

Next Generation Research Podcast

Episode 2: Love shouldn't hurt: What indigenous communities can tell us about preventing domestic violence

GILES: Did you know that worldwide, nearly one in three women have been subjected to physical and or sexual violence by an intimate partner or non-partner? How can we improve this terrifying statistic for future generations to come?

Jenevieve: People had looked at the whole world, but they hadn't looked at the worst case scenarios.

Jenevieve: And so you're interested in seeing what's happening in the worst case scenario, and why do some countries have such a high rate of violence?

GILES: Welcome to Next Generation Research, where we bring you to the heart of the most important and exciting research happening at the moment. I'm Professor Giles Yeo, a scientist at the University of Cambridge, and in each episode I have the pleasure of introducing you to one of the best researchers working in the UK right now.

GILES: All of them are part of the Future Leaders Fellowship. They're all working to solve problems and improve our lives as we know them. This episode is about research on how to prevent violence against women around the world. Dr. Jenevieve Mannell is an associate professor at University College London, where she researches violence against women from a global health perspective.

GILES: Her research is aimed at understanding the impacts that violence has on women's physical and mental health. Taking into account the reality of how destructive violence is to the entire wellbeing of someone. A 2021 report from the World Health Organization or W H O shows countries

are recognizing the broad need for action to address violence against women and girls.

GILES: 81% of countries now have national action plans in place, which aim to prevent violence against women. However, less than half have guidelines that help ensure health workers provide appropriate emotional, as well as practical care for those affected. Genevieve's research aims to create evidence-based prevention strategies.

GILES: She works in countries around the world focusing on the places with the highest rates of violence against women. She's working with two specific case studies, one in the Peruvian Andes and the other in Samoa, where she's currently based. She works with the affected communities to understand what helps them in the prevention of violence against women.

GILES: This work, in turn, may help inform the all important evidence-based guidelines, which go on to become policies and even law in countries around the world.

Jenevieve: I've always been fascinated by the really, really difficult questions around humanity and human life and social life and societies, and from a very young age, I was very interested in just why does violence happen? I know it's a weird question to be interested in as like a teenager, but I really was like it.

Jenevieve: I think it was partly because I grew up in a household where there was literally no violence. There was no sort of raised voices in our household, nothing. I really wanted to understand even how somebody could perpetuate violence against somebody else. We don't really fully understand sort of the impacts of violence and how it can shape our lives, but also just why it actually sort of fundamentally happens as a human condition. And I wanted to explore the whole idea of gender and gender inequalities and how that relates to violence against women, because it

certainly does. And so I did a, a PhD in, in gender studies and have continued that trajectory really into, into now studying it for the last, it's been over 10 years now, of studying violence against women research.

Jenevieve: And so research has also gotten to the point where, It can be a little bit too academic ivory tower. And so now I've gotten the chance through the FLF to come to Samoa and again, be really, really attached to the changes that I wanna create in the world. And so that's just, you know, that's phenomenal. That's more than I could ask for.

Jenevieve: In practical terms. My research is really about talking to women who have experienced violence against women, but not just their experiences of violence. Also, how they've come out of those experiences. What the potential is for hope in their lives and ideas around resilience and just happiness, right?

Jenevieve: What do they want to see? So I think it is about kind of the negative aspects of violence and violence experience, but it's also about understanding how people cope, how they transform their lives into something more positive so that we can then in turn develop interventions that are focused on those positive aspects and really help people transform their lives as well as addressing.

Jenevieve: The underlying reasons for the violence in the first place, which often has nothing to do with the individual at all. So there's a broader piece of work around that aspect of like, what are the determinants of violence? What causes violence in the world? What causes violence to be used against women? And so that's when you start looking at things like gender inequalities.

Jenevieve: Histories of colonialism, which I'm really interested in, experiences of climate change and how those actually can produce higher levels of violence against women within countries. So thinking about those

structural determinants. So the history of this type of research is that often it was taken up by feminist activists.

Jenevieve: Right? So throughout the sixties and seventies and eighties, there was a number of feminist activists who said, you know what? We need to listen to women's stories of violence. These are very real stories. They are happening, and we need to use this as a framework for stopping these violence from happening in the first place.

Jenevieve: So what has happened more recently is that since really the late nineties, early two thousands, it's been taken on as a global health issue, and epidemiologists have gotten hold of this issue and sort of said, Well, let's try to understand the prevalence of violence around the world so that we can look at differences between countries and regions and really understand it, how to tackle it at a sort of a macro or global level.

GILES: It's so important to have a combination of quantitative, meaning putting a number on something and qualitative data coming from interviews, for example. The large scale surveys funded by organizations such as the W.H.O are crucial in amassing enough data to show the scale of the problem and map it accurately around the world.

Jenevieve: I think one of the interesting things about those surveys is that they don't ask people about, you know, have you ever experienced violence? Because in a sense, violence means something completely different to different people around the world. What violence is. They ask really, really specific target questions around, has your husband ever slapped you?

Jenevieve: Has he ever kicked you? These types of things, so action oriented specific acts that actually get pretty good evidence around comparable data, around violence experiences. So there's a lot of development in the fields around methodology of trying to get the highest

number of disclosures possible, so we actually get closer to the actual numbers.

Jenevieve: Because violence is one of those things that if people don't tell you what's happening, you'll never know, right? So it's really difficult to get any sort of accuracy around data. Often having an interview with somebody who is actively listening and nodding and reassures you about the violence that you're experiencing, that it's not your fault, can be a really reaffirming situation for people who have never been able to disclose the violence they've experienced to another individual because of high levels of stigma and discrimination and, Non-acceptance. So it can actually be a good positive thing. But also increasingly we've sort of been playing with the idea of having people self complete surveys as a means of. Increasing violence disclosure. So sometimes it's actually difficult to tell somebody sat in front of you that you're experiencing violence, but that it might be easier to do it on a tablet.

Jenevieve: The data that we've mostly looked around has been really focused around violence from an intimate partner, which is often called domestic violence, but domestic violence is also more inclusive and can include other parts of violence like violence from mother-in-laws or siblings or whatever it might be.

Jenevieve: So it's really thinking about honing in on intimate partner violence as a measure. So we started off the project by doing really a systematic review of looking at that data. But looking at the 25% of countries that sort of sit at the top of prevalence rates that have the very highest prevalences, and we looked at that as a specific group of countries, which hadn't really been done before.

Jenevieve: People had looked at the whole world, but they hadn't looked at the worst case scenarios. And so you're interested in seeing what's

happening in the worst case scenario, and why do some countries have such a high rate of violence? This has been the question that's sort of perplexed me for most of my career.

Jenevieve: What we found is that obviously it has to do with a lot of sort of structural things. So if you have a country that is at war and there's an active conflict, that's going to push up your rates of domestic violence as well. I think partly because people are exposed to violence and so they start to rationalize violence as just something normal that happens in your life, and that when it's combined with a country where women are not seen as valuable as men in society, the violence gets played out against women as well, right? So they become the scapegoats in many ways for the violence that's being experienced elsewhere and the trauma and the everything else that people are going through. That was really interesting to see the ways in which other forms of violence can lead to violence against women in the home.

Jenevieve: And we started to be really interested in what else sort of perpetuates that and sort of looking at histories of colonialism. So histories of colonialism were violent in and of themselves, and they've left in many ways a legacy of violence in many countries because of the racial inequalities that they've left in their wake.

Jenevieve: A really good example of these high prevalence contexts is really Afghanistan. We can see all kinds of things happening with Afghanistan that teach us more about violence around the world. Certainly the role of gender inequalities and the fact that women are, are not seen as particularly valuable in Afghanistan society, or they're not afforded the same rights as men, which is absolutely the case.

Jenevieve: And also sort of this history of, of conflict and so, you know, we often sort of think of Afghanistan as just the most recent conflict, but

actually they've experienced conflict for the last 40 years. They've sort of been the center of proxy wars for the last 40 years and that's had huge, huge implications.

Jenevieve: On people's mental health, on their, the sense of community within the country, which has been completely devastated. And so when all of that is dismantled and you don't have the social networks in place, you don't have the social systems in place because today's safe houses aren't even allowed, and NGOs have been told that they can only hire men and they're not even allowed to hire women to be their main employees.

Jenevieve: That just isn't the most recent sort of changes that have happened within Afghanistan. Then you can see how rates of violence against women completely explode and you have nowhere for those women to go. But then it all kind of stems from this, this history of colonialism, conflict and poor mental health.

GILES: The core of Jenevieve's research is about interacting with people and doing that in often extremely challenging situations. I don't know if enough of us, including myself, who spends all the time in the lab, appreciates the need for researchers like that.

Jenevieve: So much of global health research I think focuses on relationships and it's all about sort of relationship building. And if you don't have a relationship with a community or an organization that's working in the country where you want to work, there's no project. The Pacific is the region in the world that has really the highest rates of violence against women. And you know what? We don't really know why, we have all kinds of ideas about it, but the Pacific is really interesting cuz it doesn't check any of the boxes that I was talking about earlier around, you know, armed conflict. There's not really high levels of conflict in the Pacific. You don't

have mass destabilization because of war or, or some of the other sort of predictors we know of, of violence against women.

Jenevieve: And so it's a mystery and I, as I said, love challenges and big questions and the Pacific is one of those really, really big questions for me.

GILES: There's only so much you can do from the other side of the planet in this sort of field. And in becoming a future leaders fellow Genevieve was given the opportunity to choose where she wanted to conduct her research.

GILES: Now she's in situ. She's able to build important relationships face-to-face in Samoa.

Jenevieve: I really didn't know very much about Samoa before I came here. I think we're so far away from the Pacific in the UK, like literally on the opposite side of the planet that it's just feels very distant. I think I was really lucky. I sort of managed to get in with a really excellent organization that's called Samoa Victim Support Group, and they helped me put the proposal together in the first place.

Jenevieve: Then when we came to Samoa, my entire family came with me because I knew that I wanted to go for a long period of time and really I wasn't going to leave my kids back in the UK who were still quite young. I remember flying and so you fly across this vast ocean for hours and hours. You see nothing but water, and then the landscape changes slightly and it becomes completely turquoise.

Jenevieve: And you see this sort of tropical island in the background, and you come into Samoa and it is a very small island and the culture, I think, is so radically different that everything is different. So the houses are open, you don't really have walls to houses. They tend to just build, be built with sort of pillars and a thatched roof on top.

Jenevieve: And now today people do have privacy through back rooms that, but the main house is always open to the elements.

Jenevieve: So Samoa is definitely considered a high prevalence setting. Violence is widely reported in the news. It's talked about almost on a daily basis, and I think one of the interesting things that I found in sort of reading these stories is that they're always looking for the cause. So it's a little bit of like, well, the couple was drinking and so therefore that's the reason for the violence.

Jenevieve: They tried to find ways of justifying it. Maybe the wife was speaking up out of turn, and so they tend to try to put these things into the newspaper itself, whereas I would say, the individual who's experiencing the violence is very rarely to blame, if ever, and it's often the situation is much bigger than just an individual couple fighting that there's much more structural aspects that are bringing out the violence.

Jenevieve: And to think of a setting like Samoa and the Pacific is high prevalence even sort of gets us to focus on that even more so. So why does this country have such high rates of violence? 39% of women have experienced violence in their lifetime will experience violence. That's sort of average across the entire country.

Jenevieve: But then if you look at the prevalence rates in the last year, it's over 30%. So if you can just think of what that means, one third of women almost have actually experienced it in the last year, which is extremely high, just thinking everybody around you is experiencing violence. So that's what our challenge has been and then how we've dealt with it really because of the very specific cultural and historical aspects of Samoa, is to look at how can we work with communities in order to develop.

Jenevieve: An intervention that they themselves will see in this sustainable. And so this is where I'm working with the Samoa Victim Support Group.

Pepe: Samoa Victims Support Group is a non-government organization set up in Samoa in 2005 with a vision to ensure that victims of crimes and those in need are well supported to be safe and in control of restoring their lives. My name is Pepa Tevaga, acquired the high chief title of _in my village here in _, but I prefer to be called Pepe.

Pepe: Currently working for Samoa victim support group, going on to, I think 14 years now. Carrying the role of communications and media manager, so there's no government shelter. SVSG runs the only shelter for survivors, and we have seen that part of our work is a rehabilitating program for the children, for the women. Svs G'S work has branched out to include a lot of community work because we need to work with these families because the victims, they have to go back to the families. They will not be with victim support forever. 10 years ago there was not a lot of talk or a lot of noise made about violence.

Pepe: There was violence, but it was kept quiet. Samoa being a very small place basically, you know, everybody else. So there was a lot of pride if you tell on this one. You know, what will happen to my family, what will happen to my village

Pepe: in 2010, victim support rollout, its first project in the community. It was a campaign against rape and indecent acts. It was a very bold campaign, and it was a nationwide campaign. And through funding from the government, we went out there because at that time we saw an increasing number of sexual abuse of young girls.

Pepe: At first, we hesitated because sex is a very taboo topic here in Samoa. We are a close knit community. Even parents cannot talk to their children about sex. You know, very conservative community. We were amazed by how our people really needed awareness on sexual crimes, you know, and the impact of it on the survivors.

Pepe: Because the, the survivor will be traumatized. We were amazed by how village leaders put up their hands and say, we want to be part of the work. And that's where we started recruiting village leaders as what we call now S V S G, village representatives. And those village representatives are made up of village leaders, high chiefs, women in the committee, church ministers.

GILES: In order for Genevieve, along with S V S G to run effective workshops aimed at tackling the violence at a community level, they had to get a lot of people involved.

Jenevieve: What we've done is together, we've reached out to 10 communities that they work with on a regular basis and identified village representatives from each of those communities.

Jenevieve: And so we have one man and one woman village representative from each community, and then Samoa victims support group also came back to me and said, okay, well we need mentors because elders play such a fundamental role that we won't get anything done in communities if we don't have the elders. So then we identified one elder from each.

Jenevieve: Of the 10 communities as well. So we have in effect three representatives that we've then been doing workshops with.

Pepe: We started from young people that identify a need for support. We have grown to become an organization to be reckoned with in Samoa. We have grown in confidence and we have grown in trust of our community through the research study by Dr. Jenevieve, it's a very good timing. Because we want to see, uh, through a research study how far we have come with our communities. How far have our village representatives been doing their advocacy work? It's engaging our people, our local village representatives as local researchers to us it really touches our heart.

Pepe: Because it's locally grown, it's grassroots. Some of these people, they finish school in primary school, but they're village leader with a wealth of experience and knowledge from their own communities, and we want to tap into that. They're so proud because we call them you are local researchers, the media calling them local researchers, and it's giving them that self-esteem to continue to do good for others.

Jenevieve: A question that I often get in conferences or from other academics is really about how do you change behavior, right? Or how do you change this perception of violence being ordinary or accepted and I actually think the question goes about it in the wrong way in some ways. By asking that type of question, we assume that there's something fundamental that needs to change about the ways that people behave or the ways in which they see the world.

Jenevieve: It's about supporting the people who are already saying it within communities. I think one of the, maybe the best examples that we have is we basically took the question to them of what the problem of violence was. What is it about? and what do you think the solutions are? So we used each of our 10 communities and, and this was all led by SVSG.

Jenevieve: And so what they did is they separated into both men and women and said, okay, what are the problems with violence and, and how do you understand this and, and what do you think the solutions are? And then came back together and held a community discussion. And one of the sort of great moments of these community discussions was when women came forward.

Jenevieve: And so a lot, a few women decided to tell their stories of violence. And all of a sudden, this makes the whole thing emotional for the entire community. What happened in one community was that one of the women came forward and said, this is my personal experience of violence,

and she was the chief's wife, and so the chief was there as well and sort of said, actually, yes, no, I am responsible for this and I have done this.

Jenevieve: And that radically changes the conversation within a village if you have that public space in which you are admitting to violence. And so he may have had conversations before and admitted to violence in the past, whether it's to a church minister or to a friend, but giving it a new space and a new forum and a new conversation shifts the entire dynamic within a community and really shifts the types of conversations that are acceptable.

Jenevieve: That's what's transformative about it, I think.

Sometimes you have the discourse of violence prevention and it does tend to be sort of an us and them discourse. And so I just wanted to get out of that discourse a little bit and be like, it's not about us and them at all actually. And it's much more about how do we support them and bringing about the changes they wanna bring about.

Pepe: There's a lot of personal sacrifice in this work. Your heart is with the work. Because you see, you see abused children and women on a daily basis, and no matter how, how you see them every day, you can never get used to it. We cannot change the whole world, but we see the difference of the work that we are doing, and we want to make sure that it continues.

Pepe: The most rewarding part of this work is seeing the survivors returning home. You know, stronger, you know, coming into the office, you know, crying with some of them. They're quiet, they're silent with, with a, with a burden that they're carrying and seeing them walking out of the door, out of the campus, you know, you see a face, a smile, you know, you see a recovered child and recovered woman that is reward.

Pepe: It's a reward for. For going through the, the challenges of this work.

GILES: I mean, everyone listening to this I'm sure agrees that violence against anyone is bad. But what I've learned here however, is that in order to stop violence against women on a societal level, you really need to understand the cultural nuances in each community. Otherwise, there is a real danger of treating the symptoms.

GILES: So the actual violent act without tackling the cause of why the violence is occurring to begin with the cause of violence. Is going to differ from community to community, from country to country, and trying to understand those differences are gonna be crucial in tackling this terrible problem as well.

GILES: Thank you so much to Jenevieve and Pepe. To hear more about Jenevieve's work, follow her on Twitter at @JVmannell, or for more about her project, the Evidence for Violence Prevention in the Extreme. Follow the project's Twitter page at @EveProjectucl. Next time

Andrew: can we take things which are seen as environmental pollutants, so carbon dioxide for instance, and can we turn that into a fuel which we can put into your car?

GILES: This podcast is supported by the Future Leaders Fellows Development Network. You can find out more about the Future Leaders Fellowship by following @FLFDevNetwork on Twitter, and we will link to their website and our episode description. I'm Giles Yeo and you can follow me on Twitter and Instagram @GilesYeo.

GILES: The producer is Hester Cant. The executive producer is Freya Hellier. The sound engineer is Morgan Roberts and thanks to Oliver Mytton and Laura Carter for their additional support.

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