



# Why SARV Matters for PNG Churches

## **Policy Brief**



**PNGAus Partnership**

# WHY SARV MATTERS FOR PNG CHURCHES



## Executive Summary

- SARV destroys communities and causes immense harm: belief in sorcery or witchcraft is deeply entrenched and widely held in different forms across Papua New Guinea, not only in remote and rural areas. It is a real problem. The scale of the problem is significant and is getting worse.
- Many Churches are doing good work in this area but there needs to be greater solidarity among Churches on SARV: MI calls for all Churches to work together on this issue. Churches have an ethical and moral responsibility to tackle SARV – there is no space for ambiguity on SARV.
- The Churches are like a ‘sleeping giant’: they have so much potential as an agent for positive change. This potential has not yet been fully realized.
- SARV is about the protection of life, especially vulnerable groups: it causes immense harm and affects us all. Children and people with disabilities are being accused: there is intergenerational trauma, as many children of victims are being accused.
- MI calls on the Government to improve basic services and stand up for the voiceless: there is a problem with implementation and money is not flowing down to local communities. The Government must provide more financial support and leadership on this issue.
- Education and awareness activities on the prevention of SARV should be on the national curriculum: there is currently nothing on this in the national curriculum. Knowledge is passed down from generation to generation and it is important to start educating our children on the prevention of SARV.
- Protection of human rights: PNG is a communal society and needs to live in harmony. All churches are against torturing, killing and violence.

SARV is a challenge and remains a major problem in Papua New Guinea, despite ongoing efforts to address SARV.

SARV is about the protection of life, especially vulnerable groups: it causes immense harm and affects all of us.

In many cases, Churches are first responders to SARV and have an important role in the community. Many churches are doing a lot of good work on SARV, including providing safe houses, awareness and counselling but there needs to be greater solidarity among Churches and no ambiguity on the seriousness of SARV. MI calls for all Churches to work together on this issue.

SARV is one of the most prevalent issues in PNG that is destroying communities. Churches simply cannot accept violence as a way of resolving conflict. It is not Christian; it is also neither a cultural nor a traditional practice. There are other more peaceful means of resolving conflict. It is not who we want to be as a nation. The Church should be more prophetic in the protection of human life.

There are four main sections to this briefing (i) Why SARV Matters. (ii) The Churches' role. (iii) Calls on government. And also (iv) What MI is planning.

## SARV is a serious challenge, causing immense harm to its victims.

SARV is a serious challenge, causing immense harm to its victims. The scale of the problem is significant and increasing.

One study found that an average of almost 400 people are accused of sorcery each year. A third of these cases led to physical violence or property damage. Among those accused of sorcery, 65 were killed, 86 suffered

## Box 1: Good work by the Churches on SARV

There is lots of good work done by the Churches on SARV:

**Catholic:** There are 9 safe houses that are provided by the Catholic Church in Bougainville, Madang, Wewak, Vanimo, Port Moresby and East New Britain Provinces. Health centres and counselling centres are also provided.

**Seventh-Day Adventist:** The Seventh-Day Adventist Church under the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) provide two safe houses for victims of SARV in Morobe and Port Moresby. Health services are also provided.

**Baptist Union:** Hospital with clinics in East Sepik Province, Enga Province and Western Highlands Province. Work is underway for a Safe House Referral Centre in Western Highlands Province. The Baptist Union is working closely and partnering with Government Health- FSC, Police- Family and Sexual Violence Unit (FSVU) in each province and other angle partners like NGOs and CSOs and other Safe Houses.

**Evangelical Church of PNG:** A safe house that is provided by the ECPNG in Hela Province for the victims of GBV and SARV.

**Foursquare:** One safe house in Eastern Highlands Province.

**United Church:** Run several safe houses and awareness activities.

**Salvation Army:** Run safe houses, health centres and provide counselling.

permanent injury and 141 experienced serious assault and harm, such as burning, cutting, tying or being forced into water.<sup>1</sup>

It has been observed that the official data is only the 'tip of the iceberg' and the real number of cases presenting at health services may be much higher.

## SARV affects all sectors in society.

SARV affects all sectors in society and has impacted the lives of people.

It is not just the direct victims that are affected. There is intergenerational trauma and a deep effect on children. Many children in PNG witness extreme acts of violence against those accused of using sorcery and, for some of them, it is their own parents they watch being tortured or beheaded.

But also, children are today being accused of being sorcerers. Reports from academic experts suggest this appears to be a relatively new trend, although this is not

certain, as the data on SARV is far from comprehensive (Forysth, 2021).<sup>2</sup>

Often, the child has parents/relatives who have themselves been accused.

SARV causes immense harm both to victims and families – much more needs to be done to stop accusations against children. Church leaders and those providing pastoral care, educators and health workers can play a primary, active role in engaging, educating and leading populations away from sorcery as an explanation for illness, death and misfortune (Forysth, 2021).<sup>3</sup>

## What role can churches play?

Churches have a strong influence over the community and play an important role in prevention. As we can see in Box 1, the Churches are providing safe houses, health services, counselling and awareness. The Catholic Church, in particular, have 9 safe houses in Bougainville, Madang, Wewak, Vanimo, Port Moresby and East New Britain Provinces

<sup>1</sup> Inquiry into Gender Equality Policies & Institutions, Gender Based Violence and Sorcery Accusation Related Violence, Report to Parliament No.1

<sup>2</sup> Children as victims of sorcery accusation related violence in PNG - Devpolicy Blog from the Development Policy Centre

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

The Churches would like to be recognized as a place of love, peace, hope and shelter to which the accused can turn. However, there needs to be greater solidarity among Churches – MI calls for all the Churches to work together on this issue.

The Churches are a ‘sleeping giant’ when it comes to dealing with SARV. The Churches have great but as yet unrealized power in preventing SARV. The Churches are powerful in the way they can influence the community in a positive way but have not yet shown the full extent of their power to influence when tackling SARV.

Churches play an important role as a moral authority in the country. Ambiguity by the Churches on SARV is not appropriate.

## SARV victims and families have become refugees in their own country and their own community.

There are significant numbers of SARV victims that are having to migrate from their own community but are still stigmatized and face discrimination. SARV victims and their families have become refugees in their own country.

In the Melanesian Institute’s publication on *Sorcery, Witchcraft and Christianity in Melanesia*, an article from Jack Urame (*Media reports and public opinion on sorcery and witchcraft in PNG*) states that people who migrated from their place to settlements in towns and cities were not only those who were affected by the lack of basic infrastructure in remote areas, but also those in who were affected by sorcery and witchcraft related accusations. The accused sorcerers and witches desert their villages out of fear of being attacked. Since towns and cities are seen as neutral grounds where they can escape and live without fear, they migrate to settlements. (Urame 2008)

However, the migration to urban areas does not reduce the fear and belief in sorcery and witchcraft and does not seem to minimize the accusations and murders either.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Urame 2008 “Media reports and public opinion on sorcery and witchcraft in Papua New Guinea”

## Churches call on the Government to improve basic services.

For real prevention and behaviour change to take place in our country, the National Government must lead and take responsibility for investing in and inspiring the change needed. They have failed to take sufficient leadership so far, not least in not providing adequate funding for important areas identified by the SNAP.

There are a range of issues with current crisis response, recovery and reintegration services across the country, including:

- **education services**
- **under-staffed health services**
- **severe lack of safe shelter** for fleeing survivors and their children. At a minimum, every province should have at least one safe house per district.
- **a lack of counsellors** for both survivors and perpetrators
- **a lack of well-trained police personnel** to investigate and compile cases for prosecution. Sometimes there is no fuel for police to respond – a lack of resources.
- **village court officials need resources, training and education.** Lack of funding for community policing, peace mediators and village court magistrates (some village court officials are not even paid).
- **lack of basic services**, such as education and health, for the rural areas.
- **there needs to be more awareness of the sorcery laws.**

It is important for the Government to invest in prevention and education activities to address the root causes of the increasingly violent culture of impunity that has become so common across the country.

## Conclusion: SARV matters for PNG Churches

- **SARV is about the protection of life.** It causes immense harm and affects the whole community.
- **SARV is a serious challenge:** Belief in sorcery or witchcraft is deeply entrenched and widely held in different forms across Papua New Guinea,

not only in remote and/or rural areas. Violence related to accusations of sorcery or witchcraft is a threat to life and a serious problem.

- **Many Churches are doing good work in this area but there needs to be greater solidarity among Churches:** MI calls for all the Churches to work together on this issue. The churches need a united voice on SARV.
- **MI's research will aim to mobilise the churches to collective, critical self-assessment on protecting life** – learning the best practices to allow a united approach.
- **Churches call on the Government to improve basic services.**
- **The Churches are like a 'sleeping giant':** they have so much potential as an agent for positive change. It is time for the 'sleeping giant' to wake and realise the untapped potential to prevent SARV. There is no place for ambiguity on SARV among the Churches.

## MI research and advocacy on SARV

MI will conduct research and advocacy activities which support the goal of mobilizing the churches on SARV. MI's research will aim to mobilize the churches to collective, critical self-assessment on protecting life.

MI is carrying out research on SARV in Enga and Simbu. Qualitative research methods (in-depth interviews, focus group discussions and ethnographic episodes) and secondary data from existing documents will be the key research methods used in this project.

MI will convene a large-scale forum in mid-2024 to present the research findings to various stakeholders for critiquing, dialoguing, and recommendations for policy change, advocacy, collaboration and networking.

The research will help Churches to understand and learn the best approach to incidents of SARV.