



Committed ally

Tonga's new domestic violence laws are having an effect on how perpetrators are handled in the multi-island nation.

As a progressive, female police officer in Tonga, Detective Senior Constable Ana Aho has her work cut out.

Educating on and enforcing domestic violence laws in the country's 36 inhabited islands – some hundreds of kilometres apart – is tricky and can be frustrating.

And Tonga's religious, male-centred culture has firm beliefs on what is – and what isn't – appropriate when it comes to communicating with wives and partners.

As part of the Tonga Police Development Program (TPDP), Detective Senior Constable Aho is being supported in her mission to bring the reality of Tonga's 2013 Family Protection Act (FPA) – and the new protections it affords women – to the Tongan community.

It is part of the larger Pacific Police Development Program focus on sexual based violence and the rights of women.

Working in country with AFP Police Advisor Sonia Sawczak from the Tonga Police Development Program, Detective Senior Constable Aho is expanding her work to include developing an anti-domestic violence awareness campaign with the AFP's Strategic Communications team in Canberra.

Presently in Tonga, community members are protected by the FPA, with the Tonga Police having the right to issue 'police safety orders' to partners. In a major step forward, abusive partners can now be compelled to move out of their house, leaving the victim and children with a home base.

According to Detective Senior Constable Aho, spreading the word is slow, but steady.

"Most of the people in the community don't know about the Act – especially all of the outer islands," she said.

"We work closely, hand in hand with [senior] police and all of our stakeholders to come to a point where we have the same feeling on domestic violence issues. But it's a cultural thing to beat women in Tonga – that is tough to change."

Some Tongan victims tend not to make complaints about being abused at home.

"They think their husband will go to jail – [and it's] the husband who earns money and works for the family," she said.

Based at the Central Police Station in Tonga, Detective Senior Constable Aho regularly takes phone calls from police in the outer islands, seeking advice as to how they should proceed with domestic violence matters.

"Some ask me 'Ana, what are we going to charge the perpetrator with? You know it's our culture. I can't go and tell the man to leave the house because he says he's the owner of the land!'"

Beyond face-to-face advice and telephone calls to the outer islands, Detective Senior Constable Aho talks to the media, appearing in television segments and on radio talkback about the state of domestic violence in Tonga.

Her message is clear and direct.

"Some Tongan men are very strict with religion and culture – and this includes beating women. I let them know that there are other actions they can take."

As part of her duties, Detective Senior Constable Aho also convenes case managers' meetings with all stakeholders – the Salvation Army, two women's crisis centres, and the Tongan Ministry of Health.

"We discuss all our cases that we really need to help [immediately] – we put up our high-risk offenders – everyone knows about it.

"I automatically refer the domestic violence cases to our domestic violence unit and to non-government organisations. We work with the women in crisis for counselling and other things.

Detective Senior Constable Ana Ahomeets
AFP Commissioner Andrew Colvin during
her fact-finding visit.



“If it’s a case that involves drug and alcohol, we refer the perpetrator to the Salvation Army for anger management training.”

Information exchanged during a recent visit by Detective Senior Constable Aho to the AFP in Canberra will further improve the available avenues for assistance.

The AFP has offered to assist the Tonga Police develop ideas that will ultimately be used in a communications plan to raise awareness among Tongans on the issue. While Tonga is developing its resources, it will use the AFP’s assistance to develop materials, such as anti-domestic violence posters.

Detective Senior Constable Aho says her trip to Canberra will add weight to what is already being done to confront the problem in Tonga.

“It’s a good thing for me to come to Australia. I can share with the AFP any ideas that I have on domestic violence: like plans for further promoting the Family Protection Act in communities and the need for women’s development.”

During a recent public address on White Ribbon Day in Tonga, Tonga Police Commissioner Steven Caldwell noted the crucial work of Detective Senior Constable Aho and others in encouraging women to come forward. This included 16 days of activism in Tonga to stop violence against women.

“It is the courage of victims coming forward and condemning violence in the home environment that allows police to do their job and send a message to the community that perpetrators of domestic violence will be prosecuted,” he said.

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Talamahu Market, Nuku'alofa