

INTRODUCING the PILON Regional Guidelines for Prosecutors and Witness Support Officers to support vulnerable witnesses through the Prosecution of Sexual and Gender Violence (SGBV) Offences.

One of the greatest developments in the Pacific region is to have a mutual tool for all regional member countries to address the ever-increasing issue of Sexual and Gender Based Violence on vulnerable witnesses. The vulnerable groups in our communities are becoming more and more susceptible to sexual exploitation. This issue is a focus for the Pacific Islands Legal Officer's Network (PILON) as part of its governance arrangements for PILON members.

What is PILON?

The Pacific Islands Law Officers' Network (PILON) is a network of senior law officers from 19 Pacific Island countries, including Australia and New Zealand, who work together to contribute to a safe and secure Pacific by advancing key law and justice issues.

The PILON members are namely, American Samoa, Australia, Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, New Zealand, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Pitcairn Islands, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu, with Nauru being the current chair of PILON.

In its Charter, one of PILON's purposes is to '***Strengthen regional policy and operational cooperation on key law and justice issues***'. To drive this purpose PILON has identified three strategic priorities namely, corruption; cybercrime; and sexual and gender-based violence. In its works to identify ways to improve justice, safety and the rule of law in the Pacific, PILON set up working groups for the three priority areas.

The *Sexual and Gender-Based Violence Working group* is especially focused on responses to SGBV to ensure access to justice for women and girls and to help vulnerable witnesses with appropriate support when giving their evidence in Court.

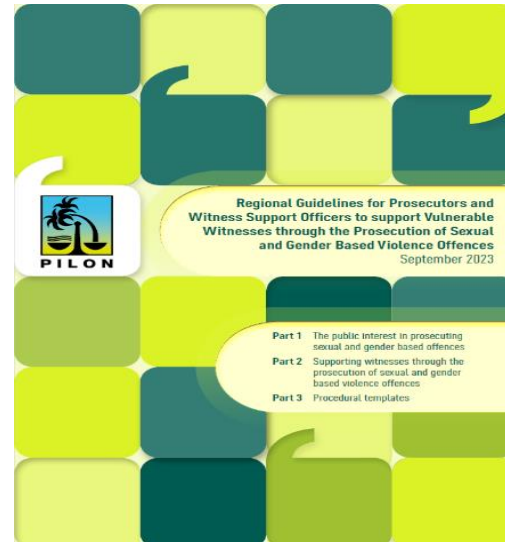
The Regional Guidelines

"The Regional Guidelines are an accessible best practice guide designed to provide direction on how to approach, understand and take measures to reduce trauma to vulnerable witnesses through the prosecution process and ensure the court hears the best evidence. This includes prioritising such cases and providing a uniform standard of support to vulnerable witnesses. The Regional Guidelines also include a number of attachments designed to be tailored to each Pacific jurisdiction and used throughout the prosecution of SGBV offences."

The PILON SGBV Working Group set up a sub-committee, the Advisory Panel to work on the Regional Guidelines. The Advisory Panel comprised of representatives from Nauru, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Papua New Guinea, Federated States of Micronesia, Republic of Marshall Islands, and Cook Islands.

The Advisory Panel launched the Regional Guidelines in November 2023 during the PILON Annual Meeting held at the Civic Centre, in Nauru.

Following the launch, the Advisory Panel hosted a three-day workshop in Nadi, Fiji from 4 to 6 March 2024. This workshop was held for Prosecutors, Police Officers and other relevant stakeholders directly dealing with vulnerable witnesses in SGBV cases.



Participants had come from member countries to be introduced to this tool and to share experiences and ideas of ways to improve the support for vulnerable witnesses of SGBV cases. The goal of the workshop was to introduce the concept of the Guidelines to member countries, to adopt and adapt it into their own jurisdictions. It was a highlight in the workshop that the *Guidelines* have seen positive impact in some member countries where these practices have been implemented. The practices in the guidelines have been proven to reduce delays in prosecution of SGBV cases with vulnerable witnesses, witnesses were supported to provide their best evidence, increase in convictions, cases proceeding to trial swiftly, and public confidence in the justice system.

The next step is for member countries to implement these Guidelines in their own jurisdictions, and the SGBV Advisory Panel will be monitoring and evaluating the adoption of the Guidelines in member countries. The results will spark more collaborative work to identify challenges, share ideas, and assistance to improve on each member efforts to better support vulnerable witnesses of SGBV cases.

Implementing the Regional Guidelines in Nauru

The Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions in Nauru is a member of the PILON SGBV Advisory Panel. In its effort to implement the *Guidelines*, the Director, Ms. Andie Driu, will initiate a taskforce in collaboration with the NPF and WASDA to implement the Regional Guidelines. It is hoped that the taskforce will develop its own strategic plans and include other relevant stakeholders to help in the support for vulnerable witnesses in SGBV cases in the prosecution process.