations for Change

Responses collected for expression of interest process were analysed to identify the aspirations of creating social change for the young people. Aspirations gathered were thematically presented in the following categories to the participants.

Figure 2. Themes extracted from expression of interest process

2.3 Commitment to Influence Change

All participants were invited to attend a discussion about participation in champions for change with local researchers. Commitment to influence social change was sought from the participants to confirm their engagement in the program. All participants shared their interests for initiating social change in a range of area that are they passionate about and confirmed their participation in champions for change program. Common critical issues that participants shared for their commitment to influence change included health, gender inequalities, human rights, safety, drug and alcohol, domestic violence, discriminations, poverty, access to education, poor leadership, and governance.

2.4 Co-design of Intervention

Once the commitment to be part of champions for change confirmed, researchers and young people met together to finalise the topics for workshops. In this co-design process, participants were given opportunity to identify the engagement methods that are best suited to their interests and environment. Following six topic areas were identified for the capacity building interventions. Researchers developed adaptable workshop materials using the feedback from participants for each topic area.

1. Leadership for change
2. Gender equity and human rights
3. Creating supportive environment
4. Advocating for health and wellbeing
5. Enabling community actions
6. Influencing systemic change

2.5 Delivery of Intervention

Workshop plan used active engagement method and included both theoretical and practical sessions. Each workshop was run fortnightly for two and a half hours in the evening allowing participants to complete their university commitments before attending session. Australian researchers facilitated online theoretical session, and the local researchers delivered in person practical sessions. Before starting the intervention, participants were asked to answer following questions.

1. What is your understanding of being a participant of champion for change program?
2. What do you think about the social issues that young people in particularly experience in PNG?
3. How do you think that these social issues can be addressed for young people to feel included, supported and empowered?
4. If there is one thing that you would like to do for young people in your community, what would that be and why that is important to you?
5. Thinking about taking a lead to influence positive social change, what process and actions can be taken in the context of your community?

After each session, participants were asked to complete combination of reflection questions related to the contents and the facilitation of the workshop. These questions intended to gather the knowledge that participants gained from the session, their reflections about the learning and their plan to apply those learning to initiate change.

2.6 Champions for Change Plan

In the final session, all participants were asked to form action groups and develop a plan to take actions in the area they find significant and concerning to young people in the community. A template was provided to develop an action plan where facilitators explained the project planning process and how to develop objectives, strategies and indicators for measurement of change.

2.7 Champions for Change Actions

Two priorities were identified to work together for young people: community safety and drug abuse. Initial activities were planned for the first six months with the focus on creating awareness and generating conversations about the issues to enable local solutions.

2.8 Evaluation of Interventions

A simple metrics were developed to collect data for evaluation of the interventions to measure change. Evaluation included both quantitative and qualitative measures to monitor progress, impacts and outcomes.

2.9 Reflections and Further Plan

Champions come back together biannually for review, reflections, and further planning. Local researchers have opportunity to meet with all champions and gather their reflections about the engagement with young people in the community and how their actions made impacts to influence social change.

3. Results

Reflections and evaluation data collected throughout the program was thematically analysed using Braun and Clarke (2006) six steps process and themes identified are presented in this paper.

3.1. Aspirations, Values and Experiences: Motivations for Change

This theme illustrates individuals' deep-seated aspirations to effect positive change in their communities. Participants express a desire to pursue careers in health, advocacy, and public speaking, driven by a sense of duty and a passion for helping others. The experiences shared reflect a commitment to addressing societal challenges, including mental health issues, youth unemployment, and gender inequality.

Young people shared aspirations to become a health professional, focusing on holistic approach including psychological, spiritual and emotional wellbeing. They express a desire to use their art hobby to bring joy and to alleviate stress. They also aspire to be a motivational speaker, drawing from their own experiences.

> I aspire to be a health professional who not only helps people with health issues but also help in building people up psychologically and emotionally. My hobby is art and I love drawing scenarios which helps my aging grandparents to see the beauty of my work and smile in the most priceless way, which helps them release stress and feel strong. I also aspire to be a motivational speaker because of my strength in public speaking and also because of my unnerving background. Also, I aspire to be a physical health professional which l am taking now and also to be a medical health professional later on in life as l want to be someone the world needs so l can heal people in all aspects and give the glory back to God.

Young people shared a desire to be versatile, with interests in various fields such as medicine, law, advocacy, public speaking, and politics. Driven by a strong desire to help people and to make the world a better place, they are particularly concerned about the current crises in their country.

> Fact be told, I am a person who doesn't know what I want to do with my life yet. Not that I'm confused or lost, but rather the opposite actually – I want to be everything, all at once - a doctor, a lawyer, an advocate, a public speaker, a politician, the list goes on. But one thing that is common in all these areas of interest is my burning desire to help people, do something good and change in this world to be a better place for everyone – particularly my country. I'm a patriot at heart: always have, and always will be. One has to only scroll through social media, flip through the pages of the newspaper – more yet walk our streets and towns – to see the current economic, social, developmental and political crisis that we experience currently. I want to be able to do something about that – that is my life passion. They say you can't change the world if you can't even mend your own lawn. With that being said, I want to start with my village.

Young people are concerned about mental health issues and advocates for increased awareness and access to mental health services. They also identify the need to advocate for the provision of free menstrual hygiene materials for girls and express concern about youth unemployment.

> Mental health is a critical issue that affects individuals across all demographics. I would like to work towards promoting awareness about mental health through

> robust public campaigns, educational programs, and community outreach initiatives. I would focus to enhance access to mental health services by allocating adequate resources for the development of specialized facilities, trained healthcare professionals, and support networks at both urban and rural areas. This is important to me because I have seen people who suffer with mental issues due to financial instability or fear of discrimination, and the lack of mental health services. I would wholeheartedly advocate for the provision of free menstrual hygiene materials for girls. This is because access to affordable and hygienic products is still a luxury that many women cannot afford today. I would like to see the youth unemployment going down, it is a very big issue in PNG.

Young people believe that gender education should be included in school curriculums to address social issues such as teenage pregnancy, gender-based violence, and sexually transmitted diseases.

> Gender education is one of the important topics that should be included at all levels of schools. Young people need to learn as early as in their primary stage at year level 6 on issues affecting gender, reproduction and development. When it is taught early it will help them to make wise decision in life and reduce some of the social issues such as teenage pregnancy, drug and alcohol issues and STIs. People might say it is not necessary, but we are Papua New Guinean and gender issues are not commonly discussed at family gathering as it is seen as a taboo. So school is the only way to educate our youths to have good values and respect to all genders equally to avoid problems such as gender-based violence, abuse, rape and other many social issues, which very common in our society currently.

These narratives collectively underscore the potential of individual actions in effecting societal change, and highlight the importance of empathy, service, and education in addressing societal issues. The data suggests a strong link between personal aspirations and societal needs, indicating a collective desire to contribute positively to society.

3.2. Inequalities, Discrimination, Barriers: Reasons for Change

This theme illuminates pervasive inequalities and discriminatory practices prevalent in society, particularly regarding gender roles and access to resources. Participants discuss the patriarchal nature of their society, which perpetuates gender-based violence, limits women's opportunities, and marginalizes certain groups, such as victims of sorcery-related violence.

> I feel challenged whenever I want to speak against the concept of inequalities that exist in society. Why I always felt this way because, inequalities between gender roles or in any aspect of life, have always been existing ever since human growth began in the world. And in PNG women are always seen as inferior and do not have the capacity to play the role of a man. This is because we are mostly a patriarchal society, this is something that is defined in our culture and practice in our beliefs and values. Hence, it is always challenging, to try to speak up against inequalities.

Young people explained the complexities in speaking up against the existing societal attitude. This challenge stems from the long-standing existence of gender inequalities and the societal norms that uphold them. This situation further complicates with patriarchal system exist in PNG, where men are seen as leaders and decision-makers, and women are relegated to domestic roles, creating additional pressure to conform to societal expectations.

It is because of our Patriarchal system of leadership, and expectations that the society bestowed upon individuals, in thinking that men are born leaders and are capable of handling big matters. Whilst women are born to be in the kitchen and looking after children. For instance, in PNG culture, men are the community leaders and decision makers and women are seen as caretakers of the house. They look after the children and keep the house clean. It goes further with social inequalities, peer pressure, fear of not being accepted by the society, and culture and tradition.

Young people further highlighted the consequences of associated inequalities including accusations of sorcery leading to violence against women, increased gender-based violence, and the suppression of female voices, requiring concerted efforts on gender equality.

I have seen the horrors of inequalities not only in my society but also in my country. Women have been accused of sorcery and burnt alive, the rise in gender-based violence and the suppression of female voices. Inequality is on the rise, and it breaks my heart. I know that gender equality is a major issue that needs to be addressed immediately. I really want to be an advocate for gender equality not because it's an issue that needs to be addressed, but also for my mother and sister, as well as for my children in the future.

Sorcery-related violence, particularly against women, as a chronic form of violence in PNG. The causes of this form of violence are multifaceted and often compounded with poor education, lack of awareness, limited opportunities, and a deteriorating capacity of law and order in the country.

There are a lot of issues to consider when it comes to PNG but if I was to consider one it would be sorcery related killing of women and the practice sorcery. It is one of the major issues in PNG and it breaks my heart to see young mothers as well as old women get tortured and then burnt alive. This is something the government needs to take seriously and address immediately. It is a major issue in the highlands of PNG and many women have fallen victim to this.

The impacts of sorcery-related violence in PNG are significantly far reaching as victims often face severe physical harm, social stigmatisation, and even an end of life. This gendered aspect of sorcery-related violence further exacerbates existing gender inequalities and contributes to the marginalization of women in PNG society. Despite the repeal of the Sorcery Act in 2013 and the passing of a new law treating all killings related to sorcery accusations as murder, enforcement remains a challenge, and the issue persists.

3.4 Resources, Supports and Solutions: Strategies for Change

Young people advocate for comprehensive strategies to address social issues, including youth empowerment, education reform, and community engagement. They emphasize the importance of providing resources, support networks, and vocational training opportunities to marginalised communities, particularly young people, to enhance their socio-economic prospects and foster inclusive development.

Youths are the building block of any nation and the nation's future depends on them. Positive influence on them will result in positive change in the family, community, province and nation at large. Thus, our youths today need to be empowered and motivated on different levels, whether they be educated or uneducated. The best way for that is to get them involved. Run workshops, seminar, camps, and advocate on youth empowerment. Ask guest speakers to talk to them so that they are motivated and supported and never to lose focus on hopes and dreams they have in life. Since, most of them are greatly influence by social

media, create pages on social media post positive things and invite them to share ideas and views that will surely help our youths.

Young people highlight the need for a quality education system and point out the lack of resources and knowledge in schools, suggesting the need for workshops to educate educators on catering to different educational needs.

> Changing a person's perspective to better and more positive concepts would require precise and clear education and demonstration. Where schools are not doing enough because of lack of resources and knowledge. To impact lives for the better there should be workshops run, especially to educate educators of young people on how to properly teach and cater for their different educational needs and be willing to go the extra mile for their students. Peers can also influence the way young people think. And it is important that what is being discussed in young people's free time is entirely positive and about great supportive and innovative ideas that can be turned into projects that will benefit the community.

Young people further suggest that peers can significantly influence actions and thinking of their friends and advocate for creating positive and supportive environment in the community that could lead to meaningful action. Narratives acknowledge that many young people lack required support, and propose capacity building programs, representations in decision making process, and life skills education as potential solutions.

> Young people made up half of the population in the country and they are the backbone of the country in terms of development. I think that many young people need support from the government and people they rely on but due to no proper support they restore drug and alcohol to make a living. Therefore, it is important create and avenue that they would be trained to get the opportunity in life such as leadership program, involve them in decision making, teach them life skills such as baking, cooking, sewing so when they go back home, they can generate income and sustain their living without depending on their parents and families.

Young people stress the importance of job creation to prevent community issues and involvement in risky behaviours to sustain a healthy living. They further emphasise the interconnectedness of economic opportunities, health, and social issues.

> Creating jobs for young people will enable them to get themselves involved and busy rather than thinking of involving with their peers and create law and order issues in their communities which would be an extra burden to the family and the leaders as well to solve them. Most importantly, creating jobs will enable them to at least earn some income to sustain their living. Just as well, because Papua New Guinea is still a developing nation, we need energetic, smart, and healthy young people to run our country, so we need our young people to be healthy and stay fit every time. Additionally, mortality rate of young people will decrease, unwanted pregnancy will be prevented, and lifestyle diseases will be avoided and again would enable the young people to stay healthy and strong to move this country forward.

These narratives provide valuable insights into the issues facing young people and offer potential solutions. It underscores the complexity of the context that young people are based in day-to-day life and the need for multifaceted approaches to address the challenges young people face.

3.5. Awareness, Engagement and Advocacy: Commitment for Change

Participants underscore the significance of awareness-raising initiatives, community engagement, and youth-led advocacy in driving social change. They emphasize the need for meaningful participation and collaborative action to address pressing issues, such as climate change, gender equality, and youth empowerment.

Young people emphasize the importance of youth empowerment activities such as workshops, seminars, social media campaigns and advocacy forums to create positive influence on them.

> I want to facilitate transforming programs such as public speaking workshops enables to build a sense of confidence in young people, so that they can be able to voice their views ethically, and effectively. Moreover, to running volunteering services, that involve youths and young people, such as cleaning the yard of an elderly neighbour, or visiting sick children in the hospital could help to develop a sense of awareness to young people about the impacts of their actions in society, and how that affects lives for the better or the worse of others, depending on what they chose to do.

Young people see critical role of education in changing perspectives, shaping behaviours and fostering positive concepts among the youth. It underscores the need for resource allocation and knowledge enhancement in schools to cater to the diverse educational needs of young people in PNG. The influence of peer discussions on young people's thinking and the importance of these discussions to enable change was seen as supportive strategy.

> It is my hope to have young people engaged in more meaningful programs such as climate change community projects, social inclusion, financial literacy, gender equality and youth empowerment projects. Giving them something to do for their own future would be more appealing to them, I think.

This research identifies the challenges constantly faced by young people, such as lack of support from the government and dependency issues, which sometimes lead them to resort to drugs and alcohol. It proposes solutions like leadership programs, decision-making involvement, and life skills training to help young people generate income and sustain their living independently.

> I would like to run awareness programs that I've already started in community centres and schools for young individuals to learn about gender equality, respectful relationships, and healthy lifestyles. I will also encourage them to participate in taking meaningful actions for their life. I would also run community engagement activities where young people can come together to develop knowledge and skills in a range of areas of their interests.

This research further emphasizes the importance of job creation for young people to keep them engaged and prevent them from causing law and order issues. It also highlights the need for young people to be healthy and active to contribute to the development of their country.

> One thing I believe that brings most young people together is sports. However, most games are played without a medical officer in the ground to assist with the athletes being injured. I think if I have the opportunity, I will develop a program that educate others to know about the basic First Aid who will assist with the games when the athletes are injured and encourage all young people to play sports in a safe environment. We can take this opportunity to engage young people in sharing information and knowledge about the matters that concerns them and others in the community.

Young people offer a compelling perspective on the role of education, particularly vocational training, in addressing youth unemployment and its associated societal issues. Young people posit that access to resources, opportunities, and support would enable them to initiate training programs in Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) and other tradesman courses. These programs are seen as a pathway to formal employment for young people, thereby reducing unemployment-related violence and crime in the community.

> If I have access to better resources, opportunities and support, I will start training programs to educate young people in TVET courses and other tradesman courses that would give them the knowledge which would enable them to get some type of formal employment. All violence and crimes happening in our community is due to unemployment. Having skills would really help get young people off the street and into the work force. There are a lot of young people with so much potential who are just on the streets because of their unfortunate circumstances. They just need someone to give them a chance.

Furthermore, it has been acknowledged that universities play a vital role in championing gender equality and addressing the social issues that are impacting the development of young people in PNG.

> Universities can play a major role in addressing existing inequalities. Gender equality can be exercised within the campus and the students can be educated on the topic of gender equality and on how to deal with any issues that would arise.

Reflections from young people involved in champions for change program offer valuable insights into the aspirations, challenges, and advocacy efforts needed to support young people in PNG. They underscore the interconnectedness of social issues and the importance of addressing systemic inequalities through collaborative, contextually relevant interventions. By amplifying these voices and perspectives, policymakers and stakeholders can gain a deeper understanding of the lived realities of communities and develop targeted strategies to promote social justice, equity, and inclusive development in PNG.

4. Discussion

Our research explored multiple factors that impacts young people in PNG who faces a myriad of social challenges. Our results highlight the urgent need to address pervasive gender inequalities and discriminatory practices in PNG. Participants express concerns about the patriarchal nature of their culture, which limits women's opportunities and perpetuates gender-based violence. This resonates with existing literature, which highlights the entrenched gender disparities and social norms that perpetuate women's marginalization in PNG (Dinnen & Fingleton, 2015). Sorcery-related violence against women, as mentioned in the narratives, is a particularly egregious manifestation of gender-based discrimination, reflecting deep-seated cultural beliefs and systemic shortcomings in the legal and judicial systems (Kulick, 2017).

Moreover, participants emphasize the importance of youth empowerment and education reform in addressing socio-economic challenges and promoting inclusive development. Youth unemployment, a pressing issue highlighted in the narratives, is intricately linked to broader structural issues, including limited access to education and vocational training opportunities (Jubilee Australia, 2017). Efforts to empower young people through skills development and entrepreneurship programs have shown promise in addressing youth unemployment and fostering economic resilience in PNG (Filer & Fox, 2014).

While participants in this research advocate for comprehensive strategies to address social issues, they may overlook the complexities of implementing such interventions in practice.

Limited government capacity, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and political instability pose significant challenges to effective governance and service delivery in PNG (Baldacchino & Strohmeyer, 2017). The narratives call for youth empowerment and community engagement initiatives, yet the feasibility and sustainability of these programs remain contingent on adequate funding, institutional support, and stakeholder collaboration (Dornan et al., 2018).

Furthermore, while grassroots mobilization and community-driven initiatives are essential for promoting social change, they must be complemented by broader structural reforms and policy interventions to address systemic inequalities (Allen, 2015). Our findings emphasize the importance of education and awareness-raising initiatives, yet the quality and accessibility of education remain uneven across PNG, particularly in rural and remote areas (Saffu & Rosenman, 2019). Sustainable development requires concerted efforts to improve educational infrastructure, enhance teacher training, and promote inclusive curricula that reflect the diverse cultural and linguistic contexts of PNG (Gibbs & Vallely, 2016).

Moreover, the participants emphasized the importance of community engagement and youth advocacy in effecting social changes within their community. In community-based projects, a central challenge lies in fostering a culture where power is collaboratively wielded by both adults and youths, contributing to the construction of a more robust societal framework (Paulo et al., 2023). The participants articulated concerns that pointed to opportunities for cross-generational learning and shared decision-making, emphasizing a united advocacy for change. Discussions revolved around addressing the parent-child relationship, promoting sports within families, and mitigating specific health issues, such as mental health and drug addiction (Paulo et al., 2023). These issues were identified as focal points for community education initiatives led by the participants.

Substantial evidence suggests that mental health services tailored for youth can be more efficient and effective when young individuals are actively involved in the design process (Culbong et al., 2023). The mental health sector is urged to transition towards an approach that prioritizes the inclusion of young people's voices at its core, recognizing their lived experiences as invaluable resources for developing culturally safe mental health care (Culbong et al., 2023). This shift aims to enhance mental health and well-being outcomes according to the youths' own defined terms. A participant highlighted the necessity of educating youths about mental health issues that are prevalent among their peers. Also empowering them to contribute positively to their community. The young participants valued the knowledge and experience gained, fostering a sense of community responsibility and confidence to support and educate their communities.

5. Conclusion

This paper presents reflections and evaluation data from a program aimed at addressing social issues in Papua New Guinea, with a specific focus on gender-based violence. The study utilizes a thematic analysis approach to examine participants' aspirations, values, and experiences, highlighting motivations for change. Participants expressed deep-seated aspirations to effect positive change in their communities, driven by a sense of duty and passion for helping others. This included a desire to pursue careers in health, advocacy, and public speaking. The paper also explores inequalities, discrimination, and barriers identified by participants as reasons for change. Pervasive gender inequalities, discriminatory practices, and societal expectations were discussed, particularly regarding gender roles and access to resources. The narratives shed light on the challenges faced by women in a patriarchal society, with the pressing need for gender equality and seriously addressing sorcery-related violence. Furthermore, participants advocate for strategies to address social issues, emphasizing the importance of youth empowerment,

education reform, and community engagement. The participants stress the significance of providing resources, support networks, and training opportunities to marginalized communities, particularly young people, to enhance socio-economic prospects and foster inclusive development.

Therefore, the study highlights the commitment to change through awareness, engagement, and advocacy. Participants emphasized the importance of meaningful participation and collaborative action in addressing issues such as climate change, gender equality, and youth empowerment. They express the need for transformative programs, awareness initiatives, and community engagement activities to drive social change.

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