

A sign at Huonville Primary School in Lae (Credit: Michelle Rooney)



## FSV, children's school attendance and strategies used by schools to help

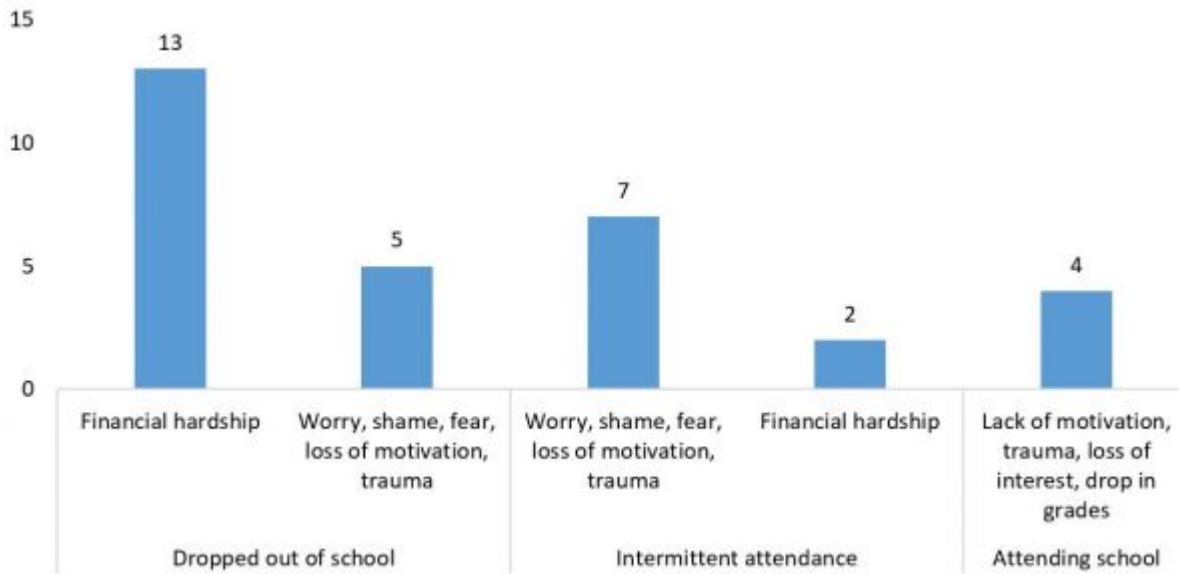
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Previously, we [introduced our research project in Lae](#) and [provided some emerging results](#) on the links between family and sexual violence (FSV) and financial hardship among the women we interviewed. This blog shares some emerging findings on the impact of FSV on school attendance, and the strategies used by schools to assist students experiencing periods of violence. It is based on interviews with 71 women, as well as senior staff in a number of Lae schools.

### FSV and school attendance

65 of the 71 women we interviewed had experienced FSV. 29 (45 per cent) spoke about how their experiences with FSV negatively impacted their children's school attendance. Of the 29, 18 said their children had dropped out of school as a result, and nine that their children were only attending from time to time. Another four said that their children were attending, but were negatively affected.

*Figure 1: Reasons for the negative impact of FSV on children's school attendance (N = 31 observed responses from 29 women)*



As Figure 1 shows, financial hardship was the main reason for children dropping out of school. Many women were unable to meet the various costs involved in sending their children to school despite the government's tuition fee free education policies. The costs of sending children to school include school project fees that many schools in PNG charge over and above the government provided school subsidies to sustain their school activities. Other costs include basics such as stationery, uniforms, bus fare and lunch. Some children ventured into income-earning avenues such as collecting plastic bottles to sell water to generate income to pay for bus fares or even school fees. Other children dropped out of school for years until their parents saved enough money to send them back. Loss of interest, shame, fear, abuse, trauma and seeking refuge in other homes after episodes of FSV were also reasons for children not attending school.

## The response of schools

Schools operate within the framework of broader [national education policies](#). Because many schools in Lae have their fair share of student behavioural issues, a strong emphasis has been placed on the [Behaviour Management Policy](#) (BM), which was introduced by Papua New Guinea's National Department of Education in 2009 to assist schools to effectively manage student behaviour. Several BM training workshops have been conducted to guide head teachers and school counsellors in managing behavioral issues, as well as to link schools to outside support services. In Lae, this includes the option for schools to refer groups of students engaged in outside school activities, such as school fights, to the provincial education authorities. Students are referred to counselling or sign good behavior bonds to stay in school, work on improving their attendance, and stay out of school fights.

Many students referred to the provincial education authorities had troubled home environments due to FSV.

The BM Policy emphasises the rights of all students and teachers to access counselling and referral services. It also places responsibility on schools to provide counselling and referral services. Reflecting these principles, schools have also appointed school counsellors.

Schools also referred to a 30-day exclusion policy which comes into effect when a student is absent from school for 30 days. For example, in one school, absences over 31 days or during an assessment period were considered a major offence under the school rules, and students would be referred to the disciplinary committee. This could result in the student being withdrawn from school and repeating the grade the following year. Given that FSV frequently results in students missing school days, this current policy has the potential to further entrench the disadvantage of students from homes in which FSV occurs.

Schools have developed strategies relevant to their school context to support their students who are facing FSV at home through the different impacts identified above. Based on the interviews with school staff, these include the following:

*Teacher support:* Class teachers provide initial support and counselling, then refer the student to school counsellors or management if attendance or the problem does not improve or if specific support is needed. Teachers also assist by sharing their own food and money for lunch and transport.

*Counsellor support:* School counsellors work with teachers to provide academic and spiritual counselling, and where necessary, refer students for external professional support services. Schools provide counselling and support to the student to help them make an informed decision to either stay or leave school.

*Peer support:* This might involve, for example, taking a friend home to escape episodes of violence at home. Student peers and leaders also assist in supporting students with attendance problems to see the school counsellors for counselling. Students also assist by sharing their own food and money for lunch and transport.

*Other school support involving school community and management:* Schools request an audience with parent/s for consultation with a view to encouraging them to support the child's education. This may include discussions about options to ensure the continuity of the child's education. For older students, schools help find small jobs (e.g. selling bottles, lollies, etc.) outside of school. Some schools provide odd jobs around the school during term breaks for allowance money, especially for those in secondary schools. For students at risk of

missing important educational milestones such as the Grade 8, Grade 10 or Grade 12 national examinations, schools with boarding facilities try to provide accommodation on campus for students to complete their exams. Schools work with relatives to help to arrange for school transfers to remove the child from a violent home.

*Non-school support:* For students who permanently drop out of school because their parent/s can't afford school fees, lunch money, and/or bus fare, the Catholic Diocese in Lae has been running literacy and vocational education classes.

## **Conclusion**

Family and sexual violence has serious implications for school attendance. Despite having minimal resources, many schools are addressing the issue in responsive and innovative ways.

For students who are able to remain in school, Lae schools have developed strategies to help continue their education and manage behavioural problems. Yet several challenges were noted in the interviews. For example, school counsellors are expected to teach as well as provide counselling to students with behavioral issues, but counselling requires specialist training not typically included in teacher training.

The policies on school attendance also need to take into account absences caused by FSV. The first principle of the Behaviour Management Policy notes that every child has the right to education, and the second is that every student and teacher has the right to be treated with respect and in a fair and honest manner, regardless of identity and background. Given that many of the women we interviewed related their experience with FSV to their children's school attendance, the 30-day expulsion policy is in conflict with these two principles.

See part one of this series [here](#), part two [here](#) and part four [here](#).

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