



# No One Should Stand Alone:

Towards a Unified  
Response to Sorcery  
Accusation Related  
Violence





**KOICA**  
KOREA INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION AGENCY



**Australian  
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## Acronyms

<b>ABC</b>	Australian Broadcasting Corporation
<b>ACLED</b>	Armed Conflict Location & Event Data
<b>BCEP</b>	Building Community Engagement Program
<b>CBO</b>	Community-based organisation
<b>CEO</b>	Chief Executive Office
<b>CID</b>	Criminal Investigation Department
<b>COMDEV</b>	Papua New Guinea Department for Community Development and Religion
<b>CSO</b>	Community service organisation
<b>ECPNG</b>	Evangelical Church of Papua new Guinea
<b>EHP</b>	Eastern Highlands Province
<b>FBO</b>	Faith-based organisation
<b>FSC</b>	Family Support Centre
<b>FSVU</b>	Family and Sexual Violence Unit
<b>GBV</b>	Gender-based violence
<b>HAMP Act</b>	HIV/AIDS Management and Prevention (HAMP) Act 2003
<b>HIV/AIDS</b>	Human immunodeficiency virus/Acquired immunodeficiency syndrome
<b>IPO</b>	Interim Protection Order
<b>JCS</b>	Joint Court Sitting
<b>KUSWA</b>	Kafe Urban Settlers Women's Association
<b>KWP</b>	Kup Women for Peace
<b>LLCAP</b>	Local Leadership and Collective Action Program
<b>LNG</b>	Liquefied Natural Gas
<b>NGO</b>	Non-government organisation
<b>OMS</b>	Operation Mekim Save
<b>PDIA</b>	Problem Driven Iterative Adaptation
<b>PNG</b>	Papua New Guinea
<b>PO</b>	Protection Order
<b>SARV</b>	Sorcery Accusation Related Violence
<b>SARV NAP</b>	Sorcery Accusation Related Violence National Action Plan
<b>SHP</b>	Southern Highlands Province
<b>SOP</b>	Standard operating procedure
<b>TVI</b>	The Voice Inc.
<b>VAW</b>	Violence Against Women
<b>VFC</b>	Voice for Change
<b>WHP</b>	Western Highlands Province

# Foreword

*No One Should Stand Alone: Toward a Unified Response to Sorcery Accusation Related Violence*

In this 50th year of independence, Papua New Guinea stands at a point of reflection as well as celebration. We look back on five decades of nationhood with pride, with sorrow, and with honest questions about who we are and where we are going.

We have built schools and hospitals. We have stood for peace in our region. We have protected our sovereignty and celebrated our diversity. But we have also allowed fear to take root in places where peace should stand firm. Sorcery Accusation-Related Violence (SARV) continues to destroy lives, divide communities, and bring shame to our nation, a nation founded on principles of communal justice and human dignity.

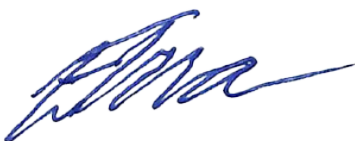
This report provides a grounded and comparative overview of how SARV is currently manifesting across seven provinces in the Papua New Guinea Highlands, and how the state and communities are responding. It is part of our nation's stock-taking about what problems exist in our communities today, how we are addressing them, and what we can do better.

We note that Papua New Guinea (PNG) is not alone in experiencing SARV—it is a concerning form of human rights abuse across many parts of the globe today.

Moreover, PNG was a world leader in developing a holistic national action plan to address SARV in 2015. Laws have been reformed. We have trained village court magistrates and police officers. Referral pathways have been strengthened.

In recent years the 2015 plan has been reviewed and revised, and through the *National Action Plan to Address SARV (2020–2030)*, the Government of Papua New Guinea has committed itself once more to confronting the challenges raised by SARV.

This important research will provide a basis for a curriculum to facilitate the prevention of SARV and the healing of our communities in our homes, our churches and our communities. It also reminds us that while responding to SARV, care for the victims and justice for perpetrators is essential, yet we must also acknowledge that responses alone cannot end this crisis – we must engage in prevention. We thank all who have contributed to this research, including Divine Word University, the Melanesian Institute, the National Research Institute, UNFPA, KOICA, and the Australian National University. But above all, we recognise the individuals and communities that have taken this work into their own hands as a commitment to protect life and rebuild our nation.



**Dr Eric Kwa**  
Secretary for Justice and Attorney General  
Port Moresby, 2025



# Executive summary

This report provides a grounded and comparative overview of how Sorcery Accusation-Related Violence (SARV) is currently manifesting across seven provinces in the Papua New Guinea Highlands (the Highlands/the PNG Highlands), and how the state and communities are responding. SARV is a complex phenomenon involving accusations of causing harm through supernatural means, often resulting in violence, displacement, or death. This report draws on field research conducted in 2024 involving participatory workshops, key informant interviews and follow-up consultations with survivors, frontline responders, church leaders, civil society organisations, health workers, and state actors.

SARV remains one of the most urgent and complex human rights issues in PNG. It is a problem experienced in many parts of the country, including the Autonomous Region of Bougainville, but it is particularly prevalent in the Highlands where this report is focussed.<sup>1</sup> Across the seven provinces, we encountered overlapping and evolving systems of belief that justify violence, deep mistrust of formal justice mechanisms and a wide spectrum of community responses, ranging from rescue to complicity. We note that Papua New Guinea (PNG) is not alone in experiencing SARV—it is a concerning form of human rights abuse across many parts of the globe today.<sup>2</sup>

It is clear there are many actors and organisations, both state and non-state, that are actively working across the region to address SARV. However, they are often working in silos and, for the most part, are not effectively working together, such as through collaborative case management or sharing resources or data.

Our research suggests that the single most significant leverage point to effect real change in addressing SARV would be to develop an effective coordination mechanism that would enable the disparate initiatives currently addressing SARV to consolidate their efforts, thereby creating the necessary collective efficacy to bring about real change. This was the original vision of the SARV National Action Plan, and it is the one that needs to be returned to and focussed on. The second is to change the emphasis on reaction to one of prevention.

<sup>1</sup> For data on prevalence across the country see Forsyth, Miranda, et al. Putting Data Around Intergroup Violence and Sorcery Accusation–Related Violence in Papua New Guinea. US Institute of Peace, 2024. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep61322>. Accessed 22 May 2025.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.theinternationalnetwork.org/>.

Our report complements and extends a separate recent report, *At the Frontline: Effective Prevention and Response to Sorcery Accusation-Related Violence in the Papua New Guinea Highlands (2024)* ('the Frontline report') by offering a province-by-province examination of SARV trends, belief systems, victim profiles, perpetrator behaviour and intervention dynamics. We agree with the Frontline report that the unique nature of SARV means that it should not be treated, as it often is, under the umbrella of Gender Based Violence (GBV). It requires a dedicated funding stream and strategy.

Crucially, while there are widespread variations between provinces, there are also significant differences within provinces, meaning that generalisations must be treated cautiously.

## Manifestations and trends in SARV today

### SARV is widespread but uneven

Serious incidents of SARV are reported across all seven provinces, but the nature, frequency and visibility vary considerably. Southern Highlands Province stands out for the volume and consistency of cases recorded, while provinces like Hela report fewer official cases but contain anecdotal evidence of severe violence in the border areas. In Enga Province, cases only started around 2010, but have been significant in both the number and extremity of violence ever since. In Chimbu Province, there have been recent cases involving the displacement of whole communities. Migration between provinces also creates pockets of SARV amongst those migrant communities, often involving refugees fleeing accusations in other provinces.

### Triggers and progression of cases are predictable

Cases commonly follow a familiar pattern: sudden death, social suspicion, confirmation by a *glasman* or prayer warrior, and violent group mobilisation. Funerals are key sites where accusations emerge and intensify. Other misfortunes such as illness, disability, accidents, or economic hardship can also trigger accusations.

### Accusations are embedded in broader social tensions.

SARV is often entangled with disputes over land, marriage, resources and political or business rivalries. Feelings of jealousy and perceived inequality, particularly around wealth, education or town-based lifestyles, fuel accusations. Gendered dynamics are central in many locations, with SARV serving as a mechanism to marginalise women and vulnerable individuals.

## Belief systems and patterns of violence

Sorcery-related beliefs are not uniform across the Highlands. While there is considerable variation in the narratives that exist, there are two overlapping typologies that shape the logic of accusations:

- Embodied cannibalistic spirit beliefs (e.g., *kumo*, *gwumu*, *yama nenge*, *pisai mai*) often associated with accusations against women.
- Object- and ritual-based sorcery beliefs (e.g., *posin*, *trambol*, assault sorcery), more often associated with men.

These belief systems are historically deep in some parts of the region but have been completely absent in other areas where their existence is a new phenomenon. However, they are also evolving, influenced by migration, Christianity, intermarriages from different parts of PNG, media and socio-economic changes. Particular narratives, such as a currently widespread one concerning '*sanguma*' that eat people's hearts, or in some places eating whole dead bodies, appears to be currently travelling across the Highlands, causing widespread fear and leading to extreme violence. Understanding these narratives and their variations is essential for designing effective interventions.

## Victim and survivor patterns

Victims of SARV are not randomly selected. Common characteristics include:

- Gender vulnerability: Older women, widows, and women without strong kinship protection, are frequently targeted, although both men and women can be accused, depending on local narratives and cultural and social norms.
- Social marginality: Disabled individuals, returnees from towns, childless women, and socially isolated persons face higher risks.
- Economic factors: Wealth, perceived or real, can provoke jealousy and accusations.
- Secondary victims: Violence often extends to children and families of the accused, resulting in displacement, death, or chronic vulnerability.
- Stigma, displacement and re-accusation are common, even after rescue. Children of those accused are also often implicated and said to 'carry the name tag' of being a sorcerer.

## Perpetrators, enablers and structures of complicity

SARV is rarely the act of isolated individuals. Rather, it reflects a complex ecology of direct perpetrators, spiritual legitimisers and passive enablers:

- Violence is typically carried out by groups of young men, sometimes mobilised by community leaders or diviners.
- *Glasman*, prayer warriors, and charismatic religious figures play central roles in 'confirming' accusations, lending spiritual legitimacy to acts of violence.
- Silence, passive agreement, or leadership ambivalence enables violence to escalate unchecked.
- The broader structural failure to intervene—by police, health workers, churches, and community members—reinforces the cycle of accusation and violence.

Disrupting SARV requires addressing not only the attackers but the social structures that normalise or excuse violence.

## Data landscape and gaps

Reliable SARV data is almost entirely absent, reflecting both the hidden nature of the violence and institutional neglect. Data collection by frontline non-government organisations (NGOs) provides critical glimpses but remains incomplete. No province maintains a SARV-specific database. State institutions lack protocols to track SARV cases across police, health and judicial systems. Efforts to address SARV must prioritise building reliable, survivor-centred data systems. Without such systems, violence remains invisible, impunity persists, and interventions remain reactive.

## Promising practices

Despite the scale of the problem, isolated promising practices do exist:

- Preventative measures, such as community by-laws, prohibiting accusations.
- Use of Interim Protection Orders (IPOs) and Preventative Orders (POs) through the Village Courts system, given before the whole community, and supported by local police.
- Survivor rescue and safe house networks, particularly in Chimbu, Goroka and Jiwaka.
- Community and religious interventions reframing SARV beliefs.
- Early interventions during funerals in order to disrupt the feedback loop of accusation and rumour, such as those undertaken by Fr Isaiah Timber from the Catholic Diocese of Mendi's youth group.
- Awareness campaigns targeting churches, schools, and public gatherings.
- However, these efforts remain fragmented, fragile, and often under serious threat due to lack of formal support and security challenges.

# Part I

## Overall analysis of findings

This report presents a synthesis of field research conducted across seven provinces in the Papua New Guinea Highlands (the Highlands/the PNG Highlands)—Chimbu, Eastern Highlands, Hela, Jiwaka, Enga, Southern Highlands, and Western Highlands—during the second half of 2024. Drawing on participatory workshops, key informant interviews, and consultations with survivors, frontline responders, church leaders, civil society organisations (CSOs), health workers and state actors, it offers a grounded and comparative overview of how sorcery accusation-related violence (SARV) is currently manifesting and how the state and communities are responding.

Our findings reveal that SARV continues to be one of the most urgent and complex human rights challenges in the Highlands. It is deeply embedded in social tensions, shaped by evolving belief systems, and sustained by a complex ecology of active and passive enablers. Effective interventions must therefore address not only perpetrators but also the wider structures of complicity and belief. It is clear there are many actors and organisations, both state and non-state, that are actively working across the region to address SARV. However, their efforts are, for the most part, uncoordinated and occasionally operate in mutually unsupportive ways. Our research suggests that the single most significant leverage point to effect real change in addressing SARV would be to develop an effective coordination mechanism that would enable the disparate initiatives currently addressing SARV to consolidate their energy and create the necessary collective efficacy to bring about real change.

This report complements and extends a separate recent report, *At the Frontline: Effective Prevention and Response to Sorcery Accusation-Related Violence in the Papua New Guinea Highlands (2024)* ('the Frontline report') and extends its analysis through a province-by-province examination of SARV trends, beliefs, victim profiles, perpetrator behaviour and intervention dynamics. We agree with the Frontline report that the unique nature of SARV means that it should not be treated, as it often is, under the umbrella of Gender Based Violence (GBV). The range of victims involved (including men and boys), the collective nature of the violence, the extreme forms of torture involved, and its very public form mean that it requires its own targeted responses, funding and coordination. We also agree with the Frontline report that while currently the major response is reactive, it is vital to switch this emphasis to focus on prevention. We are grateful that the Frontline report has done an excellent job of summarising the existing scholarship on SARV, and as such, this report does not do so in any detail, focusing instead on reporting the findings from the fieldwork. Nevertheless, we can state that nothing in this report is inconsistent with that existing literature, although in many respects it updates

and elaborates upon it and provides additional examples.

This Part 1 provides an overarching analysis of our findings; Part 2 offers detailed provincial case studies. A short conclusion finishes the report.

We have included some explicit photos of the physical harm caused by SARV in this report. This is a deliberate choice, as we believe that conveying the full horror of the sustained torture and lifelong injuries that frequently occur requires not just words, but visibility. The particular photographs were taken by one of the authors, Philip Gibbs.

## **1. Extent, nature and context of SARV today**

### **A. Our methodology and caveats on the data**

The data in this report comes primarily from seven three-day workshops that were held across the seven Highlands provinces in 2024. Each workshop had representatives from Government, Non-Government, Civil Society, Church, Faith and community-based organisations who were actively engaged in addressing SARV in the province. The workshops all followed a similar structure, firstly asking participants about their observations about the nature of SARV in the province, and then discussing intervention strategies in terms of response, early intervention, communication and awareness, teaching and training, justice and care, repatriation, and reintegration that had been implemented by stakeholders. The aim of the workshop was for participants to share with each other their experiences, and ideally to generate some collective understanding of responses and opportunities for collaboration and partnership, in adding to generating data for the report.

The follow questions were asked to structure conversations and generate comparable data:

1. Who is involved in a typical SARV case and why?
2. What are the current driving factors of SARV?
3. How is the situation changing?
4. Who are involved as actors in responding to SARV in the province and why?
5. What are the identified strategies that are working and why?
6. What are the identified strategies that are not working and why?
7. How do you know if it is working or not?
8. What can be recommended for future action based on your learning?

Notes were taken by dedicated notetakers at the workshops, and these were compiled and sent to a lead researcher who prepared provincial reports that were then circulated amongst the research team members for comment and refinement. These formed the basis of this final report. However, in compiling these provincial reports, we found that key data was still missing and so there was a second period of data collection in December 2024 in each of the provinces. This was more targeted and involved clarification of certain observations or statements made in the workshops as well as attempts to get as much quantitative data as possible.

A significant overarching finding is the extreme difficulty in obtaining accurate data on the prevalence of SARV in all of the studied provinces. This lack of reliable data hinders a comprehensive understanding of the scope and trends of the problem. In particular, the lack of longitudinal data on SARV hinders any quantitative determination of whether the number of cases are increasing or declining.

For the sake of simplicity, the overall report and this summary often refer to particular manifestations of, and responses to, SARV in the context of a province as a whole. However, just as there is widespread variation between provinces, there is also widespread variation within provinces. This means these generalised statements may not be true for every part of the province.

There were also significant limitations in the data we collected for this report. We were not able to record or engage with every individual or organisation working on SARV in all the provinces that we visited, and so some key players may be missing from the report. This report therefore does not claim to be a comprehensive account of who is doing what, although we tried to cover as many organisations as possible.

All the findings in this report must be read with these caveats about limited data in mind.

## B. SARV is widespread but uneven

Serious incidents of SARV are reported across all seven provinces, but their nature, frequency and visibility vary greatly. While an absence of quantitative data makes assessments about the increase or decrease of incidents difficult, our qualitative data reveals that SARV is experienced today in places that previously have no cultural history of SARV. In addition, there are widespread reports that the forms and extent of violence used against those accused are new and far more extreme than in the past.

In several provinces, interviewees stated that SARV is on the rise, while others noted that the forms of violence are intensifying, even if the number of accusations remains constant.

Across provinces, violence ranges from verbal accusations and ostracism to brutal torture, often through the repeated application of heated iron to the victim's flesh, sexualised violence, dismemberment, and murder. In addition, damage to property, particularly arson, is common and accusations often result in families being rendered homeless and forced to seek shelter elsewhere.



Figure 1: Photograph showing the burn wounds of a SARV survivor from Enga province. (Photo: Philip Gibbs).

## Known data

A number of organisations shared the SARV data they have been collecting with us.

- Southern Highlands Province (SHP) has the most robust incident data, thanks to the documentation efforts of Sr Lorena Jenal, who has recorded:
  - 16 cases (2021),
  - 42 cases (2022),
  - 96 cases (2023),
  - and 96 more (January–September 2024), with varying amounts of fatalities.
- Voice for Change (Jiwaka) reported 89 survivors between 2021 to 2024.
- Enga Province workshop participants recalled 24 SARV cases from 2010 to 2023, with an additional 20 cases involving 26 victims in 2024 alone, suggesting both underreporting and rapid escalation.
- The Family Support Centre (FSC) at Mt Hagen hospital reported four cases in 2022, three in 2023, two in 2024 and two so far in 2025.

Many other provinces, including Eastern Highlands Province (EHP), Hela, and Western Highlands Province (WHP), report only anecdotal or fragmentary data. Health centres, police stations and NGOs may track individual cases, but no province-wide or national SARV databases exist.

## C. Triggers and progression of cases are predictable

Across the Highlands, SARV cases follow a remarkably consistent pattern:

- A sudden or unexplained death (often of a relatively young or prominent person) triggers suspicion.
- Gossip spreads through social and kin networks, often intensified via mobile phones and social media. Funerals are key locations at which accusations emerge and intensify.
- A *glasman* or prayer warrior is consulted to ‘verify’ the suspicion.
- A target is identified, and then a group mobilises, often including young men, to interrogate, torture, or kill.
- In some cases, a secondary accusation emerges to redirect attention and escalate the violence. Communities often describe this progression as ‘standard’ or ‘expected’. In provinces like Chimbu, WHP and EHP, this pattern is so normalised that few interventions occur unless a trusted leader, such as a spiritual leader, businessman, community leader or a politician, actively disrupts the process.

Other misfortunes such as sickness, accidents, economic hardship, natural disasters (in some places) and social issues involving jealousy (such as a person who appears to hoard wealth or ostentatiously receives a large share of wealth without quickly redistributing it) can also trigger sorcery accusations.

## D. Accusations are embedded in broader social tensions

SARV is rarely an isolated act. It is often entangled with unresolved issues such as disputes over land, marriage, compensation and inheritance. Victims are sometimes accused as a way of removing them from a contested resource or to weaken their social standing. In Jiwaka and Enga, we were told of accusations that were used in the context of business or political rivalry.

Anthropological insights highlight the ways in which beliefs about sorcery are mobilised to explain and act upon perceived blockages to wealth, health, or status. As anthropologists Rena Lederman<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Rena Lederman, ‘Sorcery and social change in Mendi’, *Social Analysis: The International Journal of Social and Cultural Practice* (November 1981): 15-27.

and Thomas Strong<sup>4</sup> observe, accusations often reflect deeper anxieties about unbalanced relationships, growing inequality and thwarted expectations of modernity. For example, this includes the inequality felt between those who live in towns and those ‘left behind’ in villages.<sup>5</sup> This inequality is particularly problematic for what Strong describes as people committed to ‘an axiomatic Melanesian moral ethos of egalitarianism’. The link between SARV accusations and concerns about economic distribution emerged repeatedly as a strong theme across many of the areas where we conducted our research.

In addition, SARV intersects with patterns of jealousy, marginalisation, and gendered power. In many areas, SARV becomes a symbolic and literal tool for enforcing social norms and punishing perceived deviance. Gendered dynamics are central in many locations, with SARV serving as a mechanism to marginalise women and reinforce misogyny.

## E. Belief systems – a typology

Sorcery-related beliefs in the Highlands are not uniform, and these variations have been documented by anthropologists since the 1950s—and even earlier, as we have sought to reference throughout the report. These belief systems are often deeply embedded in cosmology and kinship, but they are also fluid—shaped by migration, media, church teachings and intergroup contact. While there is considerable variation, these various belief systems fall into two overlapping but distinct typologies that help explain why accusations arise, who is targeted and how communities justify violence.

Each section of each provincial case-study in this report contains a brief review of the relevant anthropological literature, highlighting some of the key research (while not by any means being comprehensive). We do take account of the diversity of anthropologists writing these accounts, who came from different backgrounds and worked at different time periods. Some were missionaries, some were academics, and they were from Europe, Australia and the USA. As a result, we have treated these anthropological accounts largely as part of the historical record. Taken as a whole, this review reveals four things:

1. There is an enormous variation in the descriptions of sorcery beliefs across the region, although there are also consistencies, for instance, certain types of narratives of sorcery are primarily associated with men, and some primarily with women.
2. Since the anthropological record started, there have been detailed descriptions of the ways in which the narratives about sorcery have travelled into different geographic areas, and the ways they have mutated in response to changing social and economic conditions.<sup>6</sup> This belies any assumption that these beliefs are necessarily deeply culturally engrained.
3. The behavioural responses to sorcery narratives (or what scholars Philip Gibbs and Miranda Forsyth call the ‘behavioural scripts’)<sup>7</sup> have also changed over time. It seems that behavioural scripts today are more violent, and the violence is more public, than was noted in the past.
4. During the colonial period there were strict prohibitions on SARV (and other forms of violence), and in some places this reduced the violence associated with accusations of sorcery. In some parts, killing was replaced by ostracism, and in other places, it became even more hidden.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Strong, ‘Becoming witches: Sight, sin, and social change in the Eastern Highlands of Papua New Guinea’, in *Pentecostalism and witchcraft*, eds. Knut Rio, Michelle MacCarthy and Ruy Blanes (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 67-92, 70.

<sup>5</sup> Strong, ‘Becoming witches: Sight, sin, and social change in the Eastern Highlands of Papua New Guinea’, p 71.

<sup>6</sup> Pamela J. Stewart, and Andrew Strathern, ‘Feasting on my enemy: Images of violence in the New Guinea Highlands’, *Ethnohistory* 46, No. 4 (1999): 645-669.

<sup>7</sup> Miranda Forsyth and Philip Gibbs, ‘Contagion of violence: The role of narratives, worldviews, mechanisms of transmission and contagion entrepreneurs’, *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy* 9, No. 2 (2019): 37-59, [www.doi.org/10.5204/ijcsd.v9i2.1217](http://www.doi.org/10.5204/ijcsd.v9i2.1217).

## F. Embodied cannibalistic spirits

Beliefs about embodied cannibalistic spirits posit that a spiritual being lives inside the body of the accused, often unknown even to the host. It is said that this being exits at night to ‘eat’ the internal organs, particularly the hearts, but in some places, the whole dead bodies of others. This is a gendered narrative, often targeting women, but also viewing this spirit as something that is shared within families.

**Chimbu:** The belief in *kumo* is longstanding. Accused individuals are thought to harbour creatures like bats or rats that exit their bodies at night to feast on victims. *Kumo* is not taught or learned—it is inherited or innate.

**Enga:** The old term *yama nenge* (eating spirit) has been reimagined to describe a new, imported form of *sanguma* belief. This ‘spirit that eats the heart’ is now thought to be acquired from outside—especially from Chimbu. The spirit-being is often depicted as an animal-like creature—usually a frog—which inhabits and possesses the accused.

**EHP (Asaro region):** The *gwumu* spirit, thought to dwell in the uterus or underarm, reflects anxieties about envy, spiritual contamination and modernity.

**Hela:** The Hewa people refer to *pisai*, which is believed to be very similar to *kumo* in some regards, a being which lives in a human host and ‘eats’ others, causing their death. *Pisai* has been translated by one anthropologist as ‘cannibal witches’ though there is little reason to use the word ‘witch’ to describe a creature that lives in men and women.

## H. Ritual and object-based sorcery (e.g., *posin*, poison, *trambol*) and assault magic

In many places, sorcery is said to involve the use of materials, rituals and spells, and is often believed to be practised by men. The practitioner is believed to intentionally harm others through their actions, sometimes in the context of warfare.

For example, in the EHP (Okapa, Obura-Wonenara), there is reference to *posin* sorcery that is said to involve tangible objects like hair, plants or powder. The accused are usually men, and the harm is believed to occur across group lines.

These typologies are not mutually exclusive—they often exist side-by-side or blend within a single case, and they are highly malleable. Interestingly, anthropological studies from as much as six decades ago similarly report on changing narratives about sorcery and witchcraft, meaning that it is not a new phenomenon.

Understanding the contours of the different narratives as they currently manifest is crucial, even if extremely challenging. Effective interventions must respond to the logic of the belief, not just its outcome. Challenging *sanguma* in Enga requires different framing than addressing *posin* in Okapa. Provincial variation in belief systems shapes not only who is accused and how they are treated, but also what responses—religious, legal or cultural—might be effective.

For the sake of simplicity, in this report the term sorcery is used to cover all these manifestations of belief. However, we acknowledge that this can obscure important differences between belief systems and narratives, as we have tried to address in the detailed descriptions of each province.

## 2. Victim and survivor patterns

Across all seven provinces, victims of SARV share common vulnerabilities—but there are also crucial regional and demographic distinctions. Victims are not selected at random. They are often socially positioned at the intersection of suspicion, marginalisation and opportunity—meaning that their removal either satisfies an emotional need (revenge, grief, jealousy, envy) or provides material or political advantage.

### A. Gender

Both men and women are accused of sorcery, and one common class of victim is older women, widows, divorced women or women without adult sons to protect them. This is consistent across Chimbu, SHP, Enga and EHP, where women are often suspected of harbouring internal spiritual beings (*kumo*, *gwumu*, *pisai*, *sanguma*). The gender of the person accused is highly correlated with the dominant sorcery narrative in the area—those narratives that involve *posin* or assault-type sorcery are more likely to be associated with men, and those that involve *sanguma* or feasting on human flesh are more commonly associated with women, although not exclusively. The migration of narratives into different locations complicates any attempt to make clear categorisations, as does the mutation of the narratives over time.

- In Jiwaka and Enga, workshop participants described cases where sons participated in the torture of their own mothers, underscoring the collapse of kin-based protection systems.
- In EHP, nurses report that 90 per cent of SARV survivors brought to hospital are female, most of them having been mutilated with hot irons.
- In the Western areas of the Highlands (Enga, SHP, Hela), women who are accused may be sexually assaulted or burned on their genitals or breasts by heated metal objects. Women are also sometimes paraded naked or raped during group attacks.

### B. Disability and social marginality

Social marginality was a common theme, with those lacking strong support networks seen as a particularly vulnerable class. Being single, divorced, childless, widowed or mentally ill was also cited as a risk factor across several provinces.

Less commonly, disability was provided as a factor that increased the likelihood of accusations, particularly for children or for the mothers of children with a disability. In Chimbu, women and men with disabilities were said to be early and frequent targets. One workshop participant reported that disabled people are often seen as non-productive and thus suspicious when a misfortune occurs. In Jiwaka, several survivors had visible disabilities resulting from previous SARV attacks and reported multiple re-accusations or continuous displacement. In some parts of the Highlands, there are reports of people with leprosy being accused of being witches.<sup>8</sup>

The targeting of people with disabilities and suffering from mental illnesses such as dementia, as well as from chronic illnesses such as leprosy, is a common feature in many other parts of the world where SARV occurs.<sup>9</sup> The targeting of disabled persons should be kept 'on the radar' in further research.

<sup>8</sup> See the recent UNDP mini-film on this issue: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OSKuS6NUWGI>.

<sup>9</sup> Human Rights Council, Study on the situation of the violations and abuses of human rights in harmful practices related to accusations of witchcraft and ritual attacks, as well as stigmatization', A/HRC/52/47, <https://www.theinternationalnetwork.org/s/G2300784.pdf>.

### C. Land, resources and jealousy

In many cases, the accusation is related to feelings of envy around what is perceived to be unfair economic or political advantage possessed by a particular individual. For instance, in EHP, survivors included returnees from town who had wealth or education, and who were accused for not 'sharing' properly. In Jiwaka, they included migrants from other provinces who were seen as economically more successful than the original inhabitants.

Many cases also follow an identifiable tension over resources. In Chimbu and Jiwaka, women with land or pigs have been accused by extended relatives, often to dispossess them. In SHP, there are accounts of accusations against women in polygynous marriages, where rivals used SARV to eliminate co-wives.

### D. Secondary victims and children

Violence often extends beyond the primary accused:

- Children, spouses and siblings are often displaced, attacked or orphaned.
- In WHP, children of accused mothers have been left without care and some have died from neglect.
- In Jiwaka, one NGO, Voice for Change, recorded whole tribal groups in flight, seeking safety for all family members after an accusation.



Figure 2: Photograph of a grave of a child victim of SARV. The child was burned to death in its mother's womb when the mother was tortured. (Photo: Philip Gibbs).

### E. Stigma and aftermath

Even where survivors are rescued:

- Many remain permanently displaced, unable to return home.
- Others face ongoing threats, discrimination and re-accusation.
- Victims of SARV rarely receive mental health support, and formal justice for perpetrators remains rare.

In sum, SARV not only devastates individuals but fractures families and entire communities. The survivor profile in each province reflects not only belief systems but local power structures, economic tensions and gender dynamics. Protecting potential victims and supporting survivors requires nuanced, locally tailored interventions that address these deeper patterns of exclusion and control. These victim patterns underscore that SARV is not random but systematically targets

those already marginalised by gender, disability, or social isolation. Preventative efforts must therefore prioritise reinforcing protective kinship and community structures.

### 3. Perpetrators and enablers

Understanding who drives SARV is critical—not only to assign responsibility, but to reveal the wider social ecology of complicity, silence and structural failure. Across provinces, perpetrators range from spontaneous mobs to coordinated groups acting on orders from elders, diviners or pastors. In many cases, those who orchestrate or permit violence are not the ones who swing the bush knives or light the fires.

#### a. Direct perpetrators: Youth and peer mobs

In all provinces, the immediate violence is usually carried out by young and middle-aged men, often in groups. These groups are sometimes characterised as unemployed, intoxicated or drug-affected—but this is not universally true. They are often joined by individuals from the family of the supposed ‘victim’ of the sorcery.

- In Chimbu, it is common for leaders to ‘recruit’ young men to act on suspicions.
- In Jiwaka, interviewees mentioned that young men were paid K10 to participate in tortures.
- In Enga and SHP, mobs often form quickly in reaction to an accusation, and can act violently in the absence of any formal or informal adjudication.
- In several cases, including in SHP and EHP, perpetrators included relatives of the accused, including sons and in-laws.

#### B. Diviners, *glasman/meri*, and prayer warriors

A recurring enabler in SARV cases is the figure of the *glasman*, *glasmeri* or charismatic religious intermediary. These individuals are perceived as possessing special spiritual insight into hidden truths.

- In EHP and WHP, these figures are sometimes brought in from coastal provinces to lend credibility to an accusation.
- In Enga, there are reports of diviners and prayer-warriors interpreting spiritual visions of heart-eating *sanguma*.
- In SHP, *trambol* diviners use bamboo-based rituals to ‘locate’ the sorcerer.
- In some communities, these actors are treated as quasi-legal authorities, and their pronouncements justify mob action—even over the objections of police or church leaders.

So-called prayer warriors sometimes function as a modern form of diviner, using Christian prayer or implements such as a cross or blessed water to facilitate receiving messages or visions from God that they use to counter malevolent spiritual forces. Sometimes they also name the accused, creating credibility for the accusation. This is an area that requires close watch and further research.

#### C. Community leaders, pastors and elders

Leadership responses are inconsistent. In some cases, pastors, Village Court officials or clan leaders intervene and prevent violence. But in others, they:

- Legitimise accusations either by remaining silent or passively agreeing.
- Encourage or motivate the young men to believe they are protecting the community from the threatening presence of the accused sorcerer.
- In extreme cases, participate directly in identifying or interrogating the accused.
- The absence of coordinated leadership, or the presence of contradictory moral messages, leaves communities vulnerable to escalation.

#### D. Passive complicity

Enablers are not limited to those directly involved. SARV continues partly because:

- Police often refuse to intervene, or they arrive late.
- Health workers, teachers and other public servants working in communities fail to report cases or defer to community consensus.
- The way in which health workers communicate causes of disease and death can inadvertently trigger accusations.
- Survivors are not offered protection, and perpetrators are rarely arrested or prosecuted.
- In multiple provinces, civil society organisations (CSOs) lack Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) and police lack any designated SARV unit or training.
- The architecture of SARV involves more than just perpetrators—it includes those who point the finger, those who heat the iron, those who watch in silence and those who fail to act.

#### E. Societal changes and structural failure

SARV has evolved and changed dramatically over time and profound changes are evident in every location where SARV occurs. It is clear that SARV is closely associated with societal changes, such as increasing population, in-country migration (such as for resource exploitation projects), land use pressures, uneven development and distribution of wealth and the spread of disease. In other words, SARV is closely associated with poverty and unequal and non-existent development. It is also associated with corruption and the weakness of state institutions, especially in the law and justice system. There is clear evidence that PNG's population has increased dramatically over recent decades, as has wealth inequality and the decline in state services such as education, health and law and order.

SARV also results from the ongoing failures of the PNG state to provide adequate services such as health, education, justice and security across the population, as well as necessary infrastructure such as roads and bridges. Many accidents that occur due to people drowning using inadequate bridges over fast-flowing rivers are blamed on sorcery, triggering further violence. A more effective response must improve the provision of these services, while also disrupting these layers of complicity—by protecting witnesses, reforming religious messaging, regulating *glasman* authority and holding enablers accountable across sectors.

## 4. Data landscape and gaps

One of the most persistent challenges across all seven provinces is the absence of consistent, reliable and disaggregated data. This absence is not simply a technical gap—it reflects the informal nature of the violence, the lack of institutional mandates, the deep stigma attached to both accusations and survival and the fear of retaliation for reporting felt by survivors and their supporters.

We found that different organisations (both state and non-state) collect data on SARV, but there is no consistency in the way that cases or incidents are counted and categorised and there is no mechanism for sharing data. There is also a general reluctance to share data on SARV, and mistrust around demands to do so. Most records that are kept only record the bare minimum of details, such as numbers of cases and possibly gender.

#### A. What remains hidden

There are many dimensions to SARV that remain unknown:

- Many survivors do not report attacks, either due to shame, fear of retaliation if they report cases or because they are in hiding or permanently displaced.

- Buried bodies and inaccessible locations means the true number of deceased is unknown. Several reports (e.g., Chimbu, EHP) note that bodies are disposed of in latrines or rivers, making documentation impossible
- No formal system exists within police or health records to tag or code cases as SARV-related, leading to SARV data being absorbed into generic assault or GBV categories.

## B. Data barriers

Several structural barriers to data collection were identified:

- Fear of reprisal prevents survivors and witnesses from reporting cases or seeking help.
- Lack of coordination and case-management between civil society actors, churches, health services, and police.
- Concerns over the sharing of data by many organisations that collect it.
- No SARV-specific intake forms or databases used in hospitals, courts, or police systems.
- SARV has not been treated by the government as a specific category of violence requiring dedicated tracking.

## C. Other data sources

In order to put the data collected in this study into perspective, we compare it with three other datasets. The first is the data collected by the independent, non-profit initiative Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED), which includes SARV cases in its databases of political violence. Its data is sourced from reports in the two national newspapers, The Post Courier and The National. The cases of SARV (individuals beaten, tortured or killed) in the Highlands provinces are reported by ACLED as follows:<sup>10</sup>

**Table 1: Number of accused in Highlands, 2021 - March 2025**

Province	Number of accused			Total
	Males	Females	Unspecified	
Chimbu	0	2	0	2
Eastern Highlands	3	2	0	5
Enga	0	52	0	52
Hela	0	1	0	1
Southern Highlands	2	9	2	13
Western Highlands	1	0	0	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>74</b>

The second recent source of data comes from the Frontline report. It reported 94 cases collected by a network of five Highlands SARV frontline organisations operating in EHP, Hela, Jiwaka and Chimbu in 2023. As many individuals were involved in each case as both primary and secondary victims (i.e., children and other family members of those accused) in total 638 individuals were involved.

The third dataset is a database comprised of PNG court judgements involving cases of violence against those believed to be sorcerers by the perpetrators. This is a database maintained by

<sup>10</sup> <https://acleddata.com/>.

Miranda Forsyth and housed at ANU.<sup>11</sup> We have relied upon reports in the publicly available case law database, the Pacific Legal Information Institute (PacLII), and the non-publicly accessible PNG Legal Information Network. In each database, we searched for the term ‘sorcer\*’ and looked for references to cases of individuals being prosecuted for violence linked to a belief that the individual victim was a sorcerer. This was entered into our Excel spreadsheet and then into SPSS quantitative analysis software.

Figure 3 shows a chart with the number of prosecutions per year since the year 2000. Over the period there were 113 cases prosecuted, with the overwhelming majority of those resulting in convictions.

**Figure 3: Number of prosecutions for SARV per year since 2000.**

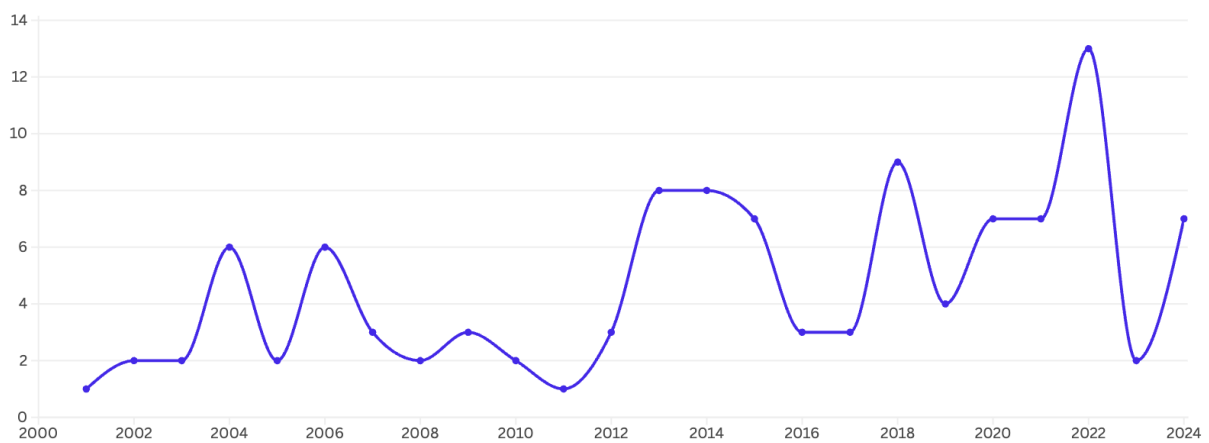
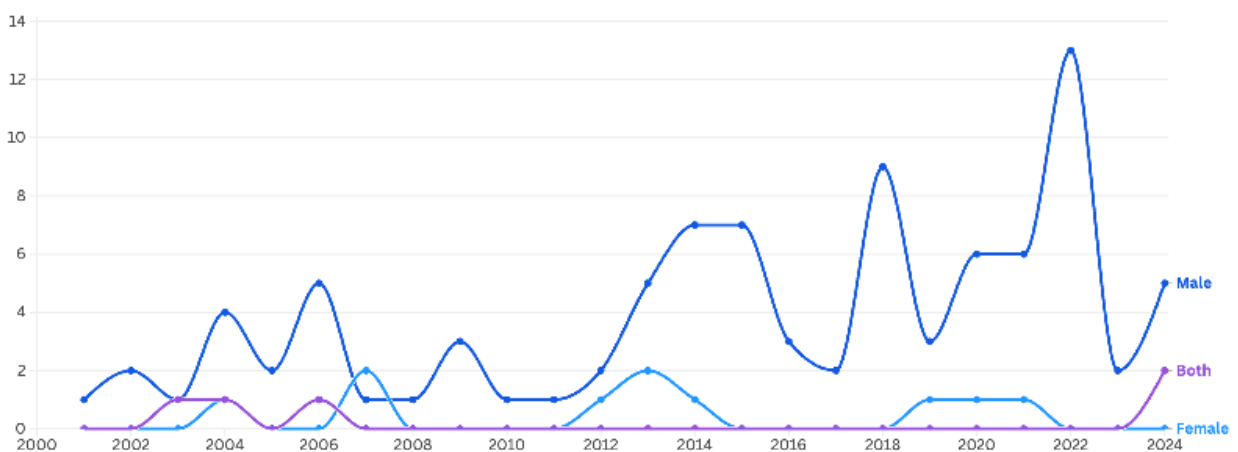


Figure 4 shows the gender of the accused in the cases that have been prosecuted. The overwhelming majority are male (93), with only 11 cases where there were only female victims, and five where there were both male and female victims.

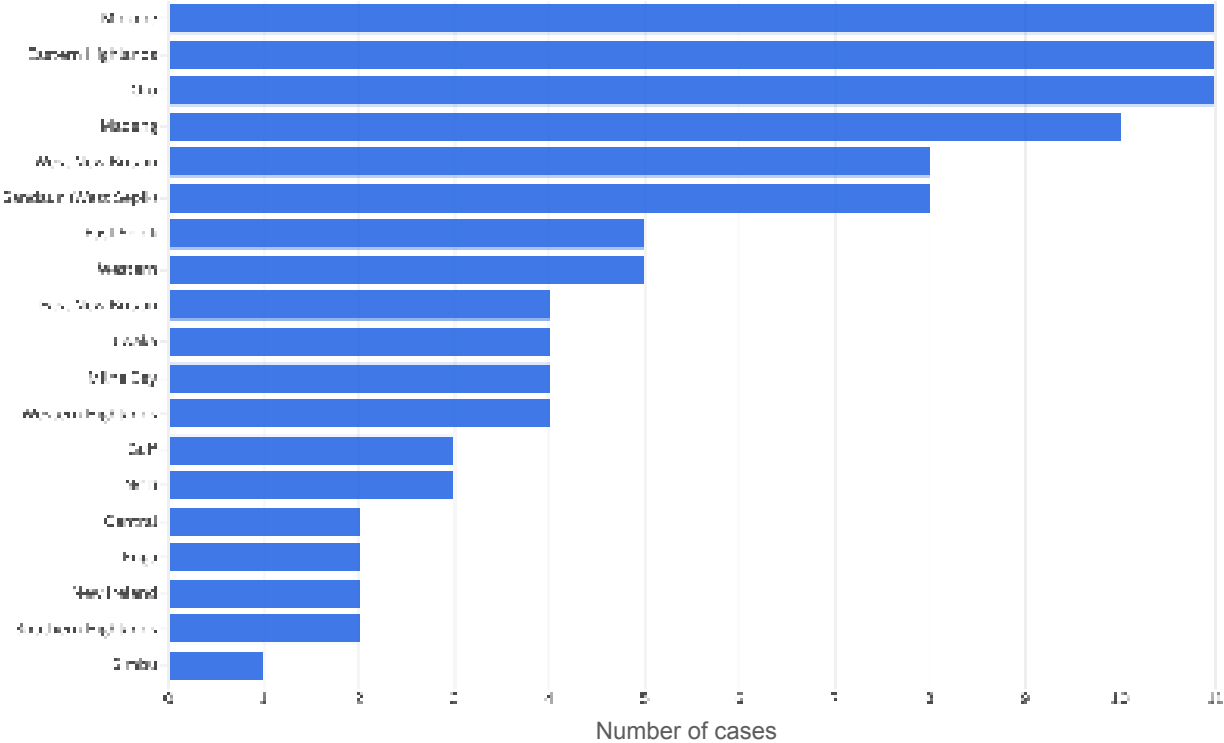
**Figure 4: Number of SARV prosecutions by gender of the accused since 2000.**



<sup>11</sup> For further details please see Forsyth, Miranda, et al. Putting Data Around Intergroup Violence and Sorcery Accusation–Related Violence in Papua New Guinea. US Institute of Peace, 2024. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep61322>. Accessed 22 May 2025.

Finally, Figure 5 shows the number of cases based on the province the case was heard in. From this, it is clear that the vast majority of cases occur in Morobe, Eastern Highlands, Oro and Madang, with all the others having had less than half the numbers as in those provinces. There are no reported cases from the Autonomous Region of Bougainville because none have appeared in our searches. This may be because these cases are not as readily included in the databases we used, or it may be due to lack of prosecutions.

**Figure 5: Number of SARV prosecutions by province in which the case was heard.**



**D. Making sense of the disparate sources of data**

It is very hard to draw any clear conclusions from the fragmented sources of data, except to say that there is a great disparity between the number of cases that actually occur, those that lead to the intervention of an NGO or care from a hospital or justice from the justice system, and those that are reported in national newspapers. In SHP, for example, Sr Lorena reported 250 cases between 2021 and 2024, but only 13 of those were reported in the newspapers. It is highly likely that there are many cases in SHP that Sr Lorena was not able to assist during that period as well. A number of Human Rights Defenders we have spoken with refer to untold numbers of cases occurring in the more remote parts of the provinces they work in (Jiwaka and Hela in particular).

What is clear, is that in every province, the true scale of SARV remains partially obscured. The few actors who do track SARV—often at great personal risk—are doing so without formal support or institutional recognition. A future response strategy must prioritise data architecture, including SARV-specific categories in policing, judicial, and health systems, and the integration of civil society monitoring into formal reporting mechanisms.

## 5. Promising practices

Despite the scale and brutality of SARV across the Highlands, communities are not without agency or creativity. Each province contains examples of promising practices, often led by civil society groups, churches or individual frontline actors. However, these initiatives are isolated, under-resourced and poorly coordinated, and are frequently overshadowed by the structural gaps in protection, justice and survivor care. The majority of resources and effort are reactive and go into responding to cases of SARV, rather than focusing on preventative measures.

The following summary shows what seems to work in addressing SARV.

### A. Sustained leadership over time

The presence of dedicated individuals and numerous organisations actively working on SARV in several provinces, often for significant periods of time, indicates a strong commitment to addressing the issue. (Examples may be seen in Lilly Besoer and the team at Voice for Change in Jiwaka, or Sr Lorraine Jenal at the St Francis House of Hope, Diocese of Mendi in SHP.) In addition, the use of local champions and influential figures from various sectors to advocate against SARV in their own areas is a significant strength in some provinces. A challenge will be to ensure that these leaders, who have often been champions for decades, are supported by the emergence of new leadership in their respective organisations.

### B. Preventative orders issued by the Village Courts

Preventative Orders (POs) and Interim Protection Orders (IPOs) are issued by Village Courts following the government's approval for Village Courts to issue POs and IPOs for any form of dispute. POs are often issued to survivors of SARV in public, i.e. before the presence of the whole community, including the perpetrators. Violation of the POs by the perpetrators attract legal repercussions, including possible arrests. The issuance of POs is perceived by our interviewees to be an effective strategy that has prevented perpetrators from further accusing people. However, it is difficult to ascertain the number of issuance of IPOs and POs in the Village Courts.

### C. Community by-laws

A number of communities in Jiwaka, SHP, WHP and even Chimbu provinces have experimented with the development of community by-laws to address a range of social order issues, including SARV. Some, such as those developed in Gor community in Chimbu, have been in existence for over a decade, while others are more recent. There are generally encouraging reports that these by-laws, that outlaw making of accusations and impose fines for making accusations, do reduce the numbers of accusations and violence. Voice for Change in Jiwaka has recently been at the centre of developing these by-laws.

### D. Survivor rescue and safe house networks

There is a great lack of safe houses for survivors of SARV throughout the entire region. However, where they do exist, survivor safe houses and rescue networks provide a critical locus of support for SARV work and care and support for survivors. They provide shelter, counselling and also livelihood support. For example, in SHP, Sr Lorena Jenal has created an informal but highly effective rescue and relocation network, often intervening without police support. In Jiwaka, Voice for Change has supported nearly 90 survivors in four years and expanded its safe house capacity in response to an influx of entire fleeing clans. In WHP, the Catholic Archdiocese of Mt Hagen supports more than 100 SARV survivors, using IPOs and coordinated referrals to shelter and legal aid.

## E. Community and religious interventions

In many areas, the mainline churches are engaged in campaigning against SARV. The Catholic Church has a range of SARV prevention programs across the region and many bishops are extremely active. In Enga, Caritas has led a series of programs dedicated to addressing SARV that have been in existence for many years and are producing positive results.

## F. Awareness and education

Awareness campaigns were noted in all provinces, often led by CSOs and church actors. Some CSOs are engaging in anti-SARV messaging and interventions during traditional gatherings like *haus kraus* (funerals) and these show potential for community-level change. In EHP, groups like Femili PNG and KUSWA conduct outreach to urban settlements and remote areas, sometimes walking two to three hours into conflict zones. In Enga, efforts at public storytelling and timeline mapping of SARV cases during workshops show promise for localised education. Drama groups in SHP and the Raun Raun Theatre in EHP are using drama presentations to illustrate the impact of SARV. A new initiative to use TikTok as a platform to share humorous videos illustrating the need to be sceptical of assumptions that sorcery is the cause of misfortune is also receiving promising levels of interest.<sup>12</sup>

Many interviewees stressed that advocacy needs to be done by leaders from within the community, as people are dismissive or resentful of messaging from outsiders. However, they also noted that carrying out such advocacy and awareness can be dangerous for those attempting to intervene.

While there is little overall consistency of messaging in awareness campaigns, or sharing of awareness-raising materials, many do focus on creating awareness about the laws against SARV as well as promoting Christian-based messages of non-violence.

## G. Multi-sectoral involvement and coalitions

All participants agreed that addressing SARV effectively involves a consolidated effort by a range of actors across the provinces, including government agencies (police, health, community development), NGOs, churches and community-based organisations. Where it occurs, survivor-centred case-management and multi-stakeholder case conferencing is very beneficial.

However, many interviewees pointed to significant difficulties in achieving such coordinated approach in practice. This difficulty is often related to local political tensions and mistrust.

## H. Justice and restorative interventions

Prosecutions for SARV remain rare but are being encouraged in some provinces, such as Chimbu, as a result of the establishment of the legal desk by The Voice Inc (TVI), and ongoing work by the PNG Tribal Foundation. The PNG Tribal Foundation provides resources to support prosecutions, such as protection and support for victims, post-mortem and medical records, legal support and file review and transport and lodging and operational costs for the police. They claim there have been seven successful SARV prosecutions supported by Tribal Foundation in the past two years for murder and/or grievous bodily harm.<sup>13</sup>

Many CSOs argue that prosecutions are critical to deter perpetrators from engaging in SARV.

<sup>12</sup> Marimari, 'Marimari: One woman's fight against sorcery violence', <https://www.marimarifilm.com/home>; for download versions, see <https://www.marimarifilm.com/download-and-use-social-media-videos>.

<sup>13</sup> Post Courier Online, 'Perpetrator sentenced to 5 years', Post Courier, 19 March 2025, <https://www.postcourier.com.pg/perpetrator-sentenced-to-5-years/>.

The first successful conviction under the new *Glassman* Act and the widespread sharing of that conviction through print and social media by Tribal Foundation is a good example of how one conviction can be used to send a message about the risks of accusation.<sup>14</sup> In addition, it was reported on 25 April 2025 that a *glasmeri* was arrested and charged under the *Glassman* Act 2022 following an incident in which two men were killed, five others tortured and 150 people displaced in Sinesine-Yongmugi district in Chimbu province.<sup>15</sup>

While prosecution of perpetrators is an important goal of justice responses, many survivors choose to pursue reconciliation, civil proceedings or customary compensation instead. This preference is often driven by a desire for long-term safety and reintegration into their communities. Survivors and frontline responders report that pursuing formal justice can escalate risks of retaliation, especially in areas where perpetrators have strong local support or family networks and there is no visible police presence.

Restorative approaches—such as public peace mediation, compensation and community dialogue—are seen by many survivors as more effective in enabling them to return home, reclaim land or livelihoods and live without fear. These practices are not without limitations (many are concerned that they enable the culture of impunity for perpetrators), but they reflect the need for survivor-led, context-sensitive options within SARV responses.

Some SARV supporters are also seeking compensation for defamation through the District Court, and reportedly, the large sums of compensation being awarded by the *Oporasen Mekim Save* (OMS)<sup>16</sup> court in Enga is having a deterrent effect.

### A summary of promising practices

In sum, innovations exist—but they are fragmented, fragile and largely informal. The gap between what frontline actors are doing and what systems officially provide is wide and growing. Unless existing promising practices are resourced, replicated, and supported by formal systems, they will remain the exception rather than the rule.

## 6. Major gaps and failures

### A. Lack of institutional coordination

The lack of coordination, both horizontally across the different organisations working in the area and vertically through the different layers of government, is the single largest problem in the response today. No province has a functional, multi-agency SARV response task force. Many actors operate in isolation. Few share their resources such as awareness materials and manuals or engage in collaborative case management. Yet we know from the research that SARV responses are most effective when they are multi-stakeholder and connected. This is the key current failure that requires addressing.

The 2015 SARV National Action Plan (the SARV NAP) and its working committee was originally established to provide an overarching coordinating function, but it has struggled to do so effectively in recent years. During recent years, new donors and organisations have also become involved in the issue, bringing needed resources and energy but, in the absence of clear, nationwide

<sup>14</sup> Post Courier Online, 'Perpetrator sentenced to 5 years'.

<sup>15</sup> Post Courier Online, 'Two killed, five tortured, and over 150 displaced in Sinesine-Yongomugi following sorcery accusations', Post Courier, 25 April 2025, <https://www.postcourier.com.pg/two-killed-five-tortured-and-over-150-displaced-in-sinesine-yongomugi-following-sorcery-accusations/>.

<sup>16</sup> This tok pisin phrase means punishing the culprits to make them learn from their mistakes.

coordinated guidance, also the danger of conflicting directions and competition. The SARV NAP has been undergoing review and revision and is urgently required to bring coordination to the holistic nature of the task of addressing SARV.

Most provinces lack SARV-specific SOPs, even though similar protocols exist for GBV. As a result, the police and health workers report that they handle SARV cases ad hoc, without training or structured referral systems. There are no effective mechanisms to share lessons about what works, or to collaboratively develop and improve education and awareness resources.

The lack of effective case management systems and data-sharing platforms hinders support for survivors and the ability of NGOs, researchers and others to monitor trends. Further, inconsistencies in messaging by different actors and organisations can create confusion and weaken awareness efforts and could even be making matters worse.

While key individuals in the health and education sectors exercise needed leadership in some provinces, these remain the actions of individuals and without institutional support. This support is badly needed as both these sectors can play an important preventative role.<sup>17</sup>

## B. Impunity and justice gaps

Arrests and prosecutions are rare, even in high-profile torture and murder cases. Village Court magistrates are inconsistent—some defend victims, others enable the violence. Survivors are afraid to report cases, and when they do, they are often asked to reconcile with perpetrators or drop charges under community pressure.

Overall, we found there was little awareness of the laws around SARV amongst the general population, and also amongst members of the police force and Village Court magistrates. While some police officers work well with community leaders and put their own lives on the line at times, it is not always clear whose side they are on, which undermines the trust of victims.

## C. Inadequate survivor support

Medical care, particularly for burn and torture survivors, is extremely limited outside urban centres. There is a great lack of safe houses for survivors of SARV throughout the entire region. Psychosocial support is almost non-existent. Children of survivors are frequently displaced or orphaned, with no coordinated support mechanism in place. The stigma and social ostracism faced by victims and their families perpetuate a cycle of vulnerability.

There is also a widespread lack of effective resettlement and reintegration programs for survivors and their families, leading to ongoing displacement, ongoing insecurity and urban migration.

## D. High levels of other forms of violence

High levels of general violence and tribal conflicts in some provinces, particularly in Hela and Enga, create a challenging environment for addressing SARV, limiting access to services and posing security risks. In the EHP, tribal conflict may be seen as violent retribution for deaths attributed to sorcery.

<sup>17</sup> See Miranda Forsyth, Joanne Taylor, Tambri Housen, Celeste Marsh, Philip Gibbs and William Kipongi, 'Sorcery and witchcraft beliefs on the front line of public health response in Papua New Guinea and beyond', *Western Pac Surveill Response Journal* 15, No. 3 (2024): 1-5, [www.doi.org/10.5365/wpsar.2024.15.3.117](http://www.doi.org/10.5365/wpsar.2024.15.3.117).

## E. Lack of services directed to encouraging young men away from violence

There is a lack of services targeted at encouraging prosocial and non-violent behaviours amongst young men, who currently form a ready pool of perpetrators of SARV. As long as they can be mobilised into violent action as easily as they appear to be at present, it will be very difficult to prevent SARV. We did see one example in Enga of the Bishop working with previous perpetrators and leading them to become advocates against SARV, as detailed in the Enga section of Part 2 of this report.

## 7. Conclusion and way forward

SARV is not a relic of the past—it is a contemporary, evolving system of social regulation, conflict expression and gendered harm. In many parts of the Highlands, it has become a framework for justifying extreme violence against the vulnerable, especially women and those with limited social protection.

This report demonstrates that SARV does not present the same way in every province, or even within every province. Local belief systems vary. The roles of religious institutions vary. The presence—or absence—of frontline actors, safe houses, and legal options makes an enormous difference in survivor outcomes. In some provinces, accusations lead to community-wide manhunts and deaths; in others, intervention from a pastor or magistrate can prevent harm altogether. There is no one-size-fits-all solution.

But certain truths hold across the region:

**Violence is not inevitable.** SARV persists where there is silence, impunity, and weak leadership—but it falters where coordinated actors intervene early and with moral clarity.

**Beliefs are not uniform and can and do evolve.** Across multiple sites, exposure to new anti-SARV narratives—from biblical scripture, law, or personal testimony—has changed minds, often incrementally, but meaningfully.

**Protection is possible.** Rescues, safe houses, community by-laws, IPOs and survivor advocacy are working effectively in places where political will and social capital align.

The way forward requires an integrated and holistic response. The following actions are considered to be key priorities:

**Table 2: Priority Actions for Integrated and Holistic Response to SARV**

Action	Description
1. Build coordination mechanisms across state, church and civil society.	Coordination mechanisms should be based not just on policy commitments but on operational trust. We agree with the Frontline report that there is a need to increase government responsibility for SARV responses through dedicated SARV resourcing, strategy, referral pathways and roles. One mechanism to do this is to reinvigorate and properly task and resource the SARV NAP Working Committee and to establish or strengthen provincial SARV coordination mechanisms.

Action	Description
2. Provide resources for effective mechanisms to address SARV.	Resource what already works, and the actors and institutions already doing effective work, and learn why certain actions have impact in specific places. Support the appropriate expansion of effective mechanisms.
3. Improve preventative and early intervention actions.	Prioritise prevention and also early intervention, for example, through rapid response teams.
4. Improve data collection and dissemination.	Establish a comprehensive data collection system for incidents of SARV.
5. Provide consistent, coherent awareness.	Ensure consistency and coherence of awareness messaging, while also being responsive to the cultural and socio-political contexts of each province. There is a need to design interventions that confront fear and rumour without alienating communities, and this needs to be led by community champions.
6. Educate everyone about the laws on SARV.	Increase knowledge of the laws around SARV and the penalties for infraction, both for the general public and for state justice system actors, such as police and Village Court magistrates.
7. Provide more safe houses and reintegration assistance.	Expand the safe house network in each of the provinces. In addition, develop effective resettlement programs to ensure the safe reintegration of survivors into their communities or, where this is not possible, a solid start in a new place.
8. Support the active agency of survivors.	Centre survivors not just as victims, but as agents of change, whose insights and leadership can help break cycles of accusation and violence.
9. Develop programs aimed at preventing would-be perpetrators.	Develop and resource programs (such as non-violence and positive masculinities programs) directed towards would-be perpetrators to make them less likely to be easily enrolled in SARV.

Ending SARV in PNG must be a high priority to ensure the safety and well-being of all people and the social cohesion of PNG communities. Doing so requires concerted, proactive efforts to address all of these suggested actions coherently and will take a coalition of actors all addressing many different dimensions in a coordinated way.

This report is a small contribution to that wider effort.



# Part 2:

## The provincial case studies

This Part details the provincial case studies across the Papua New Guinea Highlands (the Highlands).

- 2.1 Hela Province
- 2.2 Jiwaka Province
- 2.3 Southern Highlands Province (SHP)
- 2.4 Western Highlands Province (WHP)
- 2.5 Chimbu Province
- 2.6 Eastern Highlands Province (EHP)
- 2.7 Enga Province



## 2.1 Hela Province

### Provincial overview

Hela Province was established as a separate province on 17 May 2012. It is located in the north-western part of Southern Highlands and west of Enga. Tari is the provincial capital. Hela Province covers 10,498 square kilometres. According to the National Population Estimate 2021, the province had a total population of 765,142. While the majority of the Helas speak the Huli language, Duna and Hewa are also common in the north-western parts of the province. The province has four electorates: Komo, Koroba Lake Kopiago, Magarima, and Tari Pori.

Hela Province faces severe security and economic challenges. The state's security apparatus is notably weak and chronically underfunded, with the civilian population significantly outgunning both the police force and military combined. Hela is known for ongoing intergroup warfare and, more recently, the rise of armed so-called warlords. The only adequately funded police units are those protecting PNG LNG project assets. The economic situation is described as 'dire', with poverty perception having dramatically increased after 2014 when the PNG LNG project transitioned from a construction to a production phase.

Despite being responsible for a large proportion of PNG's resource wealth, Hela ranks amongst the least developed and most neglected provinces in the country. Many residents lack even basic services, and the province suffers from a lack of adequate infrastructure needed to build a functioning economy. This economic precarity is compounded by stark inequalities between those who have benefited from resource wealth and the vast majority who have not. The relationship between the state and Hela is characterized as one of 'severe neglect', creating conditions where conflict, particularly over land and resources, can easily escalate into violence.<sup>18</sup>



Figure 6: Hela Province language map. Source: SIL.

<sup>18</sup> United States Institute of Peace, Examining conflict dynamics in Papua New Guinea, (USIP, 27 March, 2023), <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/03/examining-conflict-dynamics-papua-new-guinea>.

## Situational analysis of SARV in Hela Province

### a. Literature review

Previous research demonstrates that different beliefs and behaviours relating to sorcery exist across the different language groups in the province.<sup>19</sup> According to detailed anthropological research in the area, the Huli, who occupy the majority of the province, are not a particularly 'sorcery-conscious society' and there is 'no systemic routing out, or identification through divination or ordeal, of sorcerers or witches'.<sup>20</sup>

By contrast, Hewa society in the far north of the province is profoundly sorcery-conscious and the systemic identification and killing of witches has deep cultural and historical roots. Anthropologist Lyle Steadman documented the practice of witch killing amongst the Hewa in the 1960s and estimated the death rate to be close to one per cent of the population per year.<sup>21</sup> Steadman was able to document the cases of 42 people killed as witches, and of these 11 were men and 31 were women.<sup>22</sup> Witches were believed to consume their victims either from within or externally.<sup>23</sup>

To the south of the Hewa, the Duna people, particularly those located around Lake Kopyago, also have beliefs around witchcraft. Anthropologist Nicole Haley's research shows how Duna believe witches threaten fertility by consuming victims' bodies and exhibiting inappropriate sexual appetites.<sup>24</sup> Traditionally, witchcraft accusations focused on explaining 'unusual deaths' of reproductively aged individuals. However, in the early 2000s, the HIV epidemic dramatically transformed these beliefs, with AIDS deaths increasingly attributed to witchcraft. Haley documents how torture of accused witches (primarily women) intensified during this period, with methods including burning with hot irons and sexual violence.

### b. The situation today

The data presented in the rest of this report is generated from a workshop held in Tari from 18-20 June 2024 with 16 relevant stakeholders, including government departments, CSO, CBOs, churches, and other leaders such as pastors and church elders. Several additional follow-up interviews were conducted on 17th and 18 December 2024 with government agencies, churches, NGOs and CSOs.

As elsewhere in the Highlands, empirical data related to SARV is extremely limited. Participants reported relatively few cases from within the Tari Pori District (~ 6 cases per year) and stressed that the more common violence problem in the area is intergroup fighting. However, those with knowledge of the more remote locations noted that there were more cases per capita in those areas. For example, a police reservist reported that the number of cases around Margarima, near the border of Enga and Southern Highlands province (SHP) was high.

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, Robert M. Glasse's research in Robert M. Glasse, 'The Huli of the Southern Highlands', in *Gods, ghosts and men in Melanesia: Some religions of Australian New Guinea and the New Hebrides*, eds. Peter Lawrence and Mervyn John Meggitt (Oxford University Press, 1972), 27-49; Ossie Fountain, 'The religious experience of the Koroba Huli', *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 2, No. 2 (1986): 174-207.

<sup>20</sup> Laurence Goldman, *The culture of coincidence: Accident and absolute liability in Huli* (Clarendon Press, 1993), 311.

<sup>21</sup> Lyle B. Steadman, 'The killing of witches', *Oceania* 56, No. 2 (1985): 106-123, 110, <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1834-4461.1985.tb02114.x>.

<sup>22</sup> Lyle Steadman, *Neighbours and killers: residence and dominance among the Hewa of New Guinea*, Australian National University PhD thesis (ANU, 1971), 206-209.

<sup>23</sup> Steadman, *Neighbours and killers: residence and dominance among the Hewa of New Guinea*, 1971, 246.

<sup>24</sup> Nicole Haley, 'Witchcraft, torture and HIV', in *Civic insecurity: Law, order and HIV in Papua New Guinea*, eds. Vikki Luker and Sinclair Dinnen, Vol 1, 1st edn. (ANU Press, 2010), 219-235.

The workshop participants reported that a common contemporary narrative relating to SARV in some parts of the province is that of sorcerers eating people's hearts. This is not a narrative traditionally found in Hela, particularly not amongst the Huli, but it is a narrative currently prevalent in Enga and SHP.

Regarding the situation among the Hewa today, anthropologist Michael Main compared the situation he found in 2024 with that which Steadman had found in the 1970s and wrote:

“ It does seem that witch killing has become more severe in several important ways. Most obvious is the use of torture in the killing of witches, which was not recorded by Steadman, is now common. Furthermore, witch killing is now conducted out in the open with seemingly no or little risk of reprisal killings.

Overall, it is clear that the situation regarding SARV is specific to certain cultural groups in the province, and so generalising across the province can be misleading.

Most cases of SARV (and we do not know how many of these there are) are not reported to any institution or organisation. According to our interviewees, survivors do not report cases due to concerns about retaliation, security and safety for the survivors. Frontline workers note that they do what they can to assist the survivors; however, their own lives are often not protected and so they work under conditions of considerable risk.

In the cases we were told about, a common form of torture was said to involve tying women and girls onto corrugated iron platforms and placing hot fire underneath. These victims are blindfolded due to the belief that the sorcery spirit will enter the perpetrator if the accused looks at them during the final moments of his or her life. The perpetrators force the victims to confess and to identify their collaborators through torturing them, specifically by placing hot irons on their bodies, including their genitals.

Understanding and addressing the SARV situation in Hela is compounded by the very high levels of violence that exist, largely as a result of the high levels of intergroup fighting in the province. This results in significant restrictions on people's movement and communication, and the generalised normalisation of violent responses makes it difficult for those at risk to access protection or care services. Many survivors are consequently stranded in their communities. In addition, the tradition of 'payback' in Hela (where, amongst Huli, people traditionally expand conflicts across eight generations) means that SARV now becomes combined with intergroup warfare in problematic ways, sometimes catalysing a new round of fighting.

Another development in Hela is the formation of so-called hausman groups by young men. This was reported in Tari Pori and Koroba Kopiago electorates. The young men were said to consume marijuana and homebrew, then engage in activities such as abducting young girls, raping women, torturing, claiming other people's property, and demanding money from members of their respective communities. They are said to live together in one house bound by the 'one mind' motto, meaning that when someone says one thing, they all agree to it. This new movement is an inverted version of the most respected hausman system that traditionally used to exist in Hela, where positive moral values, cultural history, and other beneficial traditions and teachings were passed on from one generation to the next.



Figure 7: Photo showing a mourning at a funeral in Hela, circa 2012. (Photo: Philip Gibbs)

### Typical victims

According to the anthropological record, in the Hewa region both men and women were killed, with more women killed than men, a trend that seems to largely remain the same today. For example, in a recent ABC news article, two cases were detailed.<sup>25</sup> One is of Elli Mark, a young woman in the Hewa who was accused of sorcery by a relative after a boy drowned in a river. Elli was subsequently attacked by four men. They cut off her hand, two fingers on her other hand, and lacerated her head and knees before leaving her to die. The other is of Milai Malongo, who was pregnant when accused by her husband and in-laws of being a sanguma (including her unborn child), was attacked with a spear and ran away into the mountains.<sup>26</sup>

Amongst the Hewa at least, children are killed as well as adults. Michael Main reports that:

“ Among the many harrowing stories that I encountered were accounts of newborn babies being accused and killed. This is likely due to the belief among the Hewa that witchcraft is inherited, and so the children of suspected witches are often accused.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Tim Swanston and Theckla Gunga, ‘Sorcery accusations in PNG can quickly spiral into a life-threatening attack, but this safe house offers victims a lifeline’, ABC News, 13 April 2024, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-04-13/claims-of-witchcraft-can-lead-to-murder-in-png/103682576>.

<sup>26</sup> Swanston and Gunga, T., ‘Sorcery accusations in PNG can quickly spiral into a life-threatening attack, but this safe house offers victims a lifeline’.

<sup>27</sup> Michael Main. ‘An indigenous safehouse project for survivors of witchcraft accusation in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea’.



Key triggers are death and sickness or accidents, which lead to accusations, often driven by pre-existing jealousies and rumours. People turn to prayer warriors and consult glassman or diviners for assistance in identifying those responsible. Support for a violent response grows as does fear, and results in actual violence. When a woman is accused on the account of a death, the relatives of the accused find it hard to protect her as they are afraid of the family members and relatives of the deceased. An incident of SARV can also trigger additional violence, such as a tribal fight. Sometimes victims are rescued, and sometimes there is peace mediation, compensation payment or arrest. However, most often the victim lives with stigma and social ostracism, and their children are also branded as sorcerers, thus perpetuating the cycle.

## Organisations dealing with SARV in the province

### a. Challenges facing organisations

There are two main referral services in the provincial capital currently in operation: the Family Sexual Violence Unit (FSVU) at Tari Police station, and Family Support Center (FSC) at the Tari hospital. However, due to the many remote locations in the province where SARV occurs and the security risks, most survivors have limited access to information about these services or lack the ability to access them.

There appears to be a lack of clear communication and networking between the different organisations working on SARV, and a successful referral pathway does not seem to be in place. Different stakeholders are currently said to be operating in silos.

Overall, Hela Province has limited resources devoted to SARV prevention and response, including very limited collaboration and consultation between stakeholders, police interventions and arrests, referral pathways, and coordination.

Only one SARV case has been successfully prosecuted to date, with the perpetrators sentenced and currently serving time in jail. Some interviewees were critical of police seeking to mediate cases of SARV rather than prosecuting them.

Overall, the high levels of violence in the province mean that community-based organisations face extreme challenges in addressing SARV due to the real risks to their safety. Visiting rural areas to do awareness talks was felt to be risky, as staff and volunteers were concerned about the potential of communities believing that they are trying to support 'sorcerers'. It was noted that even the 'safe-houses' cannot guarantee the security of survivors.

### b. Active organisations

The following organisations deal with SARV in the province.

**Table 3: Organisations responding to SARV in Hela Province**

Sector	Organisation	Significance
Law and justice	Police	Active in SARV response
NGO	JIPAT Club (Lions)	Active in SARV response
NGO	Kupari Catholic Women's Rep	Active in SARV response
NGO	Mercy Wokabout Organization	Active in SARV response

Sector	Organisation	Significance
CBO	Hela Lions Club	Active in SARV response
Church organisation	Tari United Church	Active in SARV response
CBO	Hela Orphans Hope Center	Advocate against SARV
Health department	Community Health Worker	Active in care for survivors
Church organisation	Catholic Church of Tari	Active in response and care
Church organisation	ECPNG	Active in response, care, and repatriation
Church organisation	FBO from Lutheran Church	Active in response and care
CBO	Hela Women in Peace	Active in response. Early intervention, and care
NGO	Hope Worldwide	Active in care, SARV education
NGO	House of Hope	Education and care of survivors in Wanakipa
NGO	Rural Women's Empowerment Group	Care for survivors

### c. Examples of initiatives

**Education:** The Catholic Church in Tari, other churches and the Hela Women for Peace organisation, conduct awareness in schools around the Tari Town as part of their response to SARV in Hela. The Catholic Church and community-based human rights defenders carry out awareness in hospitals and villages about SARV, informing people that it is not a part of the Huli culture and outlining the detrimental effects that SARV has on social cohesion and the well-being of communities.

**Rescue:** We were told some stories of rescues being conducted by other women. In one particular case involving two women in Magarima, a woman went to the crime scene at night and rescued the survivors. She had them brought to Tari Police Station before transporting them to Kundiawa for treatment. In other cases, several accused were assisted to migrate to other places to protect them from being killed or tortured.

**Care:** The Wanakipa safe house initiative, described in Michael Main's academic article, was an indigenous project established in 2023 amongst the Hewa-speaking community in northern Hela Province.<sup>28</sup> What makes this initiative unique is that it houses survivors within their own communities rather than relocating them elsewhere, deliberately placing accused 'witches' in the presence of their accusers as a strategy to challenge and transform beliefs about witchcraft. The safe house is designed to be self-sustaining with gardens for food production, reducing dependency on external aid, and includes educational facilities to address underlying beliefs through awareness and training. The project was initiated by Bonny Walo after his mother, Jenny Walo, was tortured

<sup>28</sup> Michael Main, 'An indigenous safehouse project for survivors of witchcraft accusation in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea'.

following witchcraft accusations. He partnered with a local NGO in Tari called The Community Good to create a refuge that simultaneously provides protection and works to change cultural attitudes about witchcraft within the community itself.

While the safe house project initially showed promise, it unfortunately faced significant challenges subsequently. The project was unable to secure the necessary government support and resources to provide adequate security, leading to the safe house becoming dormant, with the survivors having to disperse elsewhere.

**What is promising in the province?**

Some of the initiatives by the Catholic Church to educate children about the problem of SARV were said to have resulted in children educating their parents and the community. However, a lack of data makes it extremely difficult to assess the impact of this or any other intervention.

**Greatest needs for the future**

Workshop participants identified the following as the most needed actions:

**Table 4: Recommended actions to respond to SARV in Hela Province**

Action needed	Discussion
Establish effective and proper reporting of SARV cases on the ground.	Currently there is no proper reporting process or case management system.
Create a SARV database for research monitoring and for evaluation purposes.	Establishing a timely data collection system would make it easier to track incidents of SARV to help researchers, advocates and practitioners understand trends of violence. This could also help the wider communities to understand the issues and develop target interventions to assist the victims.
Establish mechanisms to protect survivors who are being accused and witnesses of SARV	This should include the creation and support of safe houses and relocation programs.
Healthcare workers need to explain the causes of disease in medical terms.	Providing access to healthcare to demystify unexplained illnesses or deaths can contribute to the prevention of sorcery accusations.
Provide psychological support.	This support should extend especially to the provision of counselling and trauma support for survivors, their families, and members of communities affected by SARV.
Provide capacity building and training on handling SARV cases.	There is a need for capacity building and training for local communities, healthcare workers, and law enforcement to help them handle SARV cases effectively and sensitively.
Provide police training.	This training should aim to help police officers better understand their roles in addressing law and order. There were concerns that police should not mediate peace; they should be the one implementing the laws by arresting the perpetrators.

## Conclusion

There are many unknowns about how SARV is manifesting across Hela Province as a whole. The belief in sorcery traditionally only existed amongst a small percentage of the population on the fringes of the province, and today it seems that SARV is experienced in greater numbers in those regions than in the main part of the province, largely inhabited by the Huli. However, there are indications that narratives about sorcery may be migrating from SHP or Enga, for example, such as those we see manifested in Magarima. Governance and security provision in Hela Province is extremely weak, and law enforcement agencies and other frontline service providers are struggling with ongoing intergroup fighting. It is hoped that the efforts underway to seed the counter-narrative that sorcery beliefs are not part of Huli culture can gain a firm foothold and inoculate local communities against the transference of outside narratives.



## 2.2 Jiwaka Province

### Provincial overview

Jiwaka is one of PNG’s newest provinces, established in 2012 when it was separated from the Western Highlands Province as part of government efforts to improve administrative efficiency and service delivery. Named after the first letters of three major local tribes—Jimi, Waghi, and Kambia—Jiwaka covers an area of 4,798 km<sup>2</sup> and has a population of approximately 451,496 people as of the National Population Estimate 2021.<sup>29</sup> The province is characterised by its agricultural prominence, particularly in the fertile Waghi Valley, which is known for coffee production, a vital cash crop supporting local economies.

Population distribution in Jiwaka varies considerably across its landscape, with some areas experiencing significant social challenges. The province features densely populated settlements along the Waghi Valley, where communities cluster around fertile farmlands and transportation routes, while the mountainous Jimi area remains sparsely populated with isolated hamlets.

Like other highlands provinces, Jiwaka experiences periodic intergroup fighting and election-related violence, with tensions often arising from land disputes, compensation disagreements, and historical tribal rivalries. Violence in general and especially violence against women and girls is high in Jiwaka,<sup>30</sup> although community-led peace initiatives involving church groups and traditional leaders have worked to mitigate conflicts in recent years, especially in areas surrounding the provincial capital of Banz and in communities near Minj and Kudjip. The main language groups are shown in the map in Figure 9.

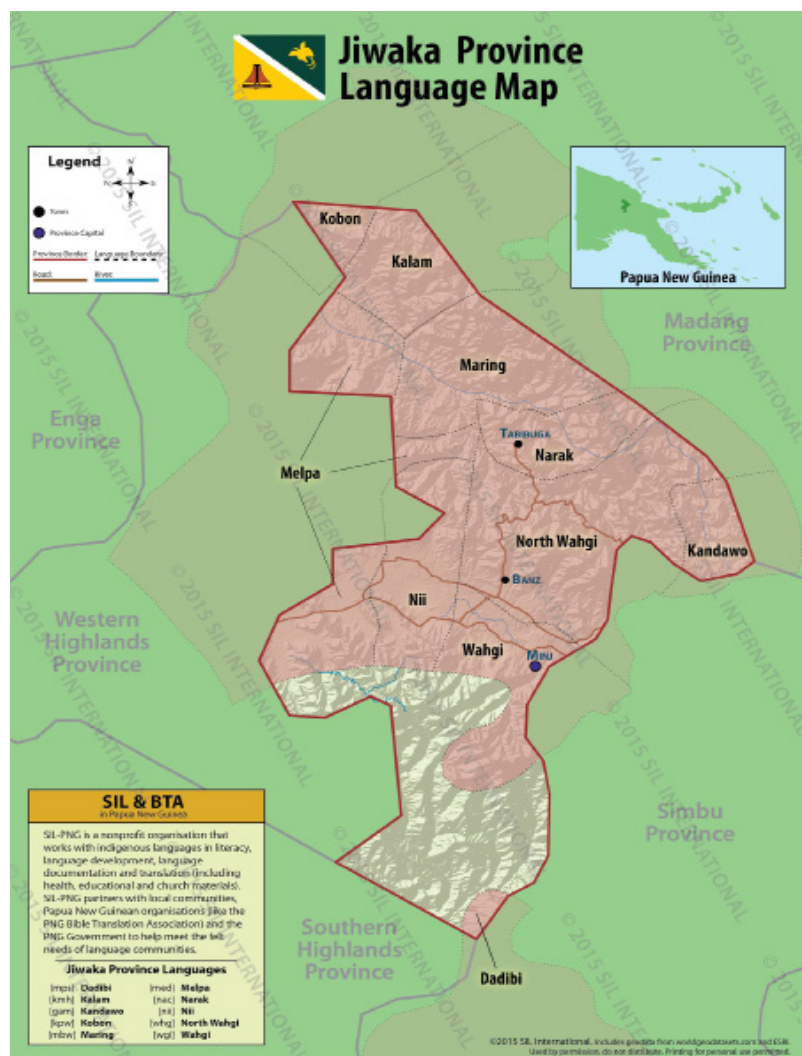


Figure 9: Jiwaka Province language map. Source: SIL.

<sup>29</sup> PNG National Statistical Office (2022) National Population Estimate 2021. [nso.gov.pg/statistics/population/](https://nso.gov.pg/statistics/population/)

<sup>30</sup> Voice for Change, Voice for Change community survey: ‘Violence against women and girls in Jiwaka Province, Papua New Guinea’, (Voice for Change, 2013), [https://voiceforchange.ngo/images/publications/VfC\\_Community\\_Survey.pdf](https://voiceforchange.ngo/images/publications/VfC_Community_Survey.pdf)

## Situational analysis of SARV in Province

### a. Literature review

As elsewhere in PNG, there is a variety of rich anthropological material about witchcraft beliefs in the different parts of the province.

#### **Kalam witchcraft and sorcery beliefs (0.8% of Jiwaka)**

In her PhD thesis, anthropologist Inge Riebe states that according to Kalam oral history, witchcraft beliefs (*koyb*) and associated violence appear to be relatively recent developments, emerging in the mid-to-late 19th century alongside other significant social changes.<sup>31</sup> Kalam informants reported that witchcraft as an explanation for death only became widespread in the Kaironk valley during this period, coinciding with increased population density, the introduction of domesticated pigs in greater numbers, and the beginning of organised fighting in the valley. Men are always accused, rather than women.

The concept of witchcraft appears to have been introduced from neighbouring groups and adopted as a response to changing social conditions. After the Australian colonial administration made violent killing a punishable crime, those accused of witchcraft were required to make compensation payments instead.

#### **Kopon witchcraft and sorcery beliefs (0.01% of Jiwaka)**

According to Riebe, the Kopon system differs significantly from the Kalam in that it is typically women who are accused of witchcraft rather than men. The witchcraft essence of Kopon women is described as 'a duckling like creature in the abdomen of the women'. While Kopon witches are also believed to eat dead bodies, they 'do not behave analogously with human killers as Kalam male witches do'.<sup>32</sup>

#### **Maring witchcraft and sorcery beliefs (3.2% of Jiwaka)**

The Maring people, who live in the Bismarck Mountain Range, have been the subject of several anthropological studies. Unlike the Kalam's focus on male witches, amongst the Maring, both men and women can be accused of practising harmful magic, and while most accused witches are women, the most feared ones are men. Accusations typically arise after the occurrence of deaths, illnesses, or other misfortunes. Witches are said to be able to assume animal disguises, particularly pied (black and white) animals, cassowaries, pigs, dogs, reptiles, and frogs - all are considered anomalous in some way. Witches are said to possess a witchcraft essence called 'kwimp' which can be transferred to others, transforming them into witches too. Witches are said to have an insatiable appetite for human flesh, particularly the flesh of the dead, and are believed to gather at graves for nocturnal feasts. The primary way to identify witches was said to be through confession (often extracted under duress) or accusation by known witches.<sup>33</sup>

#### **North Waghi witchcraft and sorcery beliefs**

Anthropologists Pamela Stewart and Andrew Strathern report that the belief in *kum* witchcraft

<sup>31</sup> Inge Riebe, '*...and then we talked. Mnm transforming grief among the Kalam of New Guinea Highlands*', PhD thesis (ANU, 2024), <https://openresearch-repository.anu.edu.au/items/6ffa907b-a5f8-46c5-b94d-d9d10b59fedc/full>.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Christopher J. Healey, 'Culture as transformed disorder: Cosmological evocations among the Maring', *Oceania* 59, no. 2 (1988): 106–22.

amongst the Wahgi involves the belief that certain individuals of either gender have intangible malevolent powers that allow them to cause illness and death in others.<sup>34</sup> Descriptions of witch attacks may stress the intense gaze of the witch or the harbouring of small familiars (e.g., a cat, marsupial rat or a snake) that a witch unleashes against his or her victim.

Unlike the relatively recent adoption of witchcraft beliefs by the Kalam, the Waghi appear to have a longer historical engagement with witchcraft concepts, with these beliefs deeply integrated into their traditional religious and social systems.

## Summary

Traditionally, a wide variety of narratives relating to sorcery and witchcraft existed in different parts of Jiwaka, with some parts (e.g., the Kalam) experiencing these later than others. In the past, both men and women were accused, and subjected to varying types of violence. The Jimi area is also characterised by some as an epicentre of sorcery.<sup>35</sup>

### b. Situational analysis today

SARV is a significant issue in Jiwaka today, with cases originating from both within the province, and also with survivors and their families from outside fleeing to the province for safety and support. As in all provinces, obtaining accurate data to understand the scope of the problem is extremely difficult.

The data in this case study comes from a workshop held in Jiwaka between 30 May to 1 June 2024, convened with 20 participants from civil society and the government that are active in addressing SARV. Various follow-up interviews and requests for data followed.

One of the organisations in the province that does keep data is the NGO, Voice for Change (VFC). VFC told us that a total of 89 survivors of SARV have sought help from them under their Ending Violence Against Women Response and Prevention Desk between 2021 and 2024. The nature of these cases varied – some suffered verbal abuse and others were physically tortured and displaced. Commonly, survivors faced loss of livelihoods, homes, subsistence gardens, livestock and loss of dignity. This impacted on their immediate families and communities as well.

### Typical victims

While both men and women are accused in Jiwaka, women seem to be accused more often, as seen in the data shared by VFC below. Boys and girls were accused alongside adults, although less commonly. The increase in cases in 2024 shown in the table was partly explained by VFC as being as a result of word getting out about the support they are providing. They also reported a large influx of cases in the middle of the 2024 year. Some of these cases involved whole tribes fleeing, and their presence necessitated VFC locating four additional places of refuge for them. The data collected by VFC is set out below, separated into primary and secondary victims.

<sup>34</sup> Stewart and Strathern, 'Feasting on my enemy: Images of violence and change in the New Guinea Highlands'.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

**Table 5: Number of victims of SARV in Jiwaka, by year and gender/disability (Source: Voice for Change).**

Primary accused, disaggregated by sex and disability					
	2021	2022	2023	2024	Total
Male	1	4	2	23	30
Female	9	12	3	31	55
Male with a disability	0	0	1 (Hearing impairment)		1
Female with a disability	1 (right leg injured in previous assault)	2 (left leg deformation; deaf in right ear)			3
<b>Total</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>89</b>
Secondary accused, by year					
	2021	2022	2023	2024	Total
Total victims	30	52 (including 4 siblings who died while moving from one place to another seeking refuge.)	17	NA	99

### Context for accusations

The common narratives around accusation are that sanguma are said to be: eating people's hearts, casting spells on people's properties, and casting spells to prevent people's education and financial prosperity. The economic concerns underlying accusations, and accusations of people who are seen to be doing well, are quite evident in the province.

Unexpected deaths of young and middle-aged people were said by the workshop participants to be the primary common triggers to SARV in Jiwaka Province. The second triggering factor was said to be jealousy. Both wealthy individuals, and individuals who had only a few relatives and held valuables such as land, were said to be falsely accused of practising sorcery with the aim of taking over their property. We interviewed two brothers who had been chopped with bush knives, resulting in lacerations on their arms, hands and fingers, causing permanent injuries. They were from another province and believed they had been targeted because they had been successful.

Tribal, political, and business rivalry also served as potential triggers. There was said to be a belief that people can use sorcery in place of fighting to attack their tribal enemies, political enemies and business competitors. Sorcery beliefs are therefore increasingly entwined in politics, commerce and intergroup fighting.

We were also told that some citizens do not see floods, landslides and heavy rain as being natural phenomena. Rather, there is a belief that special people can control the weather and cause natural disasters. An example was given of the flooding of Mombol River in the North Waghi district of Jiwaka province in 2018. Several lives were lost and many properties were destroyed as it burst its banks after a heavy rainfall. The explanation given was that the Jimi people had used their magical powers

to cause heavy rain in the mountains that flooded the Mombol River. This was said to be done in retaliation against the practice of the youths from the tribes along the Mombol River threatening and robbing the people from Jimi district. After the 2017 national election, there were regular roadblocks created by youths of rival candidates. The Jimi people were robbed of personal properties, goods and money and some women had been raped. The matter was reported to the police and the local leaders but nothing was done. It was therefore thought that the Jimi had taken the matter into their own hands through creating the flooding by sorcery.

## Typical perpetrators

The majority of workshop participants said that young and middle-aged men are typical perpetrators. The involvement of family members in torturing accused members of their own family was reported to be common practice throughout the province.

## Typical progression of cases in Jiwaka

- The typical SARV case in Jiwaka Province can be triggered by illness, death or loss. A person with high status in the community or a child may fall sick or die unexpectedly and gossip starts to circulate.
- After a death, the movements of people, their appearance, their ways of eating and other bodily movements, the words they select during conversation, their facial expressions and other body languages are carefully observed during the haus krai period (from death to a few weeks after burial of a person) to look out for suspicious or abnormal movements, actions and expressions to attribute the death of the deceased to any suspicious actions. Relatives investigate the people who were last seen to have been mingling with the dead person before their sudden death.
- Any immediate or extended family member may call the names of people whom they know and suspect of performing sorcery. Family and clan leaders may engage youths and drug-addicts to engage in a witch-hunt.
- Suspects are interrogated and if they fail to admit to sorcery, they may be tortured or have their property destroyed. If an intervention happens, it may succeed, or it may happen too late. Or, an intervention may not happen at all.
- As the case progresses, where possible, survivors are removed from crime scene. Where there is clear evidence of misjudgement on the part of the perpetrator, compensation for survivors is negotiated. Survivors who are unable to defend themselves seek refuge elsewhere. Perpetrators are only very occasionally arrested by police.

In addition to this process, we also received information about the role of the prayer warriors. The following narrative is based on observations by volunteer pastoral worker and research assistant with the Catholic Archdiocese of Mount Hagen, Paul Petrus. He told us there are many prayer warriors “popping up” in the Western Highlands and Jiwaka Provinces. While some are recognised by authorities in their respective churches, others are self-proclaimed. They are the glasmen or glasmeri of the churches. They claim God has given them special gifts of vision, prophecy and healing. Some prayer warriors undergo severe suffering and lengthy penances and fasting in the mountains. They perform a variety of rituals to identify sickness in a person or the cause of a person’s death. Many people visit these prayer warriors seeking healing from chronic illnesses and to identify the cause of their suffering. Prayer warriors often act as mediums to command God’s blessing on a certain individual. They also pray to break curses in a family or clan.

Some prayer warriors proclaim that they can remove sorcery spells and cast out the demon (including Satan) that controls the person/host and causes them to practise sorcery. Typically, prayer warriors

pray to find out 'who' caused the sickness, misfortune and problems. Prayer warriors believe sorcery is the work of Satan. They see themselves as involved in a spiritual battle that they must fight to overcome the devil and remove the evil power within the host or sorcerer. The prayer warriors are often given an offer in the form of cooked food and cash. There is no fixed amount set but the people give however much they can afford. Many prayer warriors are not aware of the new Glassman Act 2022 and its penalties. They are said to feel they have a special call from God to serve humanity.

## Organisations dealing with SARV in the province

Overall, there was agreement that the different organisations working on SARV in Jiwaka could work together more effectively and collaboratively. There is a need for clear referral pathways, particularly in relation to death and medical certification as this appears to be causing blockages such as delays or difficulties in obtaining timely certification of the cause of death, barriers to the smooth processing of death-related paperwork and unclear procedures for referrals to appropriate authorities or services.

### Voice for Change

Voice for Change (VFC) is an active and effective NGO that deals with Gender-Based Violence (GBV) and SARV prevention and response. It focuses on preventing violence against women and girls through community training and collaboration with local service providers and authorities. Its current initiative to provide accommodation to survivors whose homes and food gardens have been destroyed has been extremely helpful for affected individuals and families. Some of the services provided for the SARV survivors approaching the office have included:

- a. Assistance in taking matters to the Village Court. The rationale is that although it is a court of lesser jurisdiction, its ability to include the community in the situation means that community members are able to witness the orders made by the court, which serves as an awareness-raising tool and a way of preventing future SARV cases in that community
- b. Assistance in taking matters to the District Court where the accused may be charged with defamation under section 18 of the Defamation Act 1963, which constitutes a criminal offence.
- c. Assistance with obtaining an Interim Protection Order (IPO). Since most cases that involve a family or relative accusing other kin or family members of sorcery fall within the definition of the Family Protection Act 2013, this warrants the application and issue of the IPO. This is a workable and effective alternative that deals with sorcery accusation at the accusation stage before it escalates to torture and wilful murder.
- d. Provision of education and training about SARV in communities. VFC seeks to educate and train community leaders to take ownership of addressing GBV and SARV cases in their respective societies. VFC felt this was effective but also that it needs a lot more effort going forward.
- e. Support for communities to create community by-laws to stop accusations (see discussion below).
- f. Provision of counselling, safe houses, medical treatment, legal advice and support and support-person accompaniment.
- g. Support for survivors to have peace mediators mediate their cases and assist with integration or repatriation.

It should be noted that part of the reason for VFC's success is its ability to seek funds from external partners to meet survivors' basic needs such as food, clothes, bedding, and key provisions for the survivors' children. In addition, due to the CEO's position of respect, perpetrators refrain from coming to attack the survivors who are taken care of within the VFC's premises. However, threats are still often issued during the initial stages of negotiations of cases, and in communities, whenever VFC's staff or staff from other frontline agencies go to rescue survivors.

## The Voice Inc

The work of The Voice Inc involves extending free legal services to Jiwaka. This work is discussed in the Chimbu chapter of this report.

## Caritas and the Catholic Church

The Catholic Church strongly condemns SARV in all its forms. Fr. Andrew Fallat, parish priest of Fatima Parish in the Jiwaka province, stands strongly against the traditional practices surrounding sorcery accusation violence and calls for more awareness against these beliefs. He argues that Christians must respect that life is precious and uphold the teachings of the Church against such practices. People must be made aware of the legal referral pathways. As a strong advocate against SARV, Fr. Fallat has stressed that all relevant stakeholders must work in partnership with one aim: to prevent SARV.

## Nazerene Church (Hospital)

The Kudjip Nazarene Hospital has served hundreds of SARV survivors over many years and continues to do so. Along with other sub-hospitals and Health Centres in Jiwaka, the Hospital claims to provide education and awareness against SARV and emphasises the medical-based causes of death (see below).

## Medical centres

Two medical officers who attended the workshop reported that they educate people and patients about the importance of understanding the natural causes of death and the significance of relying on a medically proven cause of death. However, some participants expressed concern that the medical facilities, including the hospital, charge substantial fees to SARV victims before providing medical treatment. In addition, it was noted there are difficulties in obtaining certified medical reports that are needed to aid the progress of SARV cases in the District Court.

## Police

Overall, accessing justice for survivors is extremely difficult. There is a lack of police presence and legal services in most parts of the province. No prosecutions were reported to have resulted in convictions. VFC identified the following challenges as being significant ones that prevent people from accessing justice or seeking help:

**Acceptance of compensation:** This practice has become a norm after a person's integrity and dignity has been stripped from them after being accused of practising sorcery. This usually happens within family or amongst relatives. Where serious action is not taken initially, this leaves a gap for problems to escalate afterwards.

**Information on SARV is not accessible:** Many people are not aware of the law that protects them from being accused of SARV and the penalties that attach to the commission of this offence. With the rise of SARV cases, the government amended the Criminal Act 2022 on 16 May 2024, to include sorcery and the penalties for the offence committed. However, this information has yet to reach the majority of PNG's population, a fact exacerbated by the fact that no awareness has been done by the relevant government authority.

**No proper prosecution and handling of SARV cases:** There is a need for a clear and defined pathway to ensure that SARV cases are prosecuted and that effective processes are in place to protect and support survivors and witnesses and to ensure that perpetrators are brought to justice. Cases must also be handled with sensitivity and given sufficient resourcing.

## School

A primary school teacher who attended the workshop discussed the benefits of including a lesson on SARV during their classes. She highlighted that many of the children return to their homes and educate their parents about the dangers and laws that underpin the involvement in SARV cases. The immediate and long-term effects of this have not yet been studied but given the success of this approach in other areas, such as disaster preparedness, this warrants further investigation.

## What is promising in the province?

### Peace mediators, IPOs and Village Court magistrates

The most common and effective approaches to prevent accusations or violence are said to be mediation of cases by peace mediators and the issuance of IPOs by the Village Court magistrates. Peace mediators are paid a small stipend to mediate cases by the Local Level Government.

### Community by-laws

As noted above, several communities in the province have been aided by VFC to develop their own community by-laws. These were initially created in three villages in 2018, and more recently, the practice of making by-laws has extended to 14 other communities. Each community by-law includes a provision about 'saying no to accusations' and makes it an offence to accuse someone of practising sorcery. While it is still too early to note the extent to which this has resulted in real change, anecdotal evidence suggests that it is starting to change the norms around the acceptability of making accusations.

Two well-respected leaders from the community of inland Kurumul attended the workshop. They discussed the positive impacts of the community by-laws which they (all the clan and community leaders) initiated and established. The primary objectives were to minimise the high rate of decay in both law and order and social and moral well-being in their society, as a result of undergoing constant social change and influences from the influx of people from neighbouring provinces. They said that the most significant achievement was the by-law to put a complete stop to SARV: any suspicions are brought to the community for the community leaders, Village Court officials, and ward councillors to deliberate on. This has resulted in a noticeable decline of SARV cases, with no reported SARV cases since the creation of the community by-laws.

## Greatest needs for the future

There are significant challenges faced by the organisations working in the Jiwaka Province. The lack of continuous funding for the safe house run by VFC makes it especially precarious. In addition, there is a need for clear referral pathways, particularly in relation to death and medical certification, as this appears to be obstructing justice. The Chief Magistrate of Jiwaka District attended the workshop for several hours over the two days. He said he will be ready to fast track any SARV cases that reach him and pass his judgement within a short span of time. However, he made it clear that he will only be able to do this provided that proper and certified medical reports are included in the court files as evidence, in order to give him 'the green light' to pass his judgement. Other participants noted the difficulty and cost of obtaining medical certificates, making it clear that this is an area in need of urgent attention and redress.

The workshop participants identified the following additional needs:

**Table 6: Recommended actions to respond to SARV in Jiwaka Province.**

Action needed	Discussion
Accelerate support for SARV cases.	This needs to be achieved through training, oversight and collaboration with state and non-state actors to mitigate SARV cases.
Provide SARV-based training.	This needs to be offered to Village Court magistrates and other court officials to properly equip them to handle SARV cases effectively.
Create a mediating strategy.	A strategy for mediating sorcery accusations at the community level needs to be developed.
Improve awareness around survivor rights.	More awareness needs to be done to ensure that legal rights of survivors are understood and respected.
Expand the safe house network.	Establish and expand safe house facilities for victims in all districts. This includes supporting safe houses long-term, to keep them safe and viable.
Fast-track SARV cases through the court system.	This will help to prevent witnesses from becoming unavailable and evidence from being lost.
Assist women through the justice system.	Provide education and assistance to female survivors to access the justice system and prosecute their cases.
Support community policing.	Promote community policing and community justice systems.
Do frontline risk management.	Develop a risk management plan for frontliners in addressing SARV.
Provide appropriate survivor care.	Improve care and counselling services for victims and affected communities
Provide appropriate support for children.	Develop specific mechanisms for cases involving children. This will help to ensure that their well-being and protection is foregrounded.
Ensure police funding is adequate.	Police need to be well-resourced as underfunding and limited resources hinder progress in addressing SARV.
Increase education and awareness around SARV.	There needs to be more education and awareness programs about SARV and GBV through public awareness, Radio Maria, FM Radio Stations, churches, and schools.



## 2.2 Southern Highlands Province

### Provincial overview

The Southern Highlands Province (SHP) started with a land area of 25,698 km<sup>2</sup>. However, in 2012, SHP was split into the Southern Highlands and Hela provinces, with Hela taking some 10,498 square kilometres from SHP. Currently, the SHP has a land area of approximately 15,200 square kilometres and a population estimated at 927,306.<sup>36</sup> The population includes a number of linguistic groups. The Huli cross a major physical divide formed by Mt Ambua into the Nembi Valley where they border the Mendi speakers who extend east into the Lai and Mendi valleys and uplands. To their east, the Kewa, Wiru and Hagen speakers live along the southern side of Mt Giluwe and around Mt Ialibu.

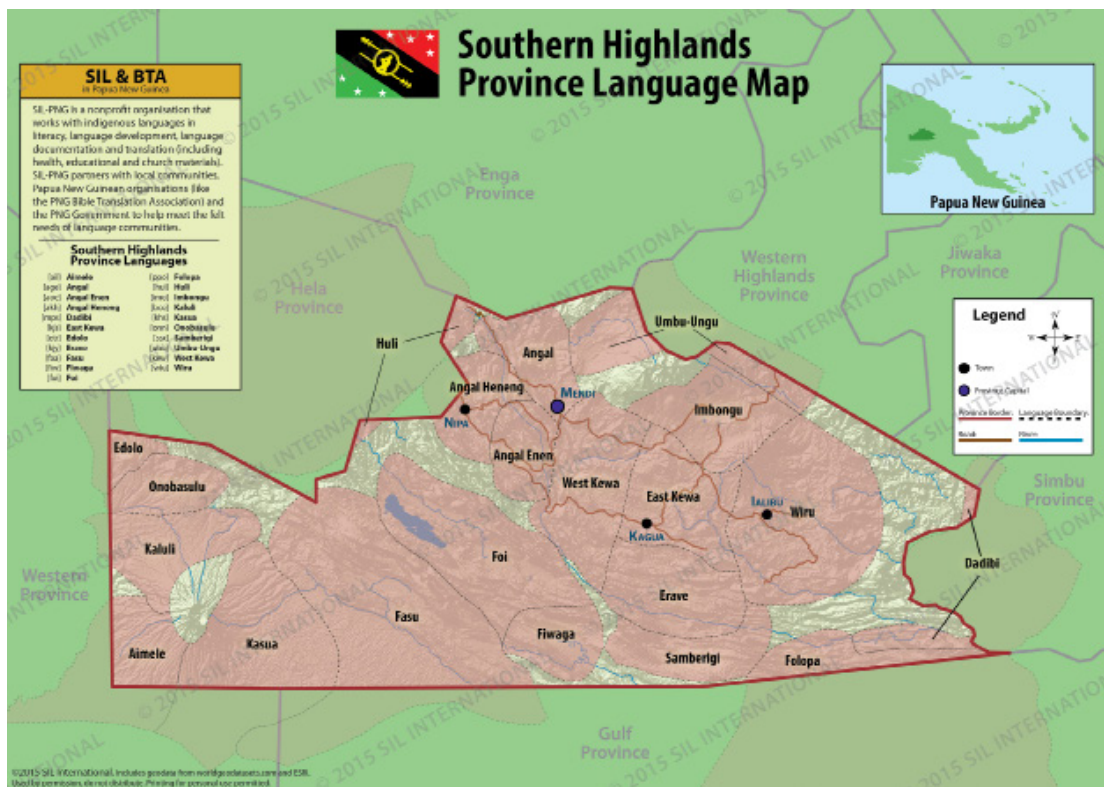


Figure 10: Southern Highlands Province language map. Source: SIL.

Political leadership in the SHP has been characterised by instability interspersed by suspension of the provincial government. The third Premier, Andrew Andaija, died in a plane crash in 1980. The first Provincial Governor died in a car accident in 1997. Due to an inability to govern, the provincial government has been suspended three times (1992, 2000 and 2006). On the third suspension, a State of Emergency was declared. In 2018, another State of Emergency was instated after parts of the SHP suffered from a severe earthquake. Further, in June 2018, riots broke out when supporters of the losing candidate for the Southern Highlands provincial seat rioted after word of a court decision about the election reached them.

<sup>36</sup> NSO, (2022). National Population Estimate 2021. <https://www.nso.gov.pg/statistics/population/>.

## Situational analysis of SARV in SHP

### a. Literature review

As in so many of the provinces discussed in this report, the history of sorcery beliefs and practices in SHP depends upon the particular region being discussed. In some parts of the province, traditionally there was a belief in ghosts more than sorcery. If someone fell seriously ill, a person with the required knowledge, usually male, divined the residence place of the attacking ghost and the victim's relatives made an offering of a pig there to placate the offending ancestor spirit and 'stop it from "eating" the sick person'. There were also larger rituals to please the ancestral spirit and lessen its malevolent attacks on their descendants.<sup>37</sup>

It is clear from the anthropological record that SHP has been a locale where many different narratives have circulated at different times. Writing in 1981, anthropologist Ruth Lederman states that:

“ Until recently, the Mendi understood sorcery both as a means to avenge deaths inflicted on members of one's own group by members of enemy tribes in times of war, and as a weapon used by envious men against less-than-generous Big Men of their own tribe, who did not redistribute their wealth adequately.<sup>38</sup>

She writes that, at the time of her research in the late 1970s, the Mendi claimed that the incidence of sorcery was increasing. While there is no way of confirming this claim, the observed proliferation of named types of sorcery over the past twenty years does support it indirectly. Further, she notes that in the past, 'poisons' and sorcery procedures were said to be obtained primarily from places like Erave, an area to the south of Mendi and on the lower altitude, a more heavily forested periphery of the Highlands, where Mendis believed many powerful sorcerers lived. Today, in a period of widening geographical awareness, new forms of sorcery are thought to come from other places, like Chimbu and coastal Papua New Guinea.<sup>39</sup>

Scholar Philip Gibbs writes in a 2020 publication that in recent decades, belief in new types of spiritual forces, now often referred to as *sanguma*, appear to have spread westwards in the Highlands towards the Southern Highlands. He refers to a number of newspaper reports drawing attention to the emergence of this new narrative. For example, in a newspaper report from 2011, the Provincial Police Commander from the SHP was quoted as concerned that sorcery was 'an evil practice which used to be confined to the Eastern Highlands, Chimbu and the mid-Waghi area of Western Highlands and this had now crept into Southern Highlands'.<sup>40</sup> These news reports of sorcery in the SHP appear from the beginning of this century. One finds headlines such as 'Hired Sorcerers Killed in Mendi',<sup>41</sup> and 'Two Alleged Sorcerers Kidnapped in SHP'<sup>42</sup>. There is an article entitled 'Kangaroo Court for Suspected Sorcerers',<sup>43</sup> which tells of eight men accused of sorcery facing a 'kangaroo court' at lalibu in the east of the province. In that case, a creature which 'fed off meat' was said to come from Kainantu in the Eastern Highlands and the people of lalibu had offered to contribute money in order to return the creature to its place of origin. A later article on the same incident, with the title 'lalibu in Frenzy over Sorcery',<sup>44</sup> tells how people had been flocking to lalibu station and nearby Walume to

<sup>37</sup> Paul Sillitoe, *Give and take: Exchange in Wola society* (ANU Press, 1979), 23.

<sup>38</sup> Rena Lederman, 'Sorcery and social change in Mendi'.

<sup>39</sup> Rena Lederman, 'Sorcery and social change in Mendi', 20.

<sup>40</sup> *The National* 6 April 2011, 4.

<sup>41</sup> *The National* 27 February 2002, 5.

<sup>42</sup> *The National* 16 November 2004, 4.

<sup>43</sup> *The National* 25 June 2001, 5.

<sup>44</sup> *The National* 9 August 2001, 5.

see the alleged sorcerers being interrogated. It was thought that the imported creature was hiding in a creek, and people led by women from the nearby Catholic Church, with prayer and religious songs, were combing the creek and surrounding areas to find the creature.<sup>45</sup>



Figure 11: Photograph of the lalibu people looking for sorcery turtles, 2001. (Photo: Philip Gibbs)

Since that time, sorcery and witchcraft accusations have become increasingly common in the SHP. In some parts, it is known as ‘stoneman’ sorcery. In other places, it is called ‘Dracula’, after the bloodthirsty character from Bram Stoker’s Gothic fiction. Some accusers resort to a method, called trambol, using a length of bamboo for divination. A piece of the bewitched person (hair or clothing) is attached to a piece of bamboo held at either end by two men. Along with spells, the men allow the bamboo to ‘lead them’ to the suspected sorcerer’s house or to the sorcerer. In SHP, it was commonly reported that people believe that the sorcerer gets power from the ground, so suspected sorcerers are placed (or hung) on platforms (often a sheet of iron) off the ground.

#### b. Contemporary situation

The data presented in the rest of this case study is generated from a workshop that was held in Mendi from 18 to 20 June 2024, involving 22 relevant stakeholders. These stakeholders included government departments, CSO, CBOs, churches and other leaders such as pastors and church elders. Some additional follow-up interviews were conducted in December 2024. Interviews were conducted with both government and non-government stakeholders.

<sup>45</sup> Philip, Gibbs, Sorcery accusation-related violence in Papua New Guinea. Christina – a case study, (2020), Internationalen Katholischen Missionswerk missio e.V. (Menschenrechte 75), (Missio Internationalis Katholisches Missionswerk e.V., 2020).

Like other provinces, it is difficult to obtain data about the numbers of SARV cases. The most comprehensive is that collected by Sr Lorena Jenal, a Catholic nun who has been leading a rescue mission for the accused over a number of years. Recent rescue cases by Sr Lorena and helpers include the following:

**2021**, 16 cases, all except one from SHP. One woman died.

**2022**, 42 cases, all except two from SHP. Two women died.

**2023**, 96 cases, the majority from SHP, with four from Hela. None died.

**2024 (till September)**, 96 cases, the majority from SHP, with three from Hela. Three died.

Rescue efforts involve Sr Lorena attending the site of the accusation, most often without the assistance of police. She works through community and religious leaders and her extensive networks and reputation.

It is as yet unclear whether the increasing figures indicate an increase in the frequency of accusations and violence. However, these figures reveal an extremely serious situation developing in the Southern Highlands. The Catholic Bishop of Mendi, Bishop Donald Lippert, is reported as saying that '[i]n the Southern Highlands, SARV is on the increase and has become something that was never part of traditional culture'.<sup>46</sup>

The situation is gendered, although the violence is inflicted on both males and females. In several cases where men were tortured in the SHP, the men were stripped naked and the torture involved violent manipulation of the men's genitals. Women too are stripped naked, and paraded in public, and the burning includes having heated objects thrust into their genitals. Gibbs argues that the violence is heavily gendered, and that "one cannot ignore research that reveals a fundamental antagonism between the sexes, particularly in the Western end of the Highlands."<sup>47</sup>

According to tradition, men would eat, socialise and sleep in the men's house and because of menstrual taboos, women were never allowed to enter. While many of the rigid rules regarding avoidance of women are no longer followed today, and gender relations may be said to have improved in the sense that they are less sharply divided, it is likely that the powerful, feared qualities women have been reputed to possess continue to be dreaded today.<sup>48</sup>

## Typical victims

The majority of the victims of SARV are female, young to middle-aged adults (19 to 40 years) and having little to no formal schooling. Accused males were from the Kutubu district. Those brought to the Family Support Centre at Mendi Hospital may have had hands<sup>49</sup> or legs amputated and most suffer burns, including burns from heated implements forced into their genitals. Many accused women have been accused before, so they are considered 'suspect' in their local community. Often, they are accused by immediate and extended family members (for example, in-laws accusing a

<sup>46</sup> The National, 'Bishop of Mendi highlights sorcery-related violence in Highlands', The National, 20 August 2020, <https://www.thenational.com.pg/bishop-of-mendi-highlights-sorcery-related-violence-in-highlands/>.

<sup>47</sup> Philip Gibbs, Sorcery accusation-related violence in Papua New Guinea. Christina – a case study, 16; Compare Amnesty International, Papua New Guinea: Violence against women: Never inevitable, never acceptable!, (Amnesty International, September 2006), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/ASA34/002/2006/en/>.

<sup>48</sup> Richard Eves, Exploring the role of men and masculinities in Papua New Guinea in the 21st Century, (Caritas Australia, 2006), 39, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/281852916\\_Exploring\\_the\\_Role\\_of\\_Men\\_and\\_Masculinities\\_in\\_Papua\\_New\\_Guinea\\_in\\_the\\_21st\\_century\\_How\\_to\\_address\\_violence\\_in\\_ways\\_that\\_generate\\_empowerment\\_for\\_both\\_men\\_and\\_women](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/281852916_Exploring_the_Role_of_Men_and_Masculinities_in_Papua_New_Guinea_in_the_21st_century_How_to_address_violence_in_ways_that_generate_empowerment_for_both_men_and_women).

<sup>49</sup> People often lose hands because they hold up their arms to defend themselves from a bush knife attack to the head.

woman of the death of her husband) or of fellow villagers (for example, blamed for the illness of a neighbour's child). Having been accused from within the family makes it less likely that the incidents will be reported to law enforcement agencies. For some, the accusation and torture are condoned by the entire community, including Village Court officials and ward councillors, which also means the incident is less likely to be reported to the police.

A major issue of concern is the growing degree of torture and sexual abuse associated with such accusations.

## Context for accusations

Sudden death or misfortune is the most common context for sorcery accusations - particularly the death of a prominent leader, businessman, or highly educated young person. However, accusations can follow almost any case of perceived misfortune, such as the death of young children, including infants. Cases have also been recorded following the death of chickens in a poultry project, or the failure of similar subsistence projects. At times, accusations may follow the words and actions of persons at a funeral (haus kraï), where their behaviour may be interpreted as linking the mourner to the cause of death. Ironically, success may also lead to jealousy, where unexplained prosperity and wealth accumulation is interpreted as a successful businessman employing magical means of gaining economic advantage over his or her competitors.

The common narratives involving sorcery in the province are:

- Allegations that sanguma are eating people's hearts.
- Casting a spell on people's properties.
- Casting a spell to prevent people's education and financial prosperity. The Kewabi tokples name for this is called 'kut'.

Interviewees attributed the cases of SARV to social changes leading to loss of traditional values found previously in the 'men's house' (hausman) and loss of respect for leaders and others in society by the younger generation, also associated with lawlessness in local communities. Furthermore, an increasing number of youths both in the villages, and in Mendi Town itself, appear to be dependent on the consumption of marijuana and locally brewed alcohol.

An insight into common thought processes around this violence can be seen in a 2025 Facebook post, which states:



Weed off if bad weed. Because bad weeds can spoil or ruin innocent and best life. We must not promote witchcraft because they are the worse one to take people's life every now than without noticing. Poster, what you have stated is right, but bear in mind if one of your real blood is witchcraft and takes someone's beloved brother or sister or even leader man's life, you will be in chaos and leave your own home and run away so no need to take revenge.



Figure 12: Facebook post on 'bad weed' and violence.

The use of language such as ‘weeds’ to refer to those accused of *sanguma* is a common form of dehumanising victims and hence justifying the violence against them.

Tragically, another photo of a different incident, this time from Nipa in SHP, was shared on Facebook in April 2025. It stated:



Why this type of inhuman treatment to a suspect.

Even if she is found guilty this against international human rights Law.

Late [Xxx] is burned to dead by his second wife. The wife is from [Xxx]. She was caught while running to escape [...].



Figure 13: Facebook post showing victim and poster's concerns.

In this instance, the comments following the Facebook post reveal a wide range of perspectives. Some are appalled at the violence and criticise the government's failure to act, with comments such as 'where are the police commissioner and police minister?' supporting a need to act against the violence. However, other comments overtly encourage violence against the woman in crudely sexualised terms.

### Typical perpetrators

In the SHP, the typical perpetrators are young and middle-aged men. In a few districts, young men who identify themselves as 'New Generation' engage in forms of criminal activity, including SARV. Cases in Kagua, Kutubu, and Imiloma provide examples of instances where the entire community is involved in the torture, either directly or indirectly. Direct involvement includes giving orders to young men to torture the accused, and indirect involvement includes community leaders and Village Court officials who support the torture and choose to remain silent during public displays of SARV.

### Typical progression of cases

Cases typically follow the progression of a death or misfortune followed by the attempt to seek answers to the causes of such misfortune. In the SHP, often a diviner or *glasman* or *glasmeri* will be brought in. These diviners commercialise their self-claimed prophetic gifts, their pronouncements accompanied by various activities such as the use of special leaves or a piece of bamboo (described above) as they respond to a group in mourning, eager for immediate answers to their unanswered

questions about the causes death and misfortune experienced. The diviner may point physically to the accused or give a symbolic description by which mourners can identify a person to accuse. Verbal accusations lead to torture with perpetrators demanding the accused admit to practising sorcery or to call the names of accomplices. Torture, with heated implements, may last for several days and in most parts of the SHP is done on platforms erected above the ground. Word of the torture may be communicated verbally or by mobile phone, in which case, rescuers may be able to come in time to take the victim(s) to safety. Police may be involved in the rescue, but in a majority of cases, rescue occurs through individuals and organisations such as Sr Lorena and the Diocese of Mendi.

## Organisations dealing with SARV in the provinces

The key stakeholder responsible for recording data is the House of Hope, led by Sr. Lorena Jenal. Data is also collected by the Family Support centre in Mendi General Hospital for those who are admitted for serious wounds. The Kumin Catholic Health Centre also records data for its clients. Government agencies such as, Family Sexual Violence Unit (FSVU), Mendi Police and Village Courts also collect data for cases that are brought to their attention. The Exodus Theatre Group can also play a role - see the story of Rebecca below.

## What is promising in SHP?

There have been a number of successful initiatives in the province. These include:

### Successful reintegration

According to Sr. Lorena and Rebecca of the St. Francis Care Home, up to 35 people have been reintegrated into their communities. Meaningful dialogue between police, safe house providers, and the respective communities from which the survivors came before actual reintegration has been observed to be an effective strategy to prepare for successful reintegration. This demands prior consultations between the concerned parties as a prerequisite for peaceful reintegration.

### Training of officials

Training Village Court officials and ward councillors and preparing them to take ownership of addressing SARV. Community leaders of standing are seen to have the power to deter SARV when they are engaged to be vocal in their respective societies.

### The role of the Catholic Church

The Catholic Church has an effective partnership with all its parishes in addressing SARV cases. The church also takes a leadership role in mobilizing other church denominations. Furthermore, the Catholic Church in SHP works closely with the police in the province. The Catholic Diocese of Mendi supports survivors through initiatives like the St Francis House of Hope as a safe house.

The Diocese of Mendi has also organised demonstrations against SARV starting on 10 August 2020 in what has started a worldwide movement to declare August 10 the International Day against Witch-hunts.<sup>50</sup> This date was chosen to commemorate a courageous survivor, Christina, rescued by Sr Lorena Jenal. Over 300 people participated in the rally held in 2024.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>50</sup> The Voice Inc. and Miranda Forsyth, 'World Day Against Witch Hunts', The Voice Inc., 2024, <https://www.thevoicepng.org/sarv-in-png/world-day-against-witch-hunts>; School of Regulation and Global Governance, 'World Day Against Witch-Hunts', <https://regnet.anu.edu.au/school-regulation-and-global-governance/content-centre/multimedia/videos/world-day-against-witch>.

<sup>51</sup> UNDP in Papua New Guinea, 'UNDP organises a rally against sorcery accusation related violence in Papua New Guinea', YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4wG1m0DjPv4>.

## Medical-based explanations

Promoting the provision of medical-based explanations about the cause of death to relatives by major hospitals and health centres provides an important pathway to assist the victims to go to the courts for well-deserved justice. The Kumin Community Health Worker School has a unit in its curriculum to teach trainees about SARV and how to handle SARV cases.

## Community initiatives

Community-based human rights and theatre groups have been using drama and role plays to educate the general public.

The Southern Highlands Grassroots Group has so far trained some 300+ mothers in basic human rights lessons to address SARV and GBV. This is an ongoing program that targets mothers and girls with no or limited formal education.

One community, Pomberal, has recently experimented with a community by-law. It includes two relevant provisions for SARV, one of which is:

Any person who wilfully harms, injures or stabs another person causing death will be arrested by the community police and referred to Royal Papua New Guinea Constabulary. The perpetrator/family will meet 50 percent of any form of compensation to maintain peace within Pomberal Community.

The second is directed to forms of divination, such as use of the bamboo:

No person shall engage in, promote, or facilitate harmful traditional practices, including but not limited to Mambu Pulling and Yeper, that result in bodily harm, torture, or tribal conflict, and any violation shall be punishable by fines up to K20,000 or imprisonment up to 5 years.

It is early days yet, but Sr Lorena has reported that the community by-law was put in place by educated members of the community who have had enough of the violence and are prepared to take a strong stand.

At the end of this case study, there are three stories about Sr Lorena, Rebecca and Monica. Each of these stories provides an example of a good initiative.

## Greatest needs for the future

Survivors mostly prefer to seek reconciliation with the perpetrators rather than pursue justice through the formal court system because of the difficulties they experience in accessing legal services. Other survivors go into hiding or seek assistance from the St Francis Care Centre. Many interviewees were of the view that the failure to arrest perpetrators remains a key factor behind the continuance of SARV cases in SHP. They felt the police should seriously invest time and resources to arrest perpetrators and have their cases processed without undue delays. They expressed the view that sentencing perpetrators with maximum result could have a huge influence on the reduction of the number of SARV cases.

The greatest needs identified by workshop participants are as follows:

**Table 7: Recommended actions to respond to SARV in Southern Highlands Province.**

Action needed	Discussion
Make greater use of protective orders.	Enforceable care and protection should be provided by serving preventative orders (PO) or interim protection orders (IPO) to perpetrators before and after reintegration.
Increase awareness of the laws.	More province-wide awareness on the Glassman Act and SARV is needed, as not many people are aware of the law.
Educate young people.	Educate children at an early age about the importance of moral and ethical values and help them develop non-violent attitudes both in schools and at home.
Provide community support.	There needs to be more support from the Community Development (COMDEV) Office in the SHP.
Increase counselling availability.	Provide improved counselling services to survivors and their families.
Educate police officials.	The Office of the Provincial Police Commander, in consultation with the FSVU, needs to educate police officers to help them focus on addressing SARV cases as a key task in all the districts. Police also need to do more foot patrols, as police presence in the communities will help to deter potential SARV cases.

## Conclusion

There is a lot of good, dedicated work being done in the SHP to promote awareness, early intervention and repatriation. This includes dramas and role plays. Yet, SARV continues. Where there is success, it appears to involve the inclusion of community and village leaders, including all church leaders.

# Three Stories

Here we present the three stories referred to in the promising practices above. These stories feature Monica, Sr Lorena Jenal and Rebecca. Each story is considered to provide an example of good initiatives occurring to take care of survivors and prevent SARV.

## Story one

### **A Pathway to Reintegration**

featuring Monica

Monica is from Teta, village near Mendi Town. She is unemployed and survives through subsistence farming. She was accused of eating the heart of a deceased person from her village who died due to a prolonged illness. She was tortured and sustained serious injuries but was rescued by some members of the community. She was taken to the Kumin Catholic Health Centre for treatment and later to the St. Francis Care Home, where she stayed for almost two years. During this period, Monica agreed to return to her village when asked about where she wanted to live for the rest of her life. With the help of police officers, Rebecca, the person in charge of the Care Centre, interceded on behalf of Monica and consulted Village Court officials and respected community leaders and proposed the idea of Monica's reintegration based on the innocence of the survivor.

Rebecca received opposition from some of the people she approached at the first instance, owing to their firm belief that Monica was a threat to the community's security and well-being.

However, some of the community members agreed to discuss the idea of reintegration with the family members of the deceased child and asked her to return a week later. When approached by the community leaders, the family members agreed to have Monica return to her village. They agreed because they were experiencing guilt and shame from having accused a person without having proper evidence. In addition, it helped when they heard that the police were involved in negotiating for the reintegration effort.

Rebecca made several visits to the community to make sure that the members of the family and community did not deviate from their decision to allow Monica to return. A week before the reintegration took place, Rebecca went to the police station and had a Protection Order (PO) filled and stamped by the Police Station Commander. The PO was delivered to the village elders in front of some of the family members of the deceased child. However, the major challenge was the lack of resources to help Monica to restart her life after being pushed out of her village for almost two years. Monica was assisted by Rebecca with some cash of up to K200, as well as receiving some bedding and clothes, as well as support from kind-hearted people and local NGOs. Rebecca further reported that Monica experienced some stigmatisation and discrimination during the first few weeks after returning but normalcy picked up a month or two later.

## Story two

### **Centre of Hope, Pomberal Southern Highlands Province**

featuring Sr Lorena Jenal

Sr. Lorena Jenal is a Franciscan Sister of Divine Providence from Switzerland and has served the people of SHP for over three decades. Most of her time has been spent on addressing SARV in the province. Her courage and determination have led her to the establishment of a safe house in Pomberal in the Nipa Kutubu electorate to provide comprehensive support, like shelter and security for survivors, hope and healing for affected people, especially women who have survived torture and violence. The safe house has assisted more than 250 women and some men as well. Sr. Lorena also provides counselling services alongside medical assistance to survivors. She is known for her courageous and fearless work in advocating against sorcery-related violence and rescuing SARV victims even in the face of extreme opposition from perpetrators.

In one incident, she directly confronted a large group of people who were torturing a defenceless mother. The angry people threatened to beat up Sr Lorena and screamed, 'Get out, otherwise we'll burn you as this witch too'. Despite the threat, her bravery eventually led her to save the life of the woman and took her to Mendi for medical treatment. She received similar threats a couple of other times, but she never gave up. During the first part of 2024, she rescued five women, of whom only one died.

Networking with local people on-the-ground and phone communication have been very helpful for Sr. Lorena. When someone is tortured, people quickly call her. Sr. Lorena never wastes time after receiving a call. She goes straight to the perpetrators and urges them to release the accused women. Because of her dedicated services, mostly to women, she is treated and respected as a mother-like figure by the survivors and thousands of people living in SHP.

She works closely with police officers, court officials and community leaders to promote the rights and welfare of every woman. She also has good communication with Oxfam in Goroka, the Family Support Centre attached to Kundiawa, and Mendi General Hospital, where she sends the survivors for safety and security.

## Story three

### Rebecca

Rebecca is a village woman who did not even finish primary school. She was one of 20 participants Cliff Kiru trained as an HIV/AIDS peer education trainer in 2006 under a European Union-funded peer education program in SHP and Hela.

Despite her lack of formal education, Rebecca started a safe house to look after orphans in 2002. When she was taking care of the homeless children, she saw that HIV/AIDS victims were also neglected by their families. She decided to accommodate them as well. In 2010, she built a safe house with bush materials as more victims came to her for shelter and food. A Catholic priest from the religious order of Franciscan missionaries assisted her in building a safe house, so she named it the St. Francis Orphanage Care Home. Many internally displaced people come to her. Sometimes they sleep without food when she has nothing to feed them with. Later, Oxfam and the Red Cross came on board to support her in looking after those homeless, displaced, and HIV/AIDS survivors.

Rebecca created a theatre group called 'Exodus Group' in 2006 to address HIV/AIDS. The group's members disseminate most of the information through drama and short role plays as a form of awareness to educate people on the negative impacts of discriminating against others. One of their targets is to stop children from calling each other sanguma.

Rebecca felt the need to work with other stakeholders on-the-ground so they could help her in her work as well. She works with FSVU and Family Support Centre. They are raising awareness in the form of drama, songs and music. Later, they formed another group called the Grassroots Adults and Youth Rehabilitation Center. This was established to train those internally displaced to make bifums, do gardening, cooking and to train in other life skills. Her work has attracted a lot of people, and many victims of GBV, FSV, and SARV come to her.

A major problem currently facing Rebecca is how to reintegrate survivors into their families or communities. Reintegration had always been hard for her. Some of the survivors stayed with her for more than six years, while the number of those she cares for has since increased, and she now has 22 children, apart from the SARV survivors whom she takes care of. A total of 15 families were transferred to Port Moresby as they were refused to be accepted by their families and relatives. Three of the children died in the safe house, but their relatives refused to take their bodies for burial, so Rebecca buried them in her village. Nobody else attended their funerals and their burials. It is therefore admirable that Rebecca makes herself available to see that these children are buried respectfully.



## 2.4 Western Highlands Province

### Provincial overview

Western Highlands Province (WHP) is the regional centre of the Highlands region. As of the 2021 National Population Estimate, the province had a population of approximately 531,402 residents, making it one of the most densely populated regions in the country. The provincial capital, Mt Hagen, serves as a commercial and administrative hub. Many different groups from across the Highlands region have moved to live in Mt Hagen for a variety of reasons, including those fleeing from sorcery accusations from elsewhere (particular, it is said, from Enga). Despite its agricultural prosperity, which forms the backbone of the economy, the province faces challenges, such as limited access to essential services, including healthcare and education. Infrastructure development is uneven, leading to disparities in living standards between the urban and rural areas. The Western Highlands has experienced numerous instances of tribal conflicts, often rooted in land disputes and exacerbated by the availability of firearms. These conflicts result in casualties and displacement of communities.

### Situational analysis of SARV in Province

#### a. Literature review

As with all the provinces, there are striking differences in traditional and contemporary beliefs and practices related to SARV in the WHP, and significant variation throughout the province.

We know from several anthropological accounts that beliefs around witchcraft or sorcery have existed in at least parts of the province for quite a long time. Amongst the Melpa speaking people, for example, anthropologists Pamela Stewart and Andrew Strathern state that there are notions about kum, a kind of witchcraft that is believed to operate in a terrifying way, since the kum may eat the inner parts of a person, causing its host to become a cannibal that seeks out corpses to consume.

The core idea in notions of witchcraft among the Melpa is greed. When conducting fieldwork in 1964-65, such notions were attached to the supposition that one or two women in each clan were cannibals

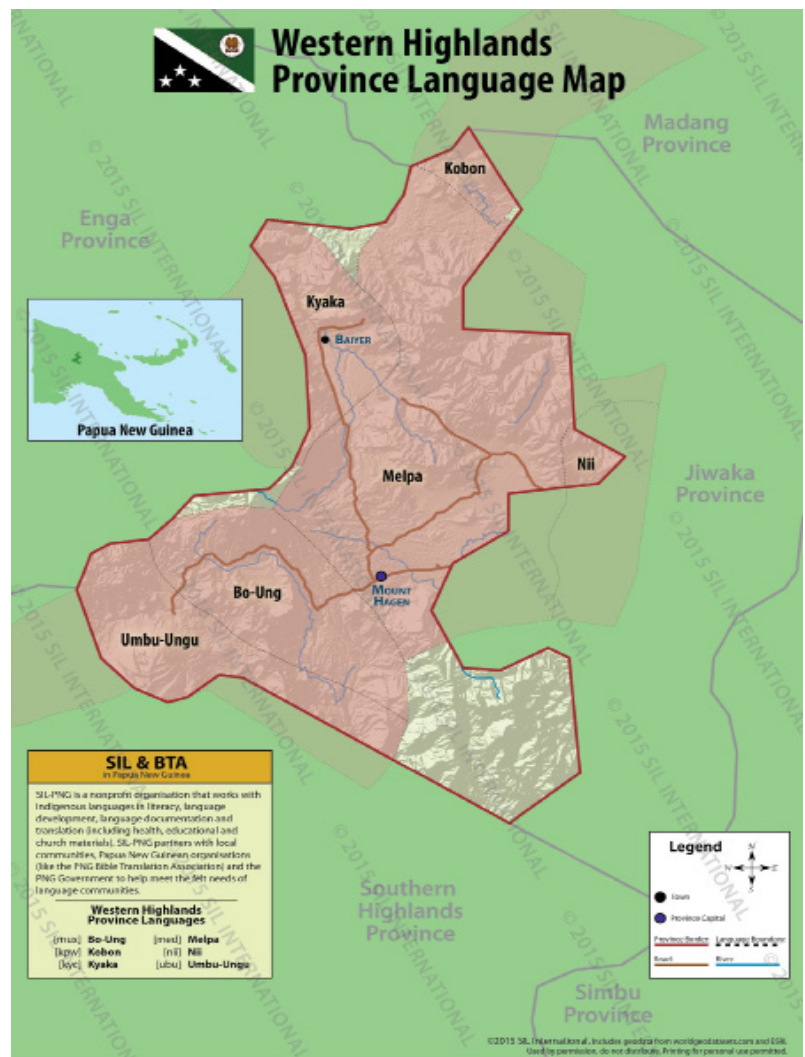


Figure 14: Western Highlands language map. Source: SIL.

who could turn themselves into dogs in order to rob newly made graves of their corpses and consume the flesh. The propensity was believed to pass from mother to daughter. Historically, there was a greater emphasis on such notions in the northern Melpa area close to the Jimi Valley, and in many ethnohistorical representations of witchcraft, the Jimi is cited as its origin place. The witches of the Jimi Valley are believed to be able to enter people's bodies through their anuses and eat their way through their intestines.<sup>52</sup>

Historically, both men and women were seen as being sorcerers – with the male ones being more distant and dangerous and the women being those who are close by and come from intermarrying clans.<sup>53</sup> Strathern writes:

“ In either case, however, the witch is pictured as a cannibal, who kills by eating the internal parts of the victim's body and/or practises necrophagy as a means of obtaining human meat as such. Destruction from within and the robbing of graves are the themes involved.

## b. Current situation

The data presented in the rest of the case study is generated from a workshop held in Western Highlands Province between 11 to 13 June 2024. There were 16 participants from the government, churches, NGOs and CSOs. There was an equal representation of both males and females. There was also follow-up research conducted in December 2024, which involved interviews with Caritas PNG, Family Life, the Community Development Officer, and the police.

As in other PNG Highlands areas, it is extremely difficult to get data about the prevalence of SARV in the province. The Family Support Centre (FSC) at Mt Hagen Hospital collects data on SARV cases, but it did not have records of many cases: four in 2022, three in 2023, two in 2024 and two already in 2025. The Archdiocese of Mt Hagen reported that it is looking after well over 100 women who are survivors of SARV.

Participants in the workshop reported that there are significant numbers of cases within and around Mt Hagen, with many people claiming that these involve people from groups outside of the province. This is certainly the case of the infamous incident in 2013 when Leniata Kepari, a young mother from Enga was set on fire around Mt Hagen township, with images that were spread around the world. Also, as with other areas, the SARV situation within the province is extremely uneven.

We were told that accusations of sorcery were common and accepted in the culture of the province, and retaliations on the accused person are culturally acceptable, leading people to fail to intervene or to report the cases.

<sup>52</sup> Stewart and Strathern, 'Feasting on my enemy: Images of violence and change in the New Guinea Highlands'.

<sup>53</sup> Andrew Strathern, 'Witchcraft, greed, cannibalism and death: Some related themes from the New Guinea Highlands', in *Death & the regeneration of life*, eds. Maurice Bloch and Jonathan Parry (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 111-133, 112.



Figure 15: Gravestone of Leniata Kepari in Mt Hagen at the Rebiamul Mission Cemetery. (Photo: Philip Gibbs)

## Typical victims

Women and girls are the most often targeted, but men are also accused. For example, the FSC reported one man from Chimbu was amongst those they had admitted. The typical victims were said to be those that are already discriminated against in the community. If someone is not well-liked in society and is already seen as not fitting in, an event such as a death can leave them at high risk of being accused.

The typical harms shared were torture and burning. Sometimes there is cutting and killings, and people also mentioned that women are often raped

## Context for accusations

In the Western Highlands, like in Chimbu and Jiwaka, the accusation and related violence is usually triggered when a prominent leader, businessman, or highly educated young person has died in the community. The community was said to feel obliged to find a resolution as a symbol of remorse to this loss, and a sorcery accusation was sometimes considered to be an effective form of resolution in this context.

Common narratives around accusation included:

- That those seen as sanguma were eating people's hearts.
- Casting a spell on people's properties.
- Casting a spell to prevent people's educational achievements and gaining financial prosperity.

One person interviewed stated:

“ The sorcery practice has developed to a new level. It is not about killing someone only. The juniors or new recruits start with eating excreta or human waste in the toilets. Eating human flesh is another stage. Drinking human blood is another stage. They go through levels to reach the top. Sorcery is performed today at the business level. People use sorcery to grow their business. In politics, candidates use sorcery to win elections.

### Typical perpetrators

The perpetrators were commonly described as unemployed youths, drug addicts, and relatives of the deceased. They are said to be directed in their actions by elders in the community.

### Typical progression of cases

We were told the following progression of a SARV case was quite typical:

- During the haus krai, there is a 'pre-screening process' to identify the accused. The leaders then recruit young men and give them instructions to start the witch hunting and torture for gaining an admission from the accused.
- Then there is a period of interrogation that occurs to affirm the accusation. During this stage, the secondary accusation occurs, which often diverts attention to another victim. Where this happens, it offers some relief to the first victim from the intensive torture they have been forced to endure to coerce their admission.
- The case ends temporarily when there is strong intervention, whether by police, human rights defenders, Church pastors or leaders. If no such intervention occurs, the case will usually end in death.
- When there is a secondary accusation or a rescue that saves a victim of the primary accusation, there is often continued stigma, stereotyping and discrimination towards the family or any relations of the victim of the primary accusation.

Elements of this progression are detailed in the flowchart generated at the workshop held for evidence-gathering, below at Figure 16.

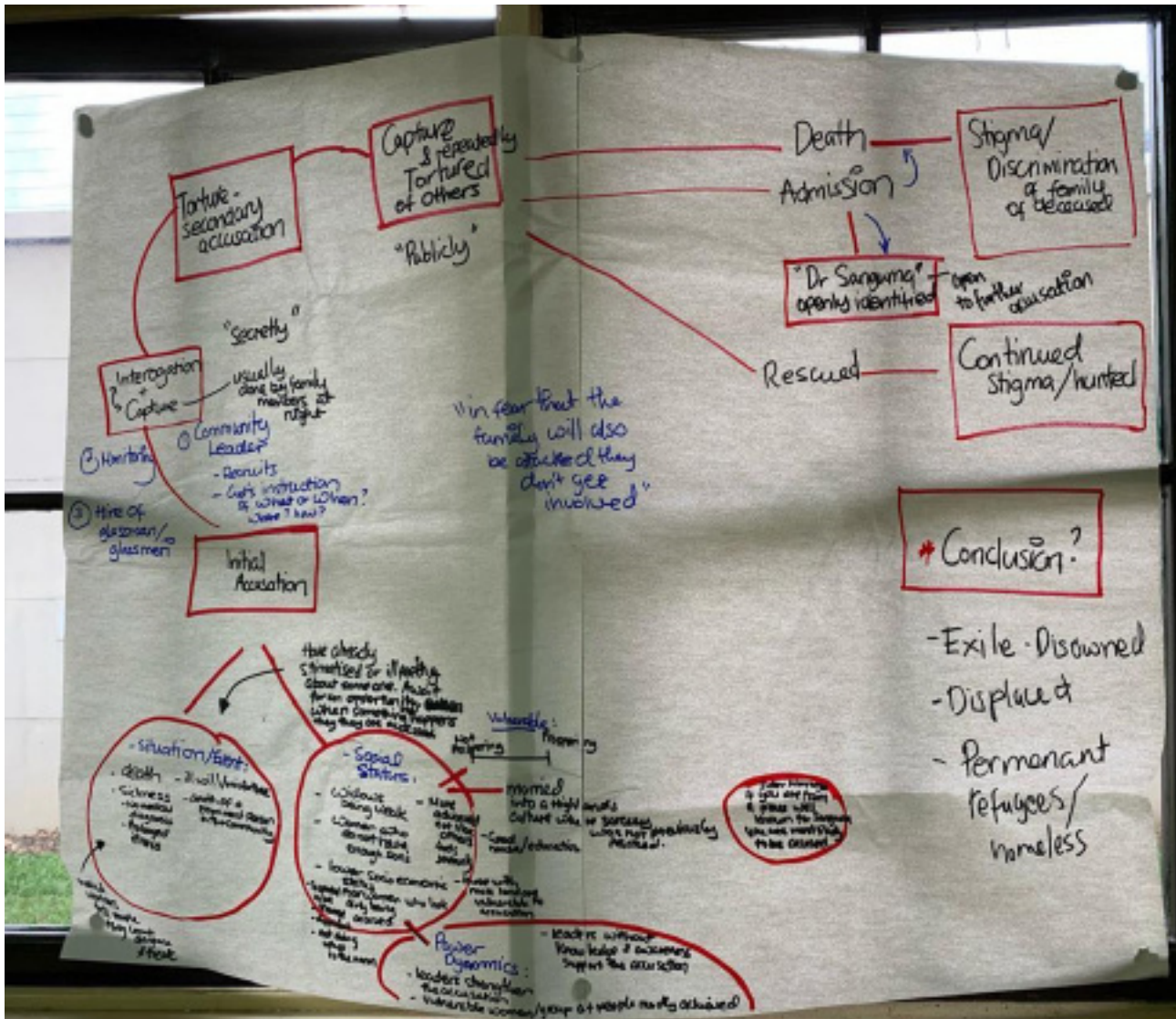


Figure 16: Progression of a typical SARV case as mapped by participants in Western Highlands Province.

An example of a recent case was recounted to us as follows:

A mother of two children was accused of sorcery after a young woman died. The accused was with the young woman when she collapsed and died instantly at a market. It was reported that the mother asked the young woman for money so she could buy a betel nut but she refused to give her money. Thus, it was alleged that mother was frustrated and performed sorcery and removed the young woman’s heart, causing her to bleed to death.

During the funeral, the families of the young woman suspected and blamed the mother for the young woman’s death. The young men in the village mobilised and planned to attack the mother and threaten her so that she would confess that she had performed sorcery on the young woman. But the village leaders, who are strong Catholics, intervened. They stopped the young men from proceeding with their attack since this would harm the reputation of the leaders and the village. The leaders promised to discuss that matter with the husband and family of the mother to send her back to her own place where she came from before she married.

After the funeral, some members of the clan hired a 'bamboo man', similar to the glasman from Erave in the Southern Highlands. It is rumoured that they paid him over one thousand kina. Upon advice from the bamboo man, a few young men collected fingernails, toenails and some hair from the corpse of the young mother and gave these to the bamboo man. The bamboo man, along with young men from the village, gathered together very early in the morning at the marketplace at the spot where the young woman died. After performing a ritual, the bamboo man gave the bamboo to a young man from the village. The young man stretched out his hands holding the bamboo in front. The bamboo immediately pulled the young man and the other young men followed closely behind. One said that they were not walking or running but it seemed like they were flying. They were flying following the direction of the bamboo.

They passed through food and coffee gardens, through houses and finally arrived at the house of the mother. She was fast asleep with her two children and her grandchildren. The young men explained how the door opened automatically as the bamboo came closer to it, so the bamboo man and others could go inside. There the bamboo led them to the sleeping mother who woke up. The bamboo was shaking violently, confirming that the mother has performed the sorcery. The young men then planned to torture the mother. But again, the village leaders intervened, saying that it would spoil the reputation and identity of the clan and village.

Today the woman is still alive, but lives in significant fear of re-accusation.

## Organisations dealing with SARV in the province

Caritas and the Catholic Archdiocese of Mt Hagen are play strategic roles in advocating against SARV, with further support provided by CSOs, FBOs, NGOs such as Voice for Change, Mubalu Women of Hope, Child Fund and St Francis Catholic Meri, and other stakeholders and individuals. State organisations such as the Family Support Centre at the Mt Hagen General Hospital, the Mt Hagen District Court and the Family Sexual Violence Unit, Mt Hagen Police.

The workshop participants said they did not think there was strong coordination or collaboration between the different groups working on SARV in the province. They noted that there were no terms of reference (TOR) or standard operating procedures (SOP), unlike the processes in place for addressing Gender Based Violence for example.

The Archdiocese of Mt Hagen reported that they are caring for well over 100 women who are survivors of SARV. The carers seek to make sure that no one is left feeling isolated. The Child Welfare Officer working at the Mt Hagen Archdiocese says that the carers are currently looking after two orphans whose mother fled from being tortured in November 2024. Their younger sister died due to lack of parental care after living without her parents and receiving no food. The carers have found the issuance of Protective Orders (POs) to be very effective. This has prompted them to encourage accused people to go and report matters to Village Courts and the police. The Child Welfare Officer also mentioned that they carry out awareness in the urban areas and at times go to remote locations, sometimes by walking for two to three hours to reach the communities and conduct awareness.

According to the police and prosecution, there is no proper data being collected specifically for SARV cases and no police unit specially assigned to manage SARV cases. SARV cases are reported to the Prosecutor's Office once or twice in a year.

## Challenges facing organisations

There are some challenges facing both organisations and individuals seeking to support survivors. These have included:

- Lack of a strong social structure caused by mixed cultural setting in Mt Hagen where many different groups from across the Highlands are living together.
- Strong male leadership and power dynamics at the local level.
- Lack of a clear referral pathways for SARV survivors to seek support and justice.
- The fear of police officers was said by some participants to be a limiting factor in people reporting cases.

## What is promising in the province?

We were told of a number of promising initiatives. These included:

### The use of Protection Orders (POs) to stop violence from occurring

Most of the POs and Interim Protection Orders (IPOs) are issued by Village Courts following the government's approval (through the Justice Department) for Village Courts to issue POs and IPOs, not only for SARV and GBV cases but also for any other forms of disputes. POs issued to survivors of SARV and GBV take place publicly, their issuance occurring in the presence of the community, including the perpetrators. Violation of the POs by the perpetrators attract legal repercussions, including possible arrests. The issuance of POs has been seen as an effective strategy that has prevented perpetrators from further accusing already accused people. However, it is difficult to ascertain the number of IPOs and POs issued by the Village Courts in Western Highlands because no one is responsible for collecting such data.

### Community by-laws

We did not get many details about community by-laws in relation to preventing SARV, but they appear to have been rolled out as part of the work done by Voice for Change in Jiwaka.

### Community support

Community-based protection has provided by a focal point to offer support for survivors. Community influencers include: peace officers, church leaders, Village Court magistrates and educated elites. Public discussions and community talks, such as at a haus kraik have been a source of support for survivors in some cases.

### Police support

While some interviewees are critical of police using mediation instead of prosecution, others see it as a helpful strategy.

## Greatest needs for the future

The workshop participants identified a number of important actions or initiatives that they consider will be needed for improved support for survivors and prevent of SARV. The following table summarises their suggestions.

**Table 8: Recommended actions to respond to SARV in Western Highlands Province.**

Action needed	Discussion
Increase advocacy around SARV.	Strengthen the advocacy messages, to spread effective behaviour change messages.
Educate youth about SARV.	There is a need for more youth behavioural change programs to help young people understand what SARV is, why it is not acceptable to use violence and to understand better what causes sickness and death.
Educate community leadership.	Work with community leaders to sensitise them to the issue of SARV and what their role is in preventing it.
Train the judiciary.	Capacitate Village Court magistrates on laws relating to SARV and GBV. Sensitising them on the appropriate ways to address cases of SARV and GBV will help ensure that survivors get effective justice. Use training such as that being used for increasing understanding of the HIV/AIDS Management and Prevention (HAMP) Act 2003 which helps increase HIV awareness in the country.
Support reintegration pathways.	Strengthen the referral and repatriation process. Ensure that there are clear pathways for survivors seeking help, support and reintegration.
Create a SARV legal desk.	There is a pressing need to develop a SARV legal desk in consultation with the Public Solicitor's Office to pursue justice for survivors.
Make a SARV management plan.	A SARV management plan needs to be established to assist survivors to seek justice.
Support the creation and maintenance of a safe house.	Develop a well-equipped safe house in the province.



## 2.5 Chimbu Province

### Provincial overview

The Province of Chimbu (or Simbu), located in the Central Highlands of Papua New Guinea (PNG), covers a landmass area of 6,112km<sup>2</sup> and has a population of 535,457.<sup>54</sup> The province is subdivided into six districts, with each district further subdivided into 18 rural LLGs and 2 urban Local Level Government (LLG) areas. Chimbu is a rugged and mountainous region, with Kundiawa as its provincial capital. The province is densely populated, with the majority of its inhabitants engaged in subsistence agriculture. The challenging terrain has limited the development of infrastructure, impacting economic growth and access to services such as healthcare, education, and law enforcement. These factors contribute to ongoing social issues and impede development in the region. Despite these challenges, the people of Chimbu maintain a rich cultural heritage, with numerous traditional practices and languages.

### Situational analysis of SARV in Province

#### a. Literature review

Anthropologist Paula Brown documented beliefs in witchcraft amongst the Kuman-speaking people of Mintima in Chimbu Province, based on her fieldwork in the late 1950s.<sup>55</sup> She describes how beliefs about kumo witchcraft traditionally centred on the idea that witches—usually members of the same local group as their victims—harboured a creature, often imagined as a bat or another nocturnal animal, that would leave their body at night to consume human flesh, causing illness or death. Men, women, and children could be suspected of harbouring a kumo, although the association with women was particularly

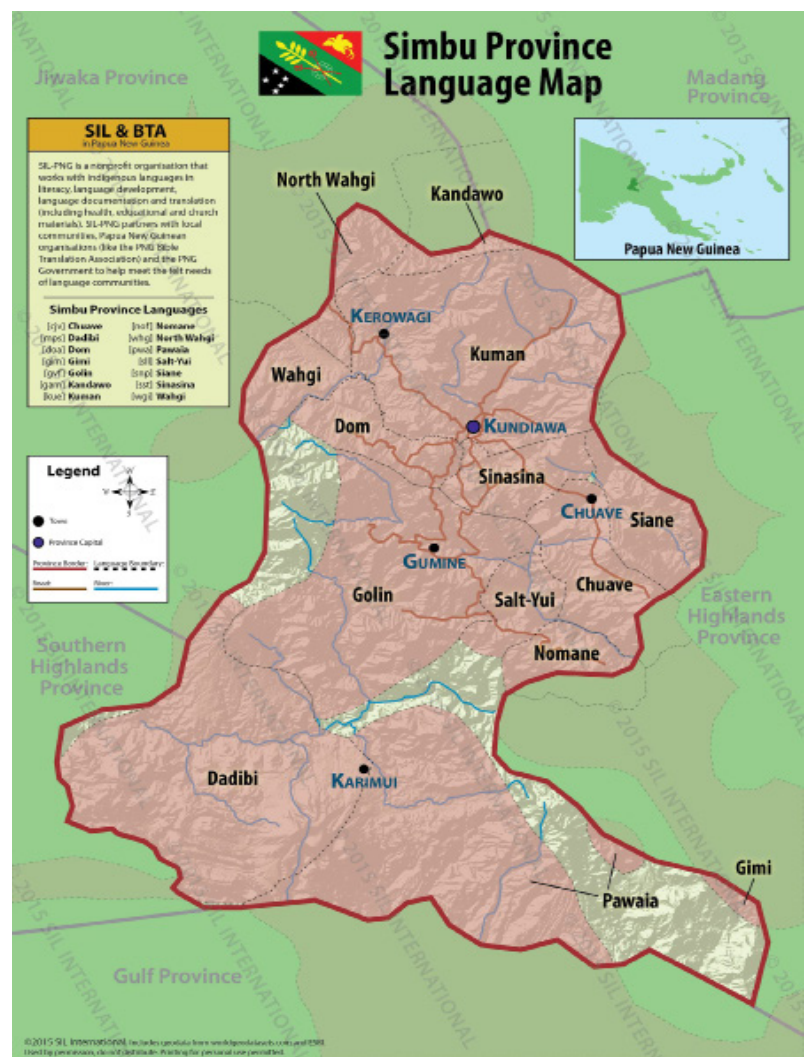


Figure 17: Chimbu Province language map. Source: SIL.

<sup>54</sup> National Statistical Office, National Population Estimate 2021. <https://www.nso.gov.pg/statistics/population/>

<sup>55</sup> Joachim Sterly, Hexer und Hexen in Neu-Guinea [German: English translation available] (Kindler Verlag, 1987); Paula Brown, 'Kumo witchcraft at Mintima, Chimbu Province, PNG', *Oceania* 48 (1977): 26-29; Philip Gibbs, 'Engendered violence and witch-killing in Simbu', in *Engendering violence in Papua New Guinea*, eds. Margaret Jolly, Christine Stewart and Carolyn Brewer (ANU Press, 2012), 107-135.

strong, contrasting with war sorcery, which was linked to male roles in defending the community from external enemies. Sometimes both a man and his wife were thought to have kumo. While accusations often highlighted familial connections, kumo powers were not thought to be consciously taught or formally inherited.

Accusations typically arose after an unexpected death, sometimes based on behavioural suspicions. Brown notes that in earlier periods, suspected witches were executed, with bodies sometimes destroyed or thrown into rivers and chasms to carry the kumo spirit away. By the time of her fieldwork, colonial prohibitions on witch-killing meant that accused individuals were more commonly exiled to the edges of their communities or to live temporarily with maternal relatives.

Philip Gibbs' research confirms and expands upon this ethnographic record.<sup>56</sup> He highlights how beliefs about kumo remained deeply entrenched in Chimbu society, even as colonial and mission influences sought to suppress traditional violent responses. Gibbs draws on earlier work by anthropologists such as Heinrich Aufenanger, who, in his research between 1934 and 1961, documented cases of suspected witches—often elderly women—being killed with spears or arrows. Aufenanger noted that although colonial officers discouraged such killings, the deep suspicion of kumo persisted, and violence merely shifted from overt executions to more concealed forms, or was replaced by social ostracism.<sup>57</sup>

Similarly, Joachim Sterly reported that belief in kumo was pervasive and intimately tied to everyday misfortune, with accusations often directed at close kin, especially when suspicions were fuelled by personal grievances.<sup>58</sup> Sterly noted that witches were not blamed for every unexpected death, given that malevolent spirits and sorcery from outside communities were distinguished from kumo, but nearly any death could potentially be attributed to kumo within the community. John Nilles also documented the Chimbu people's intricate categorisation of malevolent forces, describing how witchcraft accusations served as mechanisms for regulating social tensions, especially in contexts of illness and death.<sup>59</sup>

While the exact social responses to accusations have shifted over time, Gibbs' analysis suggests that the underlying structure of belief, which centres on internal threats posed by familiar individuals accused of harbouring hidden, destructive forces, remains remarkably resilient. Violence against accused witches did occur historically, but tended to be swift and secretive, unlike the often public, brutal spectacles that characterise many accusations today.<sup>60</sup> The anthropological record thus indicates that ideas about kumo, particularly the notion of a spirit creature consuming human flesh, have been deeply rooted for generations in Chimbu Province, even as the forms of social sanction against accused individuals have evolved across pre-contact, colonial and post-colonial periods.<sup>61</sup>

## b. Current situation

SARV is a major problem in Chimbu today, with many interviewees noting that the situation is certainly not improving and possibly getting worse. It exists all over the province, in all six districts. This is attributed in part to the more general breakdown in law and order in the province, and one interviewee noted the influx of people from other places and the increase in population also led to increases in cases.

As in all provinces, obtaining accurate data to understand the scope of the problem is extremely difficult. In terms of numbers of cases, some service providers mentioned case numbers of five to eight

<sup>56</sup> Gibbs, 'Engendered violence and witch-killing in Simbu'.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Philip Gibbs, 'Witch-killing and engendered violence', *Catalyst* 40, No.1 (2010): 24-64.

cases being brought to their attention per week, while also noting that many cases go unreported and bodies are buried in toilets or disposed of in the river.

The data in this case study comes from a workshop held in Mingende between 22 to 24 May 2024, with 21 participants from civil society and the government that are active in addressing SARV. Various follow-up interviews and requests for data followed in December of the same year.

While there is an emerging coalition to address SARV in Chimbu led by the Catholic Diocese with NGOs such as The Voice Inc, and also the provincial and national government actors such as the police— probably to the greatest extent of anywhere else in the region - there was a general feeling that there remains a lack of political will in addressing the issue.



Figure 18: SARV survivor at Kundiawa, circa 2010. (Photo: Philip Gibbs).

### Typical Victims

Whereas in the past both men and women were accused, today it is more often women, particularly those who are vulnerable in some way. However, it is sometimes the case that those who possess more land, more resources and wealth, and have a higher standard of living are being accused, and in this case, the motivations are said to be jealousy or a desire to possess what others have. We were told of one case where a man who was accused because he had a lot of land. As such, having more assets but less power in terms the support of family members and influence in community creates a risk of accusation. It was also noted that the educated who return home to their villages during holidays can be accused if they are considered not to be providing enough for the community. Polygyny, with its associated jealousies, was also noted as a factor.

Apart from physical harm to the victim through torture, burning, cutting and killing, victims also suffer the consequences of arson and damage to property. For example, at the workshop, a victim gave an account of how a secondary accusation from another woman who started calling out the names of others, resulted in the burning of houses, damage of property and loss of livestock of the other accused. Those who survive are often displaced and live with the ongoing stigma and fear of re-accusation.

One survivor who attended the workshop had been severely tortured by members of his tribe after they had accused him and others of performing sorcery that caused the death of a man. His left hand was chopped using a bush knife, resulting in it being paralysed. He sustained other serious injuries to his face and other parts of his body. His home and food gardens were destroyed and he was forced to seek refuge in another place with the help of Caritas and Kup Women for Peace (KWP). Two of his perpetrators have been arrested and charged and are now before the Kundiawa National Court. He was approached by the relative of the two who are behind bars, who asked him to withdraw the case and assured him compensation, but he declined to accept their request.

Claire Taitus, who is the Chair for Chimbu Disability Organisation and the Highlands Regional Disability Master Trainer for the Rights of Disabled People, attended the workshop and brought a perspective on the impact of SARV on people with disabilities. She stated:

“ Nearly all the people in the communities are able and can do and say anything they feel like, unlike us the disabled ones who happen to be the marginalised ones. They look down on us every time and whenever there is a death or a misfortune in the communities, we are [the] first targets, as they quickly turn to us and accuse us. In many occasions, we suffer extreme violence from the hands of abled people, while many of us have died through such violence. I come from Salt-Nomane, which is the remotest part of Simbu, and I have seen many disabled people suffer in the hands of evil people but most of the stories don't reach the authorities.

## Context for accusations

Accusations often follow a death or a sickness, particularly of a prominent person. It was noted that the community feels obliged to find a resolution as a symbol of remorse for this loss, not only for the immediate relatives but the community as a whole due to the potential the dead person had to contribute to the well-being of the community, measured by such things as their capacity to make monetary contributions to deaths, or their potential to be future political leaders within the District or Province.

In addition, it was noted that desire for access to resources often serves as a hidden motivation for accusations, as those accused are murdered or chased out of the community and others can possess their property, such as pigs, poultry, land, and similar benefits.

## Typical perpetrators

Typical perpetrators are young and middle-aged men, often those who are associated with the consumption of marijuana and homebrew. They are said to be recruited by village and community leaders to hunt for suspected people and torture them. On occasions, they are paid to do this. We were told of payment of K10 to be involved in this violence. Many interviewees noted that often the entire tribe, including educated elites, becomes involved in SARV incidents. This makes getting justice particularly difficult for survivors.

## Typical progression of cases

Accusations often happen when a community is faced with misfortune, such as the death of a prominent man seen as leader by the community and referred to as a 'big man', wealthy 'businessman', well educated 'save man', young person 'Yangpla', all persons with potential to be of benefit or an asset to the community.

Progression of a case is determined by a period of mourning and progresses according to the stages of a mourning process. During the haus krai, people are on the lookout to identify anyone who behaves irregularly and not according to the accepted practice during mourning. For example, if you laugh at a haus krai, that increases your vulnerability to the accusation. When the accusation is made, an external glasman/meri is hired to strengthen the accusation.

While the practice of engaging a third party glasman or glasmeri to verify or validate the accusation has been around for a while, the new trend has emerged that this person must be external to the community making the accusation. They are usually hired from the coastal areas of PNG. The higher the cost of hiring and the greater the logistics involved in bringing the glasman (male) or glasmeri (female) into Chimbu from places like Milne Bay or East New Britain Provinces, places reported also to have stronger beliefs in sorcery and witchcraft, the more likely it is that the accusation will be considered credible.

Those accused are subject to physical and verbal abuse. Then there is a period of interrogation that occurs to affirm the accusation and to force a confession and name any others involved. Violence continues at an increasing scale as more and more secondary accusations are made, validated by the glasman or glasmeri (who, it should be noted, collect payments for their participation).

Admission does not always stop the violence, as the accusers may continue to go after others who have been co-accused as accomplices. The case ends temporarily when there is strong intervention by police, human rights defenders, Church pastors or leaders. If there is no intervention, then the case often only ends when the accused is finally killed.

The participants at the workshop illustrated this typical case progression in the diagram below.

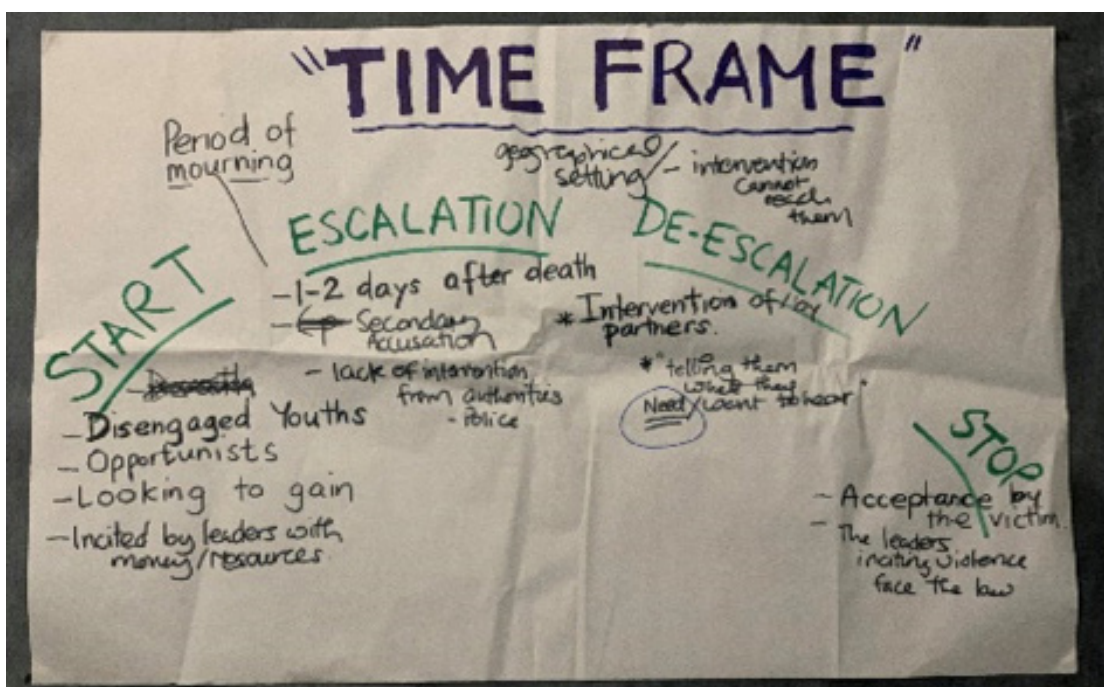


Figure 19: Progression of a SARV case, as mapped by participants in Chimbu

Key points to note from the diagram are that the torture takes place in a geographical setting where it is hard for outsiders to access to intervene, the clear identification of those involved in the accusation and violence as “opportunists”, the reference to those doing the incitement as being the ‘leaders with resources’ (i.e. those one would have hoped would be opposed to such violence), and the lack of intervention by authorities being a contributing feature to the escalation.

## Organisations dealing with SARV in the province

Relative to many other provinces, Chimbu is fortunate in having many strong actors that have been active for years in addressing SARV. Chimbu is also distinct in having the use of strong influential message carriers from church and hospital leaders, and even business elites, in calling for actions to address Gender Based Violence (GBV) and SARV. However, participants mentioned that there are challenges in sustaining partnerships and effective coordination in the province, and that these deficits were undermining the effectiveness of the individual actors. Particular issues raised included the absence of coordinated case management and concerns about the lack of sharing of data about cases, making it difficult for survivors to navigate referral pathways.

The majority of the funding and support goes towards response, rather than awareness and prevention. There is a widespread lack of understanding about the laws related to SARV. In addition, it was noted that there is inconsistency in the messaging and communication. Participants called for proper guidelines, tools, and scenario-based training involving all actors in order to bridge from what can be provided in the community to what can be provided more formally by established government services, including police, hospital, higher courts, etc.

It was observed that there is a need to build the partnerships network, with a greater understanding of each other’s complementary roles and the collaborative need to come together and share resources in a collective effort to improve case management. One area that requires prioritisation and capacity building to be effective is that of case conferencing. There is also the need to have a managed case management data platform to effectively monitor the trends of SARV across the province.

Most recently, a provincial strategy to address GBV, which also includes SARV, has been developed and presented to the Provincial Government Executive Council, which was still deliberating on it at the time of finalising this report. From this proposed commitment at subnational level, there is anticipation that greater commitment will flow from national level to resource the provincial strategy to drive actions against SARV within the province. A particular priority in the province is to establish a safe house.

### The Catholic Church

The Catholic Church is a key organisation that influences the response to SARV in Chimbu Province. The Catholic Church has developed a five-point plan as described by Fr Philip Gibbs that involves initiatives such as interventions before or during a funeral.<sup>62</sup>

Caritas PNG is also active in Chimbu. Caritas PNG exists in order to play an active role in social justice, peace, human development and emergency operations. Caritas PNG believes that, given the role of churches in providing spiritual support to communities, church leaders are strongly placed to address the beliefs in supernatural powers that underpin SARV. In December 2019, the PNG Council of Churches released a *National Strategy for Churches to Address Sorcery Accusation*

<sup>62</sup> Philip Gibbs, ‘Practical church interventions on sorcery and witchcraft violence in the Papua New Guinea Highlands’, in *Talking It Through: Responses to Sorcery and Witchcraft Beliefs and Practices in Melanesia*, eds. Miranda Forsyth and Richard Eves (ANU Press, 2015).

*Related Violence* that was endorsed by the government of PNG,<sup>63</sup> Caritas PNG calls for support to the implementation of this strategy.<sup>64</sup> The organisation is also involved in the implementation of PNG's *National Action Plan on Sorcery and Witchcraft Accusation Related Violence*. In Chimbu Province, Caritas provides awareness and advocacy against SARV, and other support that enables the reintegration of women and girl survivors of GBV and SARV following trauma from experiences of violence.

For the past three years, Caritas has set up coordinators in different parishes and this has helped with the team doing awareness and advocacy on SARV in their parishes.

### Kundiawa Hospital

The chief surgeon at the Sir Joseph Nombri Hospital Kundiawa, Fr Dr Jan Jaworski has been the centre of many reported success stories of SARV<sup>65</sup> and has pushed for the prioritisation of free services for survivors of GBV and SARV. Through this strong influence and active commitment, the Family Support Centre (FSC) at the hospital has been set up and also offers overnight, midterm stays for survivors of GBV and SARV who come to the hospital. The FSC records a minimum of five survivors of SARV weekly, as reported by manager Jean Kupo.

### The Voice Inc (TVI)

Through the influence and support of the Catholic Church, the not-for-profit organisation The Voice Inc, set up a legal desk in 2023. This has an office and offers pro bono legal representation services out of the Kundiawa Diocese. For further details, see below.

TVI also has a Local Leadership and Collective Action Program (LLCAP), funded by the Australian Government through the Building Community Engagement Program (BCEP). Through this program, there has been a strong focus on building a coalition of change in relation to SARV that influences policy change. This builds on the work that TVI has initiated through their Director Serena Sasingan, who as a senior policy lawyer with the Department of Justice, led the Government implementation of the National Action Plan to Address Sorcery Accusation Related Violence through a coordinated a cross-sectoral response to SARV. This enabled connections and partnerships between TVI, key organizations, and individuals. The coalition being formed around the Catholic Church network brought them into Chimbu Province. They have offered capacity building of key actors in the province who undertook a Problem Driven Iterative Adaptation (PDIA)<sup>66</sup> training. Under this support the Voice Inc have also developed a 10-part television series that sheds light on SARV. The series features organizations that are working at the forefront of this issue. The aim of the series is to raise awareness about SARV and promote a deeper understanding of the issue.<sup>67</sup>

<sup>63</sup> Australian High Commission, 'Churches to fight sorcery accusation related violence', Australian High Commission Papua New Guinea, undated, <https://png.embassy.gov.au/pmsb/1022.html#:~:text=Papua%20New%20Guinea's%20major%20churches,across%20the%20country%20every%20year>.

<sup>64</sup> Caritas Oceania, Caritas Oceania submission to the inquiry on human rights of women and girls in the Pacific, November 2020, [caritas\\_oceania\\_submission\\_to\\_inquiry\\_on\\_human\\_rights\\_women\\_girls\\_in\\_pacific.pdf](https://www.caritas.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/caritas_oceania_submission_to_inquiry_on_human_rights_women_girls_in_pacific.pdf).

<sup>65</sup> Maria, 'Success story: Little boy saved after sanguma accusations', [Stopsorceryviolence.org](https://www.stopsorceryviolence.org/success-story-little-boy-saved-after-sanguma-accusations/), 13 December 2014, <https://www.stopsorceryviolence.org/success-story-little-boy-saved-after-sanguma-accusations/>; Gibbs, Sorcery accusation-related violence in Papua New Guinea. Christina – a case study.

<sup>66</sup> Harvard Kennedy School, 'PDIA Toolkit', Building state capacity, [https://bsc.hks.harvard.edu/tools/toolkit/#:~:text=Problem%20Driven%20Iterative%20Adaptation%20\(PDIA,adapt%20and%20then%20act%20again](https://bsc.hks.harvard.edu/tools/toolkit/#:~:text=Problem%20Driven%20Iterative%20Adaptation%20(PDIA,adapt%20and%20then%20act%20again).

<sup>67</sup> The Voice Inc., 'Films and videos', <https://www.thevoicepng.org/films>.

## Kup Women for Peace

Kup Women for Peace (KWP) was formed in 1999 by women from warring tribes, who had experienced the effects of two decades of tribal warfare. They began to mobilise people from different sides of the conflict to put pressure on traditional leadership to stop the fighting. KWP is involved in a range of activities, including addressing SARV. It uses the Communicating the Law toolkit, which was developed to provide ways to communicate the current legal information in PNG on human rights, children's rights, GBV and SARV, specifically using participatory communication techniques.<sup>68</sup> The toolkit was developed in collaboration with the University of Queensland, human rights defenders and relevant stakeholders, including KWP, to include relevant content that builds on successful strategies already used in community education programs. The toolkit is endorsed by the Department of Justice and Attorney General and incorporates materials that have been developed by Human Rights Defenders as a result of their work and projects in GBV and SARV, with the intention for it to be available to other community-based Human Rights Defenders to use. KWP also uses a community-based Human Rights Defenders Rights Manual that provides contextualised material about addressing SARV. Together, these materials have been aimed at achieving a more effective response to SARV, helping to shift human behaviours towards adopting nonviolent approaches towards ending SARV.

Angela Yani, a KWP Peace Advocate told us:

“ As an advocate that has travelled to many different parts of Simbu, I have observed that SARV is major rising problem in the whole of Simbu. Many innocent people are suffering in the hands of cruel people who do not have any concern for the value and dignity of other people's lives. I have noted that the immediate task to address SARV and GBV in the province is to provide frequent educational awareness and teaching centred on changing the people's perceptions. People need to be assisted and brought to a certain stage where they will be able to understand what is right and what is wrong. KWP uses a SARV Manual to educate people in the different parts of the communities we reach out to. We inform them of the laws that are in place to hold perpetrators accountable for their actions-even for branding someone as a sanguma. We also inform them about the penalties for SARV. I have observed that people are gradually changing their mindsets as a result of the educational awareness and trainings that we provide.

The Highlands Human Rights Defenders also provide support to survivors, and carry out rescues.

## Police

There are considerable policing challenges as a result of the vast, remote and rugged terrain in Chimbu province. In addition, in responding to reports of SARV, police are often confronted by large groups of community members that have the capacity to overpower them due to their limited manpower and resources. SARV cases are treated as violence cases and so are responded to by general duty police, unlike the Family Sexual Violence Unit that deals directly with family and GBV cases. When SARV cases escalate into criminal offences, such as damage to property, attempted murder through torture or killing in relation to an accusation of sorcery, then the Criminal Investigations Division deals with the case.

<sup>68</sup> Yumi Sanap Strong, '11 Facilitators trained in the Communicating the Law toolkit', Yumi Sanap Strong, 29 April 2019, <https://yumisanapstrong.org/11-facilitators-trained-in-the-communicating-the-law-toolkit/>.

## Human Rights Defenders Network

The Human Rights Defenders Network is relatively strong in Chimbu province. Their presence in the community means they can act quickly to support conflict mediation and conflict resolution before the escalation of violence in the community. They work together with other key community actors, including peace mediators, Community Police, Community Church leader and the Village Court magistrate to lead mediation to stop accusation or related violence.

The Human Rights Defenders Network conducts a lot of awareness about SARV and shared some of their insights about what works and what does not. They said that communication of messages regarding the respect for human rights was most effective when they understood their audience and recipients in the community well. This was done effectively through the conduct of community entry assessments. A checklist is used to first assess what they know and what they do not know about human rights. It also identifies when there needed to be considerations for inclusiveness, such as an audience with disabilities requiring sign language interpretation support. Given the type of literacy and demographic level of the community, a most appropriate language is selected for communication. When communicating human rights, it was most effective to quote the constitution, that refers to the right to having your beliefs (in this case sorcery) but that you also have to respect and uphold the rights of others, including their right to life. Thus, taking another life because of your own beliefs is not acceptable under the laws of this country.

What actors found was most effective was to focus on creating awareness around the negative impacts of SARV, such as destruction of property, loss of lives, and the expenses involved in compensation of damages after a fight results from an accusation of sorcery. The Human Rights Defenders would then shift into talking about the fundamental human rights, and use the Communicating the Law Tool Kit to communicate awareness of the laws, penalties and consequences of coming into contact with the law. According to local CSOs, it is important that when you communicate, you do not place blame and you are selective of your circle of influence to create transformative change.

The Human Rights Defenders reported that a focus of communication around discouraging the belief system itself does not work, and indeed doing so can backfire and reinforce their beliefs because the kumo is very real to them. The facilitators also agreed that when communicating messaging around SARV to the community, it is better to refrain from using labels such as ‘drug bodies’, since youths find terms like this degrading in reference to them.

### Classification of key organisational initiatives

The different initiatives by the actors in the province can be categorised as follows:

**Table 9: Key organisational initiatives to address SARV in Chimbu Province.**

Action area	Actor	Initiatives	Relevance to outcome
Early Intervention	Catholic Church	Pastoral sermon and care-through haus kraia and community or home visitations to dispel any rumours of sorcery that triggers accusations.	Actions to stop people believing in sorcery.
	Churches	Church sermon messages on the Ten Commandments, emphasising that God is love and to love your neighbour. Also, the commandments that thou shalt not spread false rumours, or kill.	Actions to stop people accusing other people of sorcery.

Action area	Actor	Initiatives	Relevance to outcome
Early Intervention	Human Rights Defenders Network, together with community police	Messaging based on constitution and negative impacts of violence.	Actions to stop people accusing other people of sorcery.
Response	Family Support Centre- Provincial Health Authority through the Provincial Hospital	Responding to the health needs of survivors of violence.	Actions to support survivors.
	Police-Family Sexual Violence Action Unit and Criminal Investigations Division	Rescue and de-escalations of violence and safe rescue of survivors of SARV undergoing torture and violence from the community.	Actions to support survivors.
Partnerships and coordination	Provincial government	Endorsement of the provincial strategy to address GBV and SARV to build coalitions between actors to coordinate actions under established Family Violence Action Committees in the province as a partnership network for coordination.	Actions to stop accusations of sorcery leading to violence.
Rescue and de-escalation	Police-Family Sexual Violence Action Unit and Criminal Investigations Division	Rescue and de-escalations of violence and safe rescue of survivors of SARV undergoing torture and violence from the community.	Actions to stop accusations of sorcery leading to violence.
Teaching and training	Kup Women for Peace (KWP) and Human Rights Defenders Network	Human Rights Defenders use Human Rights Defenders Manual to teach and train people in the community to recognise human rights of others in the community.	Actions to stop people accusing other people of sorcery.
Improved health and hygiene knowledge	Hope World Wide/ KWP	Community-based awareness on health and communicable diseases, HIV, as well as personal hygiene. To generate increased awareness of real causes of diseases.	Actions to stop people accusing other people of sorcery.
Repatriation and care	KWP	Case management of survivors of SARV through support from larger actors such as Oxfam in PNG to provide the best care for survivors.	Actions to support survivors.
	Church	Rescues and case management.	

Action area	Actor	Initiatives	Relevance to outcome
Reintegration and care	Caritas PNG	Providing the best care through a temporary shelter. Support from the Catholic Church before settling survivors into another safe community.	Actions to support survivors.
Justice and care	TVI	Legal desk set up.	Support survivors to seek justice.

## What is promising in the province?

Despite the significant challenges posed by SARV in Chimbu Province, a number of positive developments have emerged. Faith-based interventions have proven particularly impactful, with churches such as the Catholic Diocese of Kundiawa and organisations like Caritas PNG and Kup Women for Peace playing leading roles. Their work in public education, funeral-based messaging, and mediation has helped to prevent accusations from escalating into violence in some cases.

In addition, there are the following positive initiatives:

### Emerging referral networks and coalitions

Interviewees reported that the referral process between police and health services is currently working well. There is effective case management between police and FSCs that provide medical reports should survivors want to take the perpetrator to court to seek justice.

### Village Courts and community supported protection orders

Justice is effective when there is support from the community. One mechanism that enables this is when Village Courts provide Protection Orders (POs) and Interim Protection Orders (IPOs) to survivors of violence and also to facilitate restraining orders for secondary violence to ensure the safety of survivors. Village Court officials also facilitate restorative justice opportunities in the community and these can be effective when the officials are well trained.

### The legal desk created by TVI

Another important development has been the establishment of The Voice Inc.'s legal desk in December 2023. The desk provides survivors with access to legal advice and support, while also strengthening partnerships between civil society organisations, churches, police, and the courts. Its efforts to build coalitions and raise legal awareness across the province have been positively received.

The impact of the legal desk, for the most part, appears to lie in its outward messaging to perpetrators that the survivors have assistance and support from an institution. This has provided protection to survivors who have sought TVI's help, in terms of allowing them to not be re-accused. One survivor said:

“ Recently a young man died in the village but they did not come and touch me as they used to do before the establishment of the legal desk. The information about the presence of lawyers has been sent out now, so they are afraid.

There is a lot of promise in the operations of the legal desk. However, it has been challenged by the high levels of violence in the community and the difficulties of communicating with clients over a long period.

### Community by-laws

The Community by-laws at Gor community have been in place for a significant period of time and reportedly have reduced SARV and tribal fights.<sup>69</sup>

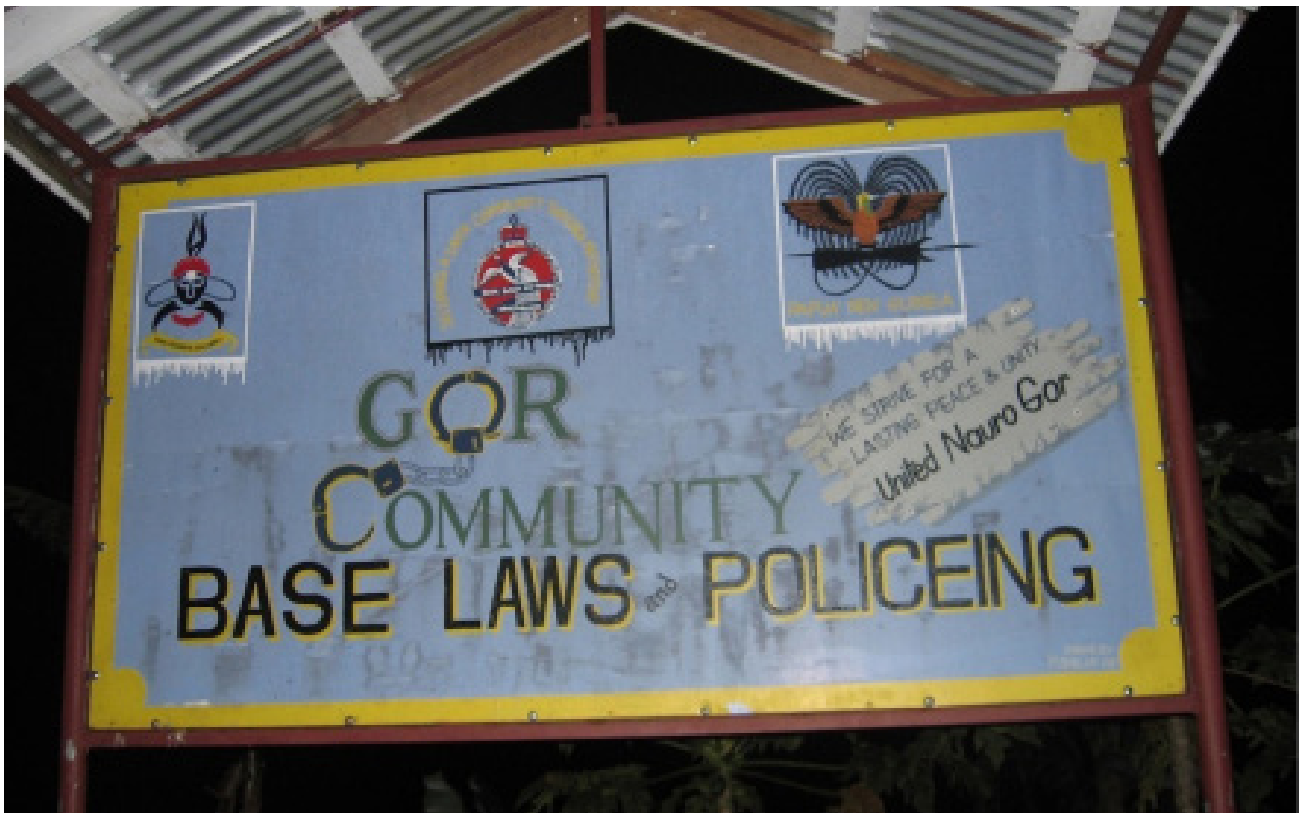


Figure 20: Photo of sign inside United Nauro Gor community. (Photo: Philip Gibbs).

<sup>69</sup> See Bal, C. 'Kumo Koimbo: Accounts and Responses to Witchcraft in Gor, Simbu Province' in Talking it Through (2015) <https://press-files.anu.edu.au/downloads/press/p316611/pdf/16.-Kumo-Koimbo-Accounts-and-Responses-to-Witchcraft-in-Gor-Simbu-Province.pdf>

## Greatest needs for the future

While there are promising initiatives underway, substantial gaps remain that must be addressed to reduce SARV in Chimbu Province. The following list details some of the needs to be addressed.

**Table 9: Recommended actions to respond to SARV in Chimbu Province.**

Action needed	Discussion
Improve early intervention.	A key priority is the strengthening of early intervention systems, particularly through structured funeral-based mediation, health education to counter traditional attributions of illness to sorcery, and community policing.
Train the judiciary and community leadership.	More systematic training of Village Court magistrates, health workers, police and church leaders in how to respond to accusations is urgently needed.
Establish and/or expand survivor support services.	There is a critical need to establish and expand survivor support services, including the establishment of a safe house, a safe house network, improved medical services for survivors of violence and the development of trauma-informed care pathways.
Provide effective case management.	In the justice sector, there is an urgent need to improve case management, fast-track legal processes for survivors, and provide survivors with greater administrative and financial support to access justice.
Set up a coordinated data management system.	A more coordinated system for SARV case tracking and data management is needed to improve responses and guide future interventions.
Consider other useful strategies.	Establishing rapid response teams, 24-hour hotlines, and SARV committees in churches have also been identified as promising strategies for the future that should be investigated further.



## 2.6 Eastern Highlands Province

### Provincial overview

Eastern Highlands Province (EHP) is home to a population of over 600,000 people, composed of diverse ethnic and linguistic groups. The province is known for its rugged mountainous terrain and cool climate, which support coffee production—its primary economic activity. Coffee farming provides income for many rural households, although fluctuating global prices and limited infrastructure hamper profitability. Subsistence agriculture remains the backbone of most livelihoods, with limited access to formal employment.

The province experiences significant social and economic challenges. Government service delivery, especially in remote areas, is often weak, with limited access to quality healthcare, education, and infrastructure, such as roads and electricity. Violence, particularly intergroup fighting, remains a persistent issue, especially in rural and peri-urban areas, driven by land disputes, compensation claims and political rivalries. While the capital, Goroka, is relatively stable and houses institutions like the University of Goroka and major government offices, rural areas often operate under fragmented authority structures. Law and order challenges, coupled with under-resourced police and justice systems, make long-term peacebuilding and development difficult.

### Situational analysis of SARV in Province

#### a. Literature review

Beliefs in sorcery in the Eastern Highlands Province of PNG are complex, and regionally diverse. We can broadly distinguish between those in the East and those in the West. According to Tobias Schwoerer's anthropological study, sorcery in many Eastern parts of the province, especially among groups like the Fore, Auyana, and Tairora in the Okapa and Obura-Wonenara districts, is considered an exclusively male domain and sorcery-related violence typically



Figure 21: Eastern Highlands language map. Source: SIL.

occurs between communities rather than within them.<sup>70</sup> Sorcery is seen less as an individual transgression and more as an intergroup threat, often linked to unexplained deaths and underpinned by broader socio-economic grievances, such as unequal development and lack of services. Historically, this type of sorcery was linked to intergroup relations and conflict. Schwoerer notes violent retribution for deaths attributed to sorcery is primarily directed against other communities (rather than against individuals). Thus, sorcery accusations have the tendency to escalate to large-scale intergroup warfare, often causing additional casualties.

In the parts of the province around Goroka, belief in sorcery does not appear to have been very prominent. One of the earliest anthropologists in the area, Kenneth Read, who was there in the 1950s,<sup>71</sup> mentions it briefly in his autobiographical book *The High Valley* where he states that ‘For males sexual promiscuity was always hazardous, since one could not be sure that a sorcerer had not persuaded the woman to obtain semen from an intended victim.’<sup>72</sup> And later he further noted: ‘Yet I know he was not emancipated from the generally held belief that women were the principal agents of sorcerers and watching him with Guma’e, I could only conclude that her personal attractions had entirely subverted him.’<sup>73</sup> He finishes by explaining that ‘Women were Circes, enticing men to casual dalliance, initiating affairs to satisfy their own desires or, perhaps to accommodate a sorcerer who had designs on the life of their partner’.<sup>74</sup>

Ronald M. Berndt’s article ‘The Kamano, Usurfa, Jate and Fore of the Eastern Highlands’ in *Gods Ghosts and Men* makes only one mention of sorcery in reference to wanting to kill people ‘or work sorcery on them’.<sup>75</sup> Schwoerer notes that it is only in the north-western corner of the Eastern Highlands Province, amongst the Dano-speaking Gururumba in the Asaro valley, where women are seen as seriously involved in mystical violence.<sup>76</sup> Women here are often accused of witchcraft, in the sense of possessing an innate antisocial quality or substance nourished or activated by greed and envy that leads them to perform certain acts of mystical violence against co-residents. This belief in witchcraft amongst the Gururumba is closely connected to the Kumo/Kum belief system found further west, in Chimbu Province<sup>77</sup> and the Wahgi valley in the Western Highlands.<sup>78</sup> According to the work of anthropologist Thomas Strong, who conducted fieldwork in 2012-2013, amongst the people from the Asaro Valley, the gwumu (witch) is always seen as malevolent, and often as being hidden in plain sight within communities, contributing to widespread fear and suspicion. Strong notes:

“ These beings, when manifest as witchcraft, reside in the gut or under the armpit of a person; they most often dwell in the uterus, lending discourse about witches a decidedly gendered aspect, though men may also be accused and possibly killed after an accusation.<sup>79</sup> ”

<sup>70</sup> Tobias Schwoerer, ‘Sorcery and Warfare in the Eastern Highlands of Papua New Guinea’, *Oceania*, 87, No. 3 (2017): 317-336

<sup>71</sup> Kenneth E. Read, ‘Morality and the concept of the person among the Gahuku-Gama’, *Oceania* 25, No. 4 (1955): 233-282.

<sup>72</sup> Kenneth E. Read, *The High Valley* (Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1965), 66.

<sup>73</sup> Kenneth E. Read, *The High Valley*, 77.

<sup>74</sup> Kenneth E. Read, *The High Valley*, 153

<sup>75</sup> Ronald M. Berndt, ‘The Kamano, Usurfa, Jate and Fore of the Eastern Highlands’, in *Gods, ghosts and men in Melanesia: Some religions of Australian New Guinea and the New Hebrides*, eds. Peter Lawrence and Mervyn John Meggitt (Oxford University Press, 1972), 78-104, 101.

<sup>76</sup> Schwoerer, 322.

<sup>77</sup> Gibbs ‘Engendered violence and witch-killing in Simbu’; Franco Zocca, ‘Witchcraft and Christianity in Simbu Province’, in *Sanguma in paradise: Sorcery, witchcraft and Christianity in Papua New Guinea*, ed. Franco Zocca, Point No. 33. (The Melanesian Institute, 2009), 10-54.

<sup>78</sup> Marie Reay, ‘The magico-religious foundations of New Guinea Highlands warfare’, in *Sorcerer and witch in Melanesia*, ed. M. Stephen (Melbourne University Press, 1987), 83-120.

<sup>79</sup> Strong, ‘Becoming witches: Sight, sin, and social change in the Eastern Highlands of Papua New Guinea’.

Strong argues that narratives about witches often reflect broader social anxieties, including fears of spiritual contamination, envy and the loss of development. Some believe witches ‘block the road’ to modernity, thereby preventing prosperity. Today, these beliefs are interwoven with charismatic Christian interpretations of good and evil, framing witchcraft within a discourse of spiritual warfare. There are reports of ‘witch lists’, where entire families are suspected of being witches. Accusations are not limited to the elderly or socially marginal; suspicion can fall on many, including kin and respected members of the community. Despite the intensity of belief, direct acts of violence against accused witches in this area appear less common than in some neighbouring regions; instead, social suspicion, stigma and avoidance dominate responses.

## b. Current situation

The data presented in the rest of this case study is generated from a workshop that was held in Goroka from 15 to 17 July 2024 with relevant stakeholders, including government departments, CSO, CBOs, churches and other leaders such as pastors and church elders. Some additional follow-up interviews were conducted on 14, 15, and 16 December 2024. Interviews were conducted with both government and non-government stakeholders. Government stakeholders interviewed were the Family Sexual Violence Unit (FSVU) of the RPNG, the Family Support Centre (FSC) at the provincial hospital and a public prosecutor from the National and Supreme Court. Non-government stakeholders included Femili PNG, Kafe Urban Settlers Women’s Association (KUSWA) and Oxfam.

SARV was reported to be of concern in the province, although there was little data available to provide concrete numbers of cases. In terms of trends over time, there was divergence in the views of those interviewed about whether SARV cases have decreased (a minority of interviewees) or increased (a majority of interviewees). It is likely this reflects differences in trends across particular parts of the province, as it is far from homogenous. The distinction between two different types of beliefs referred to in the literature review was also reflected in the interviewees’ accounts. We were told that in the east of the province, in districts like Bena, Lufa, Okapa, Kainantu and Oburawenara, people talk about posin, which is said to involve the use of tangible objects like plants, hair, ‘kambang’ (lime), etc. These objects are used to perform rituals. Men are mostly associated with posin. In contrast, in the western part of the province, including Unggai, Asaro, Goroka and Dauilo, people talk about sorcery as more of a spiritual or innate practice, and here it is most women who are accused.

There were a significant number of government and non-government organisations and individuals working on SARV, and some had been working in the space for over a decade. It was noted that there is a high presence of NGOs in Eastern Highlands, and a subjective assessment by some of the workshop participants that where there had been increased awareness work on laws and penalties of accusations there had been a reduction in SARV. However, it was also noted that the sustainability of these interventions is dependent upon resources and funding to continue the awareness sessions. Many of the cases were said to be “sorted out” through mediation and compensation. Mediations are sometimes facilitated by the police.

## Typical victims

Vulnerable people such as elderly women and girls were said to be the primary victims, although men are also accused, attacked and sometimes killed. The common forms of abuse were torture, assault, stigmatisation and displacement.

The nurses from Goroka Hospital stated that about 90 per cent of survivors brought to the hospital were females who were tortured using hot iron rods to harm their bodies and pushed into their genital areas. In many cases, their hands and legs were amputated. Some were tortured to death while others recovered and migrated to other places. Exposing the accused to heat as a key means of torture has been observed to be commonplace in EHP, as in several other highlands provinces. During the process of interrogation, violent perpetrators ask the victims to confess/admit and to identify their co-conspirators. We were told there were some instances where the accused were buried alive.

## Context for accusations

As in many other provinces, SARV in the EHP has been observed to be driven by jealousy, suspicion, fear, and superstitious belief. Death and sickness seemed to be the common trigger event for SARV around EHP.

According to the participants of the workshop, death is despised and unaccepted. In the event that a death occurs, the age and standing of the deceased are evaluated. People think that the death of healthy people should be attributed to human causes. The primary attribution of cause goes to tribal enemies. People believe that tribal enemies engage in sorcery or posin to kill a prominent member of their enemy tribe, as would have occurred in the past. This can lead either to tribal fights or to SARV.

## Typical perpetrators

Young men, both married and unmarried, and youths were said to be the lead perpetrators. There is a growing influence of youth in the EHP, also known as 'Youth Power', many of whom are said to be drug addicts. However, in some instances, the entire community is involved in the torture, either directly or indirectly. Direct involvement includes giving orders to young men to torture the accused, while indirect involvement includes instances of community leaders and Village Court officials who choose to remain silent during the process of accusation and torture, even when confronted by the death of the accused person(s).

Youth as primary perpetrators is consistent with the findings of Thomas Strong from his fieldwork with the Asaro a decade ago. He spoke about the way that older men would try to dissuade the young men from killing the women, writing that:

“ Plenty of times when the youth ‘mobilize’ in order to attack the witches, they’ll say: “don’t kill the witches! Let them be and just exile them.” And when the young men hear this kind of talk, they’ll say: “... You defend the witches, it means you are a witch also.” Even if you are a ‘good man,’ they’ll attack you.<sup>80</sup>

## Challenges in dealing with SARV

The main challenge in addressing SARV that we were told about was the limited resources and funding of frontline workers who are mostly the NGOs. This limited funding restricts the number of cases as they can handle.

Another challenge identified was the practice of some churches ‘aiding’ with SARV accusations. Because the church has a standing in communities, some pastors can have an influence in sorcery accusation. There have been instances of pastors using religion to support sorcery accusations in the province.

Cases that go to the courts sometimes take a long time to proceed. These prolonged cases get adjourned because of issues with evidence which results from lack of proper police investigation and report writing, and also from issues with witnesses not showing up. Some of these cases are dropped by the plaintiff (survivor) because of intimidation from others, or because of familial ties with the defendants or because of compensation claims.

It was also noted that there is no certified psychologist for trauma counselling.

<sup>80</sup> Strong, ‘Becoming witches: Sight, sin, and social change in the Eastern Highlands of Papua New Guinea’.

## Organisations dealing with SARV in the province

A number of organisations are dealing with the issue of SARV in EHP, ranging from law and order, NGOs/CSOs and faith-based organisations. The following table details these organisations. The table also includes influential individual actors.

**Table 10: Organisations responding to SARV in Eastern Highlands Province.**

Sector	Organisation	Activities engaged with
Law and justice	Human Rights Defenders Network, together with community police	Active in SARV response. The law and justice sector in the EHP, including police training unit and the FSVU, carry out awareness in the urban settlements and campaign against any form of lawlessness, including SARV and GBV. As members of an urban community, people are advised to learn how to live harmoniously with the different cultural and tribal groups. They also advocate for peace negotiations and conflict resolution under the guidance of police and Village Court officials.
Non-government organisation (NSO)	EHP Grassroots Group	Active in SARV response. The Eastern Highlands Grassroots Group is a community peace and order-oriented group that has taken the initiative to address lawlessness in the communities caused by urban migration, unemployment situations, cultural differences and variations in traditional belief systems that continue to dictate the actions of people from different cultural and ethnic groups. It was also indicated that the EHP is one of the leading provinces with many languages and tribal groups apart from Madang Province. This reality has been one of the factors that propagated the Grass Roots Group to engage in what they are doing.
Faith-based organisation (FBO)	The Melanesia Institute	Active in SARV education. The Institute is engaged in studies on: Why SARV matters in the church, SARV in the health space. It has conducted studies in Enga and Simbu and published a policy brief on SARV in the health space. It engages in a lot of training and research. The Institute plays a critical role in its focus on education and training, awareness, research, and collaboration with community-based organisations (CBOs), churches, communities, and other stakeholders to combat this deeply rooted issue. It has a weekly radio program on SARV and related issues.
FBO	Caritas	Active in SARV response, education. Awareness on SARV and GBV, provide training for the outfield teams, and provide and counselling to survivors of SARV and GBV.

Sector	Organisation	Activities engaged with
Community-based organisation (CBO)	Callan Inclusive Education	Active in SARV response. The Callan Service is a Catholic Church Service Ministry that is commissioned to address any form of social ills, including SARV. They disseminate radio programs that are focused on education, and awareness using biblical based teachings, as well as providing daily news reporting.
Health	CHW's School/Goroka Hospital	Active in SARV education. Family support centre (FSC) work in collaboration with FSVU, take care of counselling specialising in trauma counselling, apart from medical assistance they provide.
Church	Catholic Diocese of Goroka	Active in addressing SARV.
Education	Governance, Transparency, and Public Services Coordinator	Advocate against SARV.
Government	Department for Community Development & Youth	Showing interest in SARV management.
FBO	Rehabilitation Centre	Active in care and counselling.
CBO	Women's Group	Active in response in early intervention. This group is based around the Fish Wara Settlement, West Goroka, and Faniufa Community to conduct awareness against violence against women and girls. The group goes also goes to the communities within the vicinity of the Goroka Town to advocate against SARV, GBV and the negative impacts of drug and substance abuse on women and girls.
Volunteer	Human Rights Group	Active in advocating human rights.
Locals	Youth and disabled people's reps	Active in SARV awareness. A son of a community chief, and owners of the land that hosts the University of Goroka, Paul Aputo said that most of the residents around Goroka township, including the 2-7-mile areas are full of people who migrated from Chimbu. As a result, sorcery related violence involving people from Chimbu is common and the SARV incidents bring disrepute to the Goroka urban are at large. This has prompted community leaders and youth leaders like himself to speak out against SARV in their communities. They also issue threats of removing migrants who are involved in SARV in their communities. This threat has reduced the number of SARV cases involving migrants. However, he pointed out that locals are fearful of becoming victims of sorcerers as their communities were full of people from Chimbu.

Sector	Organisation	Activities engaged with
Kup Women for Peace	Angela Apa	Focused on peace negotiations and awareness against GBV and SARV related cases in the EHP.
CBO	Kafe Urban Settlers Women's Association (KUSWA)	Work with survivors and provide legal assistance and refer them to FSVU, case conference to reintegrate them to their communities by liaising with community leaders. They also conduct awareness, not only on SARV but GBV and other domestic issues.
Local	Evelyn Kunda	Runs a safe house, does counselling, conducts mediations. Her work is documented in the film Marimari made by filmmaker Paul Wolfram. <sup>81</sup>
Education/ Creative arts	University of Goroka	The creative arts part of the UoG have paired with filmmaker Paul Wolfram to create small videos promoting awareness about SARV. <sup>82</sup>

## What is promising in the province?

There are several promising initiatives involving theatre and awareness programs, as detailed below.

### Raun Raun Theatre

The Raun Raun Theatre is a local theatre group that has historically been a platform for community dialogue and cultural expression. It has been effective in advocating against SARV through performing dramas. Its activities were considered to have had a great impact on the lives of the people as their awareness helps people to visualise how SARV can affect the survivor as well as the survivor's family and the community at large, enabling the audience to understand the negative effects of SARV on individuals and society.

Additionally, the group promotes understanding and empathy within the respective communities and helps reduce stigma against the survivors of SARV. The performers also invite survivors and perpetrators to come forward to share their individual testimonies. When people listen to these experiences firsthand, it helps the audience members change their perception. Testimonies seem to be an effective tool when doing awareness on SARV.

### Targeting haus kraiss

Haus kraiss have been identified as a potential venue for SARV awareness. This is because they provide the venue where rumours of sorcery usually start. Organisations such as the Catholic Diocese of Goroka, the Raun Raun Theatre, KUSWA and Volunteer Human Rights Groups have organised awareness programs during haus krai in Goroka. These are either done through formal arrangements made with the relatives of the deceased or through registering the awareness activities in consultation with master of ceremonies of the haus krai organising committee.

During this mourning period, time is given to any interested individuals who want to speak about issues of common interest. Several workshop participants said that the strategy was effective as the

<sup>81</sup> Open Collective, 'Fund Evelyn's Safehouse', <https://opencollective.com/evelynssafehouse>.

<sup>82</sup> <https://www.marimarifilm.com/download-and-use-social-media-videos>.

communities where this type of awareness was carried out did not resort to SARV again. We were told that frontline stakeholders like KUSAWA, The Melanesia Institute, Caritas, KWP and others use their network to achieve this. The people in these organisations know who is on-the-ground and who are the right persons to contact. That knowledge and connectedness has helped a lot of people. In effect, where these awareness strategies have been used at haus kraiss, people have noticed that there has been no talk of sorcery.

### Greatest needs for the future

The participants told us that there were various needs to be addressed going forward. The list following details each of these.

**Table 11: Recommended actions to respond to SARV in Eastern Highlands Province.**

Action needed	Discussion
Increase SARV awareness activities.	There is a need to do more awareness by all sectors including the police, health sector, schools, churches and CSOs on-the-ground.
Improve training on SARV.	Training of SARV trainers is another important thing that needs to be considered. The Village Courts need to understand the new laws and penalties.
Create a reintegration manual.	The development of a manual for reintegration of survivors would be valuable for those assisting survivors returning to their communities or choosing to move elsewhere.
Improve police resourcing and presence.	In terms of policing, the FSVU office needs to be better equipped to be able to respond immediately when there is a case. Police need to do some foot patrols, instead of being in a vehicle all the time. People need to feel the police presence in the communities from time to time and to feel that police officers are accessible for talking with. Police also need to establish a peer relationship with community leadership, so that when there is an issue in the community, police can quickly get in contact with the leaders.
Provide counselling access.	It would be extremely beneficial to provide counselling services in the safe houses to cater for the needs of the survivors.



## 2.7 Enga Province

### Provincial overview

The Enga Province, located in the Highlands of PNG is unique in terms of geography, climate, culture and history. It is the highest province and the coolest, with steep mountains, heavy rainfall and dense forests. Deforestation for agriculture, mining and population growth is impacting the residents' quality of life in the province. It is one of the most populous Highlands provinces, home to over half a million people. The people are horticulturalists, raising large pig populations, but they also engage in small local businesses. The use of the local Enga language throughout the province strengthens cultural identity; however, the province also has a history of intergroup tribal conflict.

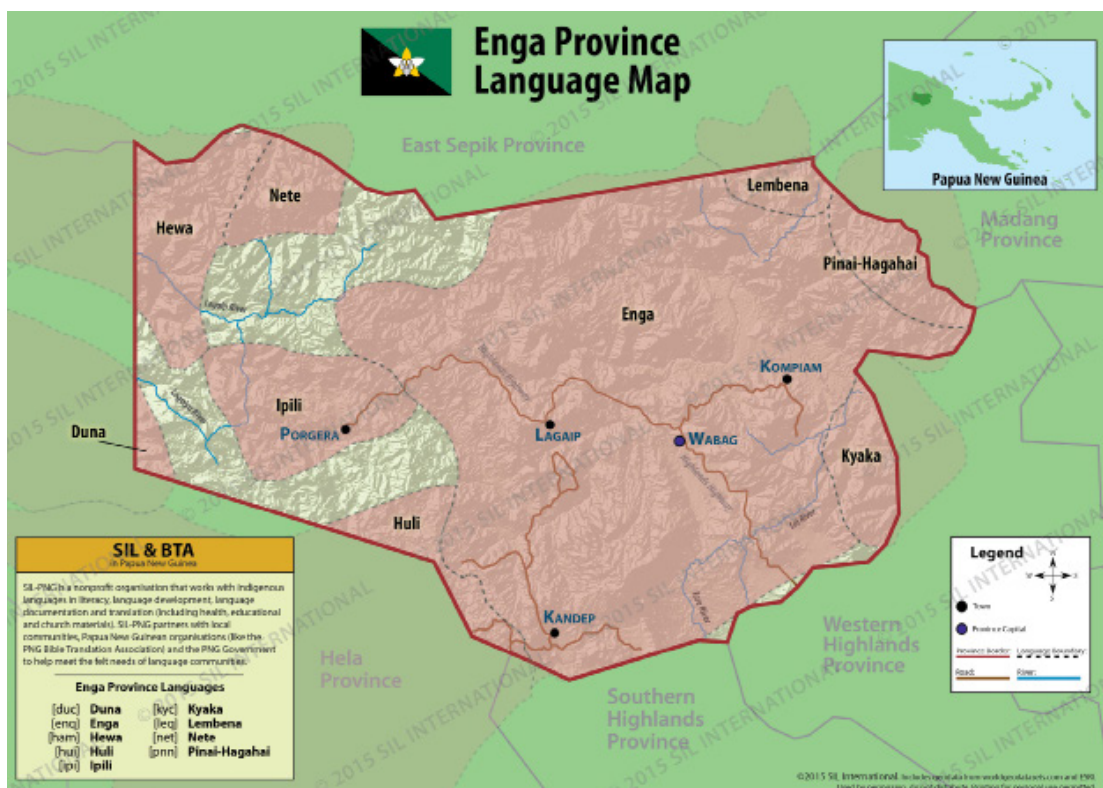


Figure 22: Enga Province language map Source: SIL.

### Situational analysis of SARV in the Enga province

#### a. Literature review

The first contact Enga had with the modern world was through gold miners' exploratory patrols in the late 1920s. Explorers ventured into the Highlands before World War II, followed after the War by Christian missions. Traditional large-scale ceremonies that were key in structuring society began to falter in the 1960s and ceased in the 1970s.<sup>83</sup> Cultural upheaval was apparent in the 1980s in road-adjacent tribes, with new styles of housing replacing the traditional separate men's and women's

<sup>83</sup> For Tee, see G.A.M. Bus, 'The Te festival or gift exchange in Enga (Central Highlands of New Guinea)', *Anthropos* Bd. 46, H. 5/6 (Sep-Dec, 1951): 813-824. For Sandalu, see John Schwab, 'The Sandalu bachelor ritual among the Laiapu Enga (Papua New Guinea)', ed. Philip Gibbs, *Anthropos* 90 (1995): 27-47.

houses. Starting in the late 1990s, mobile phones and the frequent movement of people on public motor vehicles greatly altered patterns of interaction and communication. Traditional marriage customs were increasingly disregarded, and the rapidly growing population has begun to put pressure on land availability.<sup>84</sup>

Until recently, any mention of sorcery or witchcraft in Enga directed people's thoughts to other parts of PNG, such as Chimbu Province or the Sepik.<sup>85</sup> There was news of 'witches' in the isolated area of the Lagaip River at the western end of Enga, but the Hewa people there were considered linguistically and culturally different from the dominant Enga culture, so news of the Hewa killing of witches was considered something foreign.<sup>86</sup>

According to the anthropologist Mervyn Meggitt,<sup>87</sup> traditionally in Enga, illness and death were attributed to the ghostly malice of deceased close family members, not sorcery. However, a new form of response to misfortune and death was reported in Enga around 2010, when national newspapers started reporting cases of SARV in the Enga Province.<sup>88</sup> The following year, a woman was accused and burned to death at Waipu, not far from the provincial capital, Wabag. A woman from Paiela in Enga (Angeline Kepari Leniata) was burned alive in Mount Hagen on 6 February 2013. Further accusations and violence followed in the same year, with two women accused and tortured near Yampu in Enga, and another from Paiela, near Porgera, at the Western end of the province. These events were attributed to a form of assault sorcery known elsewhere as 'sanguma', found previously in northern coastal regions around Madang.<sup>89</sup>

## b. Current situation

In 2017, the Engan Acting Police Commander, Epenes Nili, announced that sanguma-related killings were a 'new thing' in Enga, and that they had started to reach frightening proportions.<sup>90</sup> He stressed an urgent need to combat 'the evil spreading like wildfire across the province'.<sup>91</sup> Stories circulating in eastern Enga tell about how some Engan women, wanting to obtain magic to stop their husbands from getting new wives, had visited the neighbouring Chimbu Province, but had mistakenly brought back sanguma magic.

The new form of sorcery magic spreading in Enga is referred to in Enga language as *yama nenge* (literally: eating spirit).<sup>92</sup> Traditionally, the Enga term *yama* refers to peoples' lustful desire closely associated with food, especially the desire for pork meat. Traditionally *yama* was thought to cause misfortune or sickness, but it would not be responsible for serious illness or death as attributed nowadays to belief in sanguma. The Tok Pisin word sanguma had taken on enough meaning to be

<sup>84</sup> Polly Wiessner, 'The role of third parties in norm enforcement in customary courts among the Enga of Papua New Guinea', PNAS (December 07, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2014759117>.

<sup>85</sup> Philip Gibbs and W Josepha Junnie Wailoni, 'Sorcery and a Christian response in the East Sepik', in *Sanguma in Paradise*, ed. Franco Zocca, Point 33 (The Melanesian Institute, 2009), 55-96; Gibbs, 'Engendered violence and witch-killing in Simbu'.

<sup>86</sup> Lyle Steadman, 'Cannibal witches in the Hewa', *Oceania* XVI 46, No. 2 (1975): 114-121.

<sup>87</sup> Mervyn Meggitt, 'Sorcery and social change among the Mae Enga of Papua New Guinea', *Social Analysis*, 8 (1981): 28-41.

<sup>88</sup> J.A. Gumuno, 'Teenager axed to death', *The National*, 24 February 2010, 8. There were frequent reports of sorcery accusation-related violence from neighbouring provinces. For example, between 2001 and 2013, in the national newspapers, there were 22 reports of SARV from the neighbouring Southern Highlands Province.

<sup>89</sup> Anton Lutz, 'The Sanguma story' <https://www.stopsorceryviolence.org/the-sanguma-story/>.

<sup>90</sup> M. Nalu, 'Police saves women from burning in sorcery justice', *The National*, 10 November 2017, <https://www.thenational.com.pg/police-saves-women-burning-sorcery-justice/>.

<sup>91</sup> M. Nalu, 'Sanguma ops seeking funds', *The National*, 21 November 2017, <https://www.thenational.com.pg/sanguma-ops-seeking-funds/>.

<sup>92</sup> In the Hewa culture in the Enga Province, a similar form of sorcery is known as *pisai*.

useful in the mob violence taking place in Enga. An Enga person commented that sanguma is the yama spirit 'developed to the next level'.

The common sanguma/yama nenge narrative currently circulating in Enga province is that the sanguma spirit 'eats' the heart of a person, causing them to sicken and die. The heart represents the life-force in a person. Occasionally, reference is made to non-human instances, such as when a public motor vehicle (bus) broke down in the Tsak Valley in Enga and people accused one of the passengers (a stranger) of having taken and eaten the heart of the vehicle.<sup>93</sup>

Since sanguma is something non-empirical or supernatural, occasionally people may use it to explain various undesirable events like sickness, crop-failure and car accidents. Nowadays, if somebody suffers economic misfortune, business failure, unemployment, marriage breakdown or failure in studies, people may offer sanguma as the cause and call on a glasman (diviner) who, they think can tell them the 'truth', identify the cause and advise on a fitting course of action.<sup>94</sup> In Enga, the most frequent trigger for sorcery accusations is sudden death.

This Enga Province case study is based on a three-day workshop, with 16 participants, held at the Enga Takeanda in Wabag town on 1 to 3 July 2024.<sup>95</sup> The main facilitators were Dr. Cliff Kiru and Prof. Fr. Philip Gibbs. The case study has been supplemented with additional information obtained both remotely and from key informants during a follow-up visit to Enga by Prof. Gibbs between 7 to 10 December 2024.<sup>96</sup>



Figure 23: Participants in the SARV Workshop in Wabag, 1-3 July 2024. (Photo: Philip Gibbs)

<sup>93</sup> *Enda angeme kate mona yuku nelyamo*: literally, 'This woman removed the heart of the car and ate'.

<sup>94</sup> Miranda Forsyth, William Kipongi, Anton Lutz, Philip Gibbs and Fiona Hukula, 'Sorcery accusation-related violence in PNG: The role of glasman/glasmeri as catalysts of accusation and violence', PNG NRI Issues Paper 36 (PNG NRI, 2021).

<sup>95</sup> Participants included: Peter Pumbu (Caritas), Thomas Itapingi (Caritas), Jean Ponga (police), Gethrude Kivung (police prosecution), Philma Camillus (police, CID), Joel Peter (Caritas), Kevin Lungu (Caritas), Lesley Kili (NBC Enga), Richard Tipi (Caritas), Thomas Kungu (Marriage and family life), Sr Joy John (Sari Pastoral Centre), Dickson Tanda (Human Rights Defenders—Enga), Bennie Oposki (survivor), Anton Yongapen (Village Court magistrate, Dr Raymond Kipakipu (Yampu Health Centre), Philip Maso (Take Anda), James Busan (Caritas Enga), Rev Peter Wareng (Lutheran Church) and Dr Cliff Kiru, and Prof. Fr. Philip Gibbs.

<sup>96</sup> Informants included: Rev. Justin Soongie (Auxiliary Bishop, Wabag Catholic Diocese), Dr Betty Koka (Director of Public Health Enga Province), Ms Dorothy Kukum (Director of Community Development Enga Province), Mrs Lyn Ingote (Clerk of Court, Wabag), Ms Gertrude Kivung (Police Prosecution), Sr Betty Watao (OIC Family Support Centre, Wabag Hospital), Anna Davis, (HEO Yampu Hospital), Ms Malyam Anton and Mr Philip Maso (Enga Take Anda Cultural Centre), Ms Margaret Kambao (SARV survivor), Ms Fiona Yange and Mr Martin Kipan (students).

At the Wabag workshop, participants recalled 24 cases of SARV happening between 2010 and 2023, involving multiple victims throughout the province. This recollection at a session in the workshop is a significant underreporting of the cases that were detailed in the 2021 paper mentioned below. Further questioning by the author revealed 20 cases in the Enga province in 2024 alone, involving 26 victims. Some cases are limited to verbal accusations, but many of these events involve torture, and nine victims in those recent cases died. Sometimes, the children of the accused become secondary victims.

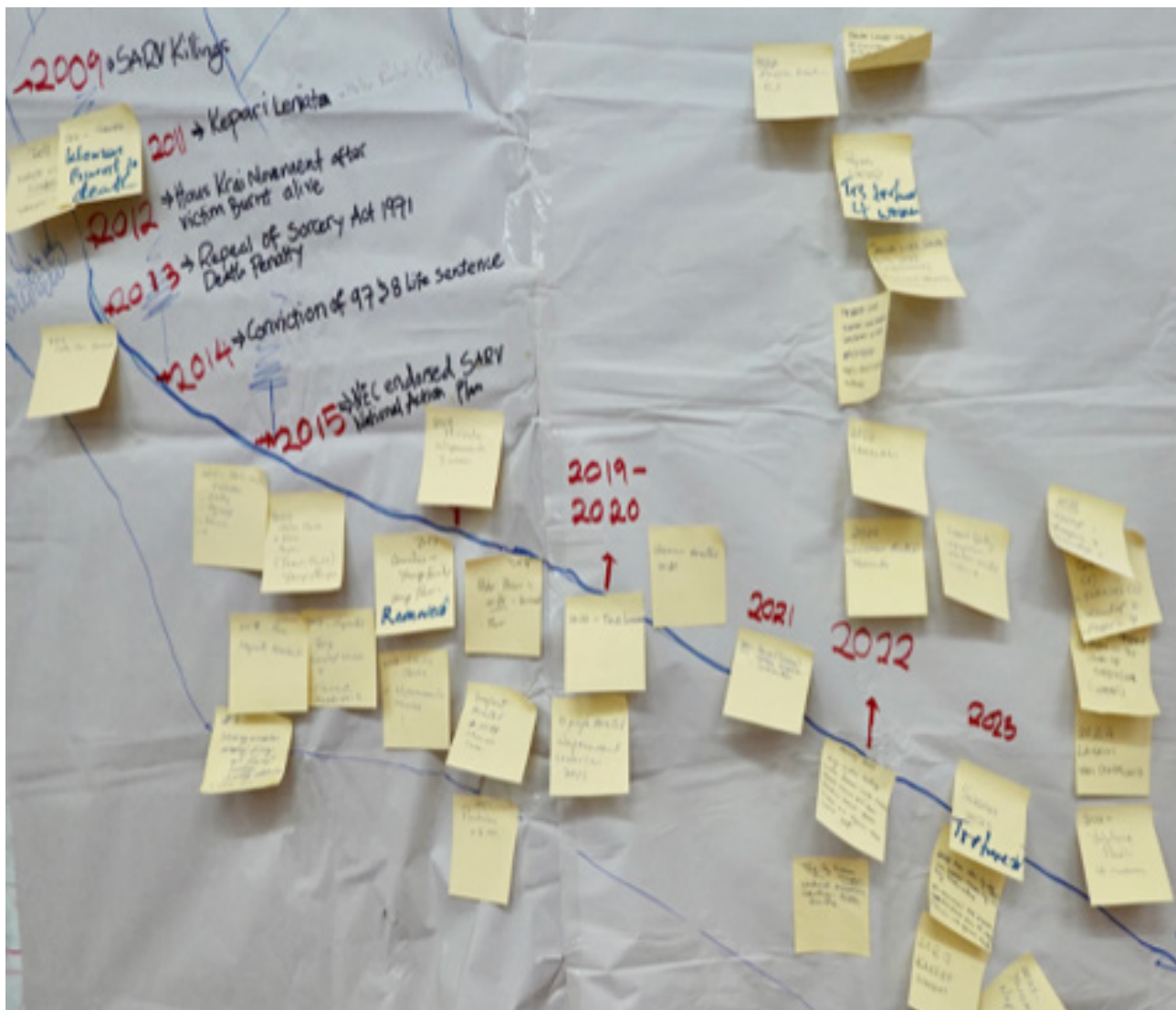


Figure 24: Timeline of SARV cases by workshop participants in Enga Province.

The photo in Figure 24 shows a timeline developed by participants during the workshop in June 2024. Participants recalled cases, entered details such as the name of the victim and the place, on a yellow sticky note and positioned these on the timeline between 2009 (earliest) through until 2024.

In sum: Twenty years ago, beliefs were different. But if one looks back over the last 10 years, the concept of sorcery has entered and developed in Enga province, building upon traditional concepts of causes of misfortune or illness and death. It is still spreading within the province, particularly in isolated fringe areas such as Maramuni, Lower Lai and Kandep. It is difficult to know whether the situation is getting better or worse, as there are still unknown cases. Yet, SARV remains a major cause of suffering within the Enga Province.

## Typical victims

A recent study of cases in Enga between January 2016 and June 2020 recorded 74 incidents of SARV that led to major physical violence and 122 incidents that did not lead to violence. In total, 307 people were accused.<sup>97</sup>



Figure 25: Photo showing the remains of two women burned to death in Paiela, Enga. The two women were burned to death in their house (around 2017). (Photo: Philip Gibbs)

The majority of the victims are female, young and middle-aged adults (19 to 40 years), with no formal schooling. Many had been accused before, so they were 'suspects' in their local community. Only a small minority had paid employment, and the majority shared a similar economic level with the rest of the community. See the table in Figure 26:

<sup>97</sup> Philip Gibbs, William Kipongi, Anton Lutz, Ibolya Losoncz, Miranda Forsyth and Fiona Hukula, 'Sorcery accusation-related violence in Enga Province', PNG NRI Issues Paper (PNG NRI, August 2021).

	Victims of violent incidents (%)
	n=149
Female	96
Accused before	54
Born in the community	35
Economic status same as rest of community	81
Education	
No schooling	69
Started and/or completed primary school	30
In paid employment	5
Age	
0-10 years	1
11-18 years	3
19-40 years	38
41-60 years	51
Over 60 years	8

Figure 26: Table 1 from Gibbs, et al. 'Sorcery accusation-related violence in Enga Province'.

At the research workshop in Wabag (July 2024), there were no specific characteristics noted (age, or social status) other than that the accused are typically female and, like the majority of older women in the province, likely not to have a formal education. Married women in Enga usually move to form a new family with their husband's clan. It was said that some women could be expected to be protected by their grown sons, yet in several cases, the sons of the accused took part in accusing or torturing their own mother.

Hot implements may be used to burn the women's bodies. Of the nine cases treated at Yampu Hospital in 2024, most had burns to their arms, including their armpits. Some were burned on their breasts. Many had burns on their 'inner thigh'. Three were reported to have been burned on their genitals. An explanation given by a research assistant working at the Enga Cultural Centre is not that these parts are specifically sexual but that they are particularly sensitive and, therefore, more likely to be a source of intense pain for the victim. One case brought to Yampu Hospital had suffered a fractured arm. Another had suffered a miscarriage following the torture. There are several accounts from the Aiyele Valley and in the vicinity of Wabag of victims being buried alive.<sup>98</sup>

### Common contexts for accusations

Often, there is a preexisting underlying conflict between the accuser and the accused. It might involve jealousy over money and goods, polygamous jealousy, or land disputes. Preexisting conditions such as these may set the scene for accusation once a community begins dealing with the news of sickness or death, which might trigger the accusation.

There are also instances of flash violence, as in the case of 'Shirley' a relative stranger to the area, who was pulled in from the road where she was innocently walking, and tortured alongside a local woman Yakol Anton in 2017 near the Pompabus parish in Eastern Enga. A pervasive culture of violence makes it difficult to address SARV effectively in Enga.<sup>99</sup>

<sup>98</sup> A short video clip of a sad case in 2024 amongst the Ipili speakers in the Paiela Valley may be seen at: [https://drive.google.com/file/d/10kcyYeYoMpPFkHD0wVKrk4TSvfOe1sRY\\_/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/10kcyYeYoMpPFkHD0wVKrk4TSvfOe1sRY_/view).

<sup>99</sup> A. Poivi, 'Massacre in Enga', The National, 20 February 2024, 1, [www.thenational.com.pg/massacre-in-eng/](http://www.thenational.com.pg/massacre-in-eng/).

## Typical perpetrators (including those who incite and assist)

Perpetrators are typically young men, but not entirely. In two-thirds of the cases studied, both men and women were involved. In a case in Kandep in January 2024, women were involved in both verbal and physical attacks on the victim. Public narratives of the mob being fuelled by drugs and alcohol are common, but upon further questioning, it appears that not all the perpetrators are so affected. There are some cases where no one involved was affected by drugs and alcohol.

## Typical progression of a case

There are often five stages in the process of a typical SARV case.

- The first stage involves triggers. These usually involve jealousy, suspicion over the death of a seemingly healthy person, false information, which lead to a tense situation. In Enga, in 2024, a woman was accused when a man collapsed unconscious shortly after she bought betelnut from him. Another was accused after a child developed diarrhoea and vomiting after she gave the child some food.
- Escalation (or de-escalation) of the accusation occurs next. Gossip (typically in-person but it is likely that mobile phones and social media use are creating new avenues for gossip to spread) is a key factor. The suspected victim is held, people seek a glasman (diviner) or prayer warrior to substantiate their suspicions. Often, there is an attempt to deal with the accusation in non-violent ways. The most likely person to intervene is a village leader, followed by a pastor or religious figure. They will often argue that there is no proof of sorcery in that case, or that violence is against the law. Religious figures, a village leader or an immediate family member might attempt to stop the violence. Police and government officials come only in a minority of cases, often only after the violence has taken place.
- Actions taken will include questioning, arrest, assault, torture, binding of the hands and feet, burning with iron rods, in some cases leading to amputation of limbs and death. The accused's house may be burned. There is often stigma and discrimination. This is the time that a victim being tortured may name others as accomplices.
- The immediate response (if any) may include rescue, hospital, legal proceedings or the victim or supporters may apply for a preventative order (PO).
- The long-term response (if any) can vary. If still alive, the victim is frequently excluded from his/her community and relocated to a safe place. There may be community reconciliation, peace talks and repatriation. These events often create a lifetime of trauma, and as one victim said, 'laip pinis olsem animal' (one ends up living and dying like an animal). It is rare for perpetrators to be arrested or charged.

## No prosecutions for SARV in Enga

As noted above, the author's questioning with key informants has revealed 20 cases of SARV involving 26 victims in the Enga province in 2024, most involving torture, and nine resulting in the death of the accused. However, inquiry with CID at the police station revealed only one case had been reported to Criminal Investigation Unit in 2023 and one in 2024 (when two accused women visiting from the remote Maramuni Valley were accused at Teramanda near Wabag and were kept in the cell by the police for their own safety). There are no incidents in 2024 recorded by the Police Prosecution Unit. In a case in Wabag town in March 2024, the victim died and the perpetrators warned people not to report the case, stating that there would be 'consequences' if they did. In December 2024, the Clerk of the Court in Wabag was not aware of any SARV cases before the court.

Normally, SARV cases involving death and grievous bodily harm are considered to be outside the

jurisdiction of a Village Court. However, Enga has developed a form of joint ‘super’ Village Court called *Operation Mekim Save* (OMS), with more authority than a Village Court, and with magistrates drawn from throughout the province. OMS can operate at a district level, imposing hefty sentences generally based on Engan cultural values. OMS is now called the Joint Court Sitting (JCS), which deals with tribal fighting and serious infractions outside of tribal fighting.

The JCS may lay heavy demands on the perpetrators, not only as a punishment but to discourage other potential perpetrators from getting involved. It appears that most sorcery cases considered by OMS/JCS in 2024 involve those who have been accused bringing claims of defamation. These are civil claims brought by the individuals themselves and not the police. For instance, on 29 March 2024 at the OMS/JCS, a woman was unsuccessful in her claim that she had been defamed by another woman calling her a *sanguma* after her children were seen to be stealing pandanus nuts. She was unsuccessful because the children were minors and there were no other witnesses to the alleged defamation. In another case, on 30 May 2024, the District Court on appeal from the OMS/JCS supported the decision of the OMS/JCS in imposing a fine of K1,000.00 (the maximum amount allowed for the OMS/JCS) for the defendant calling the complainant a *sanguma* and making her feel ashamed and uneasy to walk around in the community. On 22 July 2024, there was another defamation case after a woman was called in public a *yama palenge* (one harbouring the *yama* evil spirit, which refers to being a sorcerer).

While there have been serious cases, such as in July 2022 with the accusation of nine women following the death of businessman Jacob Luke, controversially there have been no arrests or prosecutions. Police Senior Inspector Richard Koki explained how Jacob Luke had been influential in bringing about peace in the upper Ambum Valley, and how in his view, the arrest and jail terms of the perpetrators might well have reignited the tribal fighting. Hence, in order to preserve the peace established by the late businessman, the police were supporting efforts to enlist the perpetrators and potential perpetrators in anti-SARV awareness programs (see The Twelve Disciples story below).<sup>100</sup>

### The Twelve Disciples

The late Jacob Luke owned the Mapai Trucking Company in PNG. On 20 July 2023, he went for a walk near his home at Lakolama in the Enga Province, but he never returned. His lifeless body was recovered the next day. Luke’s death was blamed on sorcery, and nine women were rounded up and tortured with hot iron implements to force them to reverse the sorcery believed to have claimed Jacob’s life.

Four women died, and five were rescued by Catholic Church members and taken to Yampu Hospital for treatment. The perpetrators came from a group of some 70 young men from at least 12 villages in the area. Seeing their strong bonds, they came to be named by the public as the 12 Disciples.

Since Jacob’s death and the murders of the women they blamed, many of these young men have reconsidered their actions, and though they have not surrendered to the law, they have repented and become involved in advocacy against SARV. Supported by the Caritas development agency, they have started farming projects, and the communities in the Upper Ambum Valley have now been declared free of *sanguma*, sorcery, drugs, homebrew and violence.

Generally, throughout Enga it is hard for police to successfully achieve an arrest and a conviction. Even if one is successful in having a suspect arrested, all too often the relatives will bribe police

<sup>100</sup> ‘I led these boys to burn those women’, YouTube video, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b-tL\\_ctPyeA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b-tL_ctPyeA).

officials and have the suspect released. If the case does proceed to court, one must then find the means to have the witnesses attend and testify. An individual may be sentenced with a jail term, but the ramifications are communal, setting one community against another. In several cases, women have decided to drop the charges or have decided against demanding the arrest of the perpetrators, for the sake of their children, so that the children might have a greater chance of maintaining peaceful relations with neighbouring clans. For these and similar reasons, to date, no one from the Jacob Luke case has been arrested or charged.

## **Organisations dealing with SARV that are active in Enga and how they operate**

There are various organisations that are actively involved in addressing SARV in Enga Province, as detailed next. The role of influential individuals is also detailed.

### **Police and law enforcement**

The Enga Provincial capital town of Wabag is often called 'Way-back' or 'backpage', conveying the sense that it is isolated and poorly developed. Police admit that without reliable vehicles, it is often very difficult for them to attend calls for assistance. Under the leadership of Provincial Police Commander Fred Yakas in 2024, the police have begun setting up a Family Sexual Violence Centre (FSVC) at the Wabag Police Station, and they plan to train officers for a dedicated SARV office in 2025. In the meantime, the CID Office deals with any SARV cases.

Inspector Iravea, head of the CID Office, notes that priority is given to helping a victim get necessary medical attention and for them to feel safe and supported. The Wabag CID office dealt with one case in 2024, in which the police kept an accused woman (from Teremanda) safe in custody for five days while they negotiated reintegration back to her village.

The PNG Defence Force is present due to ongoing serious tribal conflict in the province. However, the Defence Force will normally only intervene under special circumstances. Law enforcement agencies lament the effects of widespread intergroup and tribal violence, which detracts from efforts to deter SARV.

### **Health Department**

Enga has a Provincial level 4 hospital in Wabag town and an as yet unopened new referral hospital on the outskirts of Wabag town. Director of Public Health, Dr Betty Koka, supports the Healthy Islands Concept of health promotion and education that involves communities in all aspect of health programs. Health services also benefit from the contributions of UNICEF, Red Cross and UNFPA.

Betty Koka has been promoting an open post-mortem concept in cases where a community suspects sorcery as the cause of death. She tells how two hostages suspected of taking a person's heart through sorcery were being held in a village after someone died. She called through to the village leaders asking them to prepare several people to accompany the body and she would come and bring the body to Wabag for an open post-mortem. That way, they could determine the cause and see whether the heart was missing or that it was simply an allegation. The people met and then called back to Dr Koka saying not to come for the body. After the call from Dr Koka, they had decided to release the hostages and bury the body. This is just one example of a successful outcome of the policy she is promoting as a form of prevention.

There is a Family and Sexual Violence unit (FSVU) in Porgera, somewhat isolated from the rest of the province. Wabag Hospital has an active Family Support Centre (FSC) as part of the referral pathway, with nursing officers trained in counselling. The Centre had eight referrals for victims of SARV in 2023 and four in 2024. Sr Betty Watao at the Centre wishes to extend their services to other districts, but finds outreach impossible due to the extensive tribal fighting and lack of logistical support.

Yampu Hospital, administered by the Catholic Health Services, provides an important referral service for victims of torture. The sisters have set up private facilities and provide the security that is vitally needed by victims. Staff at Yampu Hospital assisted nine SARV victims in 2024.



Figure 27: Victims receiving support at Yampu Hospital. (Photo: Philip Gibbs)

## Community Development (ComDev)

The Department of Community Development in Enga has ten staff with five based in Wabag. Besides the director, there are staff for sports, youth, child protection, and GBV and SARV. One officer works in the districts. With a relatively small staff, ComDev works in partnership with various service providers. Community Development reports to Callan Services for special needs children. It is assisted with funding from the NZ High Commission Port Moresby, and is assisted with training by the PNG Childfund. ChildFund Papua New Guinea is the representative office of ChildFund Australia – an independent international development organisation that works to reduce poverty for children in developing communities.

The Director of Community Development, Ms Dorothy Kukum, gave examples of Community Development assisting victims of SARV to travel to safe accommodation provided by Oxfam and the Kafe Urban Settlers Women's Association (KUSWA) in Goroka and of successful reintegration in the Tsak Valley in Enga in 2018.

“ Jenny is not a sanguma—she is someone's sister, someone's mother. She was not a sanguma when she was born. Before her husband died, she was not a sanguma. Everyone benefited from her bride price when she married. But suddenly you say she is a sanguma. The other people staying with her over the past eight weeks have not died. Where is your evidence? Explain in the eyes of the police why you have accused her and tortured her!<sup>102</sup>

## Church - Caritas PNG

Caritas PNG is the Justice, Peace, Development and Relief Agency of the Catholic Church. It has international links and is established in all Catholic dioceses in PNG, including the Diocese of Wabag. The Caritas central office is at Sangurap in Wabag, but there are Caritas PNG contacts through parishes in all Districts of Enga. Records are kept at the Administrative Office of the Wabag Diocese.

Caritas PNG runs a SARV Advocacy Awareness Training Program with three days of training for every part of Enga, with the intention to eliminate SARV by 2027. This program has been running since 2022 and has been carried out on 18 occasions in 13 communities across Enga.<sup>103</sup> The program, and how it assists victims of SARV, is described below in the textbox.

### Caritas assisting victims of SARV

1. Rescue Operation (Caritas personnel go to rescue, or sometimes police bring victims to us for care).
2. Hospital Care. The best care is given at Yampu rural hospital. We continue to give extra care and visit while in hospital.
3. Safe house care, where there is counselling and further medical assistance. Here victims are given some basic livelihood training, e.g., cooking, gardening, sewing, baking. (Our safe house in Pina got burned down. Now the temporary locations are Sari and Sikiro).
4. While survivors are in the safe house, case conference takes place during which Caritas personnel visits the home of the victims and talks to their family and clan.

<sup>102</sup> Dorothy Kukum in address to the community in the Tsak Valley.

<sup>103</sup> Workshops have been held at Mang Kandep (x 2), Mariant Kandep, Yamba Kasap, Wanepap (x 2), Mapumanda, Monogam (x 2), Londol, Sikiro, Sari, Pumakos (x 2), Keas, Sangurap, and Leprapos.

This is to prepare for reintegration.

5. Reintegration: Once the clan and family are willing to accept them back, the survivors are brought back to their village under the security of disciplinary forces. A preventive order is issued to the leaders and members of the community not to accuse or torture the survivor again.
6. We continue to assist with basic food items and houseware and follow up on the progress of their integration for some time.
7. Legal assistance: After rescue, a police report is taken to arrest perpetrators. However, to date not one has been prosecuted and jailed.
8. Police failure to arrest the perpetrator prompted us to develop another strategy towards prevention, where we now target the 'would-be' perpetrators, who are basically drug and alcohol abusers.

Currently, Caritas PNG is faced with the issue of tribal fights, which limits safe travel to many parts of the province. The process of advocacy is as follows:

1. Identify a hot spot place to give advocacy training and have a reliable contact person to do awareness for the training. The preliminary awareness invitation is extended to village leaders, councillors, magistrates, pastors, catechists of all churches and especially individuals involved in drug and alcohol abuse.
2. Once a date is set, the Caritas Enga team is assembled, including a health worker to talk about the causes of death, a police officer to talk about community police and related issues of law and, whenever possible, Auxiliary Bishop Justin Soongee to talk on the dignity and sacredness of human life. Other members of the team talk on the new laws on sorcery and on the effects of tribal fights, and drug and alcohol abuse.
3. After the training, Caritas forms and mobilises a team in the area to do awareness and respond to any SARV cases.
4. Drug addicts and aimless youth are the perpetrators in almost every SARV case, so Caritas tries to focus on them and to do follow-up contacts and further training. A good church leader is appointed to oversee the group and they are assisted with an Income Generating Project to keep them occupied. The impact of the awareness can be judged by seeing a reduction or elimination of SARV cases in the area and in the community taking ownership of continuing the awareness program.



Figure 28: Individuals at a workshop against sorcery accusation violence at Sangurap in Wabag, Enga Province, circa 2018. (Photo: Philip Gibbs).

## Individuals

Mr Solo Yokopoyao conducts awareness and supports SARV survivors at Immanuel Lutheran Hospital at Mambisanda near Wapenamanda in Enga Province. He coordinates with the Highlands Human Rights Defenders Network (Mary Kini) and is supported by the PNG Tribal Foundation and Anton Lutz. Dickson Tanda has worked with Caritas PNG and now works as a Human Rights Defender in the Human Rights Defenders Network.

## What is promising in Enga province?

In reality, we do not really know how many cases police and others actually intervene in, and it is hard to say what 'working well' means in relation to responding to SARV. However, the following outcomes can be seen as some of the positive ways forward for responding to SARV that the workshop and research have revealed.

### Referral pathways

Rescue is happening in some cases. It is being conducted by police and/or FBOs such as Caritas. Upon rescue, survivors are getting such help as hospitalisation (especially at Yampu Hospital), safe houses (Sari and Sikiro) and, in several cases, reintegration. These pathways sometimes function and, at other times, do not.

### Preventative Order (PO) and Interim Preventative order (IPO)

POs and IPOs are made by the District Court. It has been found that punitive police action can exacerbate conflicts, so magistrates have turned to less forceful means for achieving peace, such as through using preventive orders and mediation or arbitration.<sup>104</sup>

### Training of Village Court magistrates and members of the Joint Court Sitting (OMS)

A recent Issues Paper from the PNG National Research Institute recommends developing training materials and conducting regular training workshops for Village Court officials to educate them on their roles and responsibilities concerning SARV and to ensure they are clear as to the legal framework.<sup>105</sup>

### Courts are imposing heavy fines on defamation for being called a sanguma

Village Courts can impose fines with a limit of K1,000.00. However, in some cases the court will in addition demand payment of pigs in compensation, which can act as a deterrent. On 28 August 2024, the OMS in Kandep imposed a fine of K1,000.00 and 17 pigs on a defendant who had accused the complainant of being a sorcerer who had removed the life of his son.

### Magistrates are asking for 'evidence'

Often the only evidence available is that someone has suffered misfortune or died and there is little evidence to support a claim of sorcery. However, magistrates have to confront the use of torture where confessions are made under duress and, in the common mind, the fact that a sick person has recovered is claimed as evidence that the torture was justified.<sup>106</sup> By asking for evidence, magistrates help make it clear that the accusations are nothing more than baseless allegations.

<sup>104</sup> Nitze Pupu and Polly Wiessner, *The challenges of Village Courts and Operation Mekim Save among the Enga of Papua New Guinea today: A view from the inside*, (Department of Pacific Affairs 2018/1, 2018), <https://openresearch-repository.anu.edu.au/items/dd4ffb5-0d00-4fa8-9bdd-002d6e91881c>.

<sup>105</sup> William Kipongi and Miranda Forsyth, *Addressing sorcery accusation-related violence in the Village Court system of Papua New Guinea*, PNG NRI Issues Paper no. 47, (PNGNRI, 2024).

<sup>106</sup> Gibbs, et al. 'Sorcery accusation-related violence in Enga Province'.

## Awareness and insight

Caritas is conducting training, with particular attention being paid to potential perpetrators, promoting an Integral Human Development (*gutpela sindaun*) approach to awareness.

Some victims have been rescued and later accepted back into their community. At times, victims are able to summon the strength to face the challenge of believing in their own innocence, despite communal rumours to the contrary.

After realising it is a false belief, some families and communities have apologised to the victims and accepted them back.

The Catholic Church is also using excommunication and the threat of excommunication to address cases of SARV, see text box below.

### SARV at Kaiap

In October 2018, Health Extension officer Leo Aean, died suddenly at a small trade store near his home in Kaiap in the hills behind Wabag town. Leo was well known as the deputy president of the Enga Public Employees Association. His neighbour Bepi had been accused several years before in a previous sorcery accusation case and had lost her hand defending herself from her machete-wielding accusers.

Hearing about Leo's death and realising that she would be a suspect, Bepi did not remain to mourn, but fled. People searched, found her, and brought her back to Kaiap. In a public spectacle, police and defence force personnel sought to rescue her, but were prevented by trees cut and blocking the road. Bepi was tortured and died, and her body disposed of.

The Kaiap community is a Catholic community, and the Catholic Bishop then excommunicated the entire community, saying, 'If you support sanguma and torture, then we don't need you in the church'. To be received back, they would have to participate in an awareness training program from Caritas, compensate Bepi's family, and make a public declaration condemning any form of sorcery belief and associated violence.

Aware that the deceased was related as the daughter of one of their aunts (*wanetange*), the community was prepared to 'remove her blood' by compensating the deceased's family with K27,000 and many pigs. Since then, the community has been received back into the church, and there have been no further sorcery accusations in the Kaiap community.

## What is not working well?

It is important to also acknowledge that there remain challenges that create risk factors for those responding to SARV. The following list details some of these challenges:

- a. Sometimes healthcare workers and medical officers appear to be afraid to attend to the accused victim.
- b. Police often do not have access to a vehicle with adequate fuel, or are not available for rescue.
- c. Police feel they are working in isolation and without proper procedures. They often do not know the people in communities and, as a result, are not trusted.

- d. Torture often occurs at night, when police and defence force are at home, off duty.
- e. There are out of court settlements for compensation and police are not taking cases to court.
- f. There is no witness protection and witnesses are not coming forward. Even if testimonies are confidential, people still spread rumours about who testified.
- g. Fees charged for legal services (and bribery to testify) often put justice beyond the reach of victims.
- h. The safe house in Pina parish was destroyed in tribal fighting.
- i. Children of victims frequently have difficulty paying for and being accepted at school.
- j. Victims are left with a sense of shame, stigma and unresolved anger. As time goes on, some victims come to take on the identity they are being accused of ('become their own worst enemy') and may feel unable to improve their quality of life, or undeserving.
- k. There is little trauma counselling available for victims.
- l. There are no official safe houses in the province. The Safety in Sari, Sikiro and Yampuare all faith-based places where there are Catholic Religious Sisters.
- m. Survivors may be accepted back, but with another death in the community, they are all too often the first to be suspected and accused again.

## Promising practices

The following table summarises the promising actions being taken to respond to SARV in Enga Province.

**Table 12: Summary of promising practices in Enga Province**

Summary	Description
Actions to stop people believing in sorcery	National Broadcasting Corporation (NBC) with health programs,
Actions to stop people accusing other people of sorcery	Caritas and Catholic diocese with awareness programs on IHD and beliefs leading to harmful practices.
Actions to stop accusations of sorcery leading to violence	Police with legal awareness program and Village Court training.
After violence, actions to support survivors and also to seek justice.	Training of medical personnel to provide a scientific explanation as alternative to sik bilong ples.

## Greatest needs for future

The five strongest themes that came through about what needs to be done to support the work moving forward are as follows.

**Table 13: Recommended actions to respond to SARV in Enga Province.**

Action needed	Discussion
Create rescue team options.	There is a need for a rescue team with a hotline number and volunteers (including police, defence force, community leaders and Caritas volunteers). Also needed is transport with fuel.
Make pathway referrals effective.	Strengthen the referral pathways: hospital – safe house; police; legal assistance; repatriation; and reintegration. This must include free services, a trauma counsellor and safe accommodation.
Educate people on the law.	Provide education on law, SARV Act 299A, Glasman Act, the roles and functions of the Village Court.
Distinguish the SARV NAP from GBV.	The SARV NAP needs to be distinguished from GBV at the provincial level, so as to be able to mobilise sufficient resources and attention.
Provide strong leadership.	Leadership by government departments is needed, such as via the Department of Community Development. Also, strong leadership is needed from individual champions, like Bishop Justin.

## Conclusion

Traditionally in Enga, illness and death were attributed to ghostly malice, not sorcery. However, a new form of response to misfortune and death has been reported in Enga since around 2010. New harmful practices have developed, accompanying a narrative telling of sorcery powers existing in some people, mostly women, who could maliciously take and eat a person's heart. Many women have been accused and tortured in an attempt to have them reverse the alleged sorcery so that the affected person can recover their health or come back to life. In the last 14 years, SARV has brought fear, pain and misery to many people.

There have been many instances of misfortune and death in Enga that have not resulted in SARV. We can learn from the successes where the real causes misfortune and death have been effectively explained and build upon these to continue developing proactive means to eliminate violent harmful practices. This Enga case study, along with the other six case studies for each of the PNG Highlands provinces, together offer information and resources from which those responding to SARV can continue to develop an evidence-based approach to preventing violence. This can help bring about communities where people, young and old, united against SARV, can find gutpela sindaun (peace and well-being) and integral human development, or what Enga people might call auu pyoo kitenge (well-being).

# Part 3:

## Conclusion

There can be no doubt that the prevalence of SARV across the PNG Highlands amounts to a crisis situation. The brutal treatment of people accused of various forms of sorcery is having a devastating impact on many communities, and there is a strong tendency for these accusations to target the most vulnerable. It is also clear that, while there are extraordinary and brave people and organisations who do vital work with extremely limited resources to address these issues, the problem is overwhelming. Far more support and collaboration need to be given to this work. Based on an overview of interview data, literature reviews, historical information and current events presented in this report, several conclusions can be drawn and these are outlined below.

### **SARV is different but also the same across the PNG Highlands**

The cultural and historical context of SARV varies dramatically across different parts of the Highlands, as do the many different forms of sorcery belief. In terms of typology, a broad distinction can be made between sorcery as a form of magic involving objects and spells, etc., and sorcery or witchcraft that is akin to a dark power that is located within the accused sorcerer. These distinctions can blur and overlap, but they are described in much of the anthropological literature in various ways. For example, posin sorcery in parts of the Eastern Highlands utilises objects such as hair samples in performative rituals and is practised by men. For other communities, women are accused of having innate powers to cause harm. Differences in how sorcery is perceived and understood to be performed are as varied as the languages and cultures of PNG itself.

Across the different cultural settings, many commonalities emerge. The people who are the most likely to be accused are usually the most vulnerable in the community. Although there are places where people can be accused and attacked because they have been successful in business or in other ways, the most common victims are those who are the most vulnerable, and this is especially true when it comes to the use of torture and displacement.

SARV is highly gendered wherever it occurs, with men or women being primarily the targets in different geographical areas. The use of hot metal objects to burn genitals is regularly reported, and is more commonly done to women, although not exclusively. An important distinction can be made between areas that have deep traditions of sorcery and witchcraft belief, and areas where this belief is far more recent, such as in Enga Province. There are some parts of PNG where sorcery belief does

not result in violence at all, but in areas where it has more recently emerged, the violence is extreme.

## **SARV has changed and continues to change**

SARV has evolved and changed dramatically over time and profound changes are evident in every location where SARV occurs. It is clear that SARV is closely associated with societal changes, such as increasing population, land use pressures, uneven development and distribution of wealth, and the spread of disease. In other words, SARV is closely associated with poverty. An additional factor is the spread and development of different Christian groups, some of which seem to suggest in their preaching that sorcery is true and confirmed by the teachings of the Bible. The rise of SARV is also associated with corruption and the weakness of state institutions, especially in the law and justice system.

There is clear evidence that PNG's population has increased dramatically over recent decades, as has wealth inequality and the decline in state services such as education, health, and law and order. If it is established that SARV is associated with these indicators, then it follows that SARV has become objectively worse. Although it is certainly true that violence and killing associated with sorcery belief is not something new, it does seem clear that there has been a general increase in the geographical spread of SARV, as well as the severity of the violence associated with SARV.

## **Triggers of sorcery accusation**

Despite the important cultural differences in sorcery belief, ideas about what constitutes evidence for a sorcery act are very similar across all regions. The most common trigger for a sorcery accusation is the death of someone. This is very often the death of a baby or young child, or else an important figure in the community such as a prominent businessman, but it can be anyone. The cause of death is often not obvious, such as a disease, but this is not always the case, and any kind of accidental death can result in an accusation of sorcery. It is common for a sorcery accusation to be made during or following the haus krai, where someone has been perceived to be acting strangely, or sometimes even without any particular behaviour being evidenced on behalf of the victim. Fundamentally, a general reluctance to accept naturalistic causes of death is a major driver behind sorcery accusations. Other causes of sorcery accusation can be more subtle and involve various forms of jealousy and rivalry, and can even build upon unresolved issues passed down through generations. Accumulation of wealth can result in a sorcery accusation, as can disputes over land or between co-wives. In these cases, sorcery accusation can be used as a weapon against a rival. An important feature of the data is that sorcery is not simply a form of belief but is attached to other societal tensions. Sorcery accusation often has a utilitarian component and can be deployed as a means to some end. For these reasons, the causes of SARV go far beyond merely a lack of education but are closely related to the many kinds of grievances that exist in society. Fundamentally, SARV is a development issue.

## **Responses to SARV**

Despite the marked cultural and historical differences between the many locations where SARV occurs, there are important commonalities in the efforts being undertaken both to protect those accused and to combat sorcery belief itself. The first and most urgent of these is the use of safe houses. In any crisis situation, the first priority is to save lives, and the establishment of secure places of refuge is occurring in all Highlands provinces. These facilities are desperately needed and greatly desired by those accused.

Another common feature is awareness efforts to promote understanding of the laws around SARV, including the Glassman Act 2022. Also important is the involvement of police in enforcing these laws and providing a deterrence effect to would-be perpetrators. A striking picture to emerge is how fast things can change when perpetrators have reason to fear the law. A combination of legal awareness so that people know their rights, and the active involvement of both police and the judicial system,

can lead to dramatic reductions in SARV cases within a community. The PNG state has a vital role to play here. The emergence of community by-laws is also a common feature that is having a positive impact. The emergence of such laws is partly in response to an absence of state intervention but also reflects the importance of culturally informed responses at the local level.

A wide variety of individuals and organisations are responding to the SARV problem. These include the emergence of local leaders who take it upon themselves to identify or construct safe houses or engage in awareness campaigns. Similarly of vital importance are established organisations such as Femili PNG, the churches, The Voice Inc, theatre groups, as well as the police and no doubt many others out there not captured by this report. Many organisations find that awareness based on Christian and cultural values can make considerable headway. What is clear is that SARV requires a multi-pronged approach from many different organisations. Also important is the involvement of grassroots actors who know and understand local context and language. SARV is a many-headed problem that demands a complex, coordinated response from multiple directions.

In conclusion, SARV is not an intractable problem caused by immovable cultural traditions. The many cultures of sorcery and witchcraft have never been static, and the historical record tells us that SARV has never been fixed in place. There are solutions to this urgent problem, and the vital and effective work being carried out by many actors in communities impacted by SARV is testament to that. A great deal can be done to support this work, if the will and the coordination are there.

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