

Preventing sexual violence

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While there has been more focus on assistance to survivors of sexual violence after they have been attacked, not enough resources or political attention are devoted to preventing these acts of violence from occurring in the first place.

International focus on sexual violence in DRC by donor governments and the media led to the launch of a new UN comprehensive strategy on sexual violence in 2009. The strategy has five components, three of which are directly linked to prevention: combating impunity, security sector reform, and prevention and protection. While donor countries have in the past often been reluctant to fund prevention activities (apart from some impunity-related activities) because of their lack of tangible outcomes, they have pushed for the new strategy and for a focus on prevention and government ownership.

The comprehensive strategy has been incorporated into the government's own Stabilization and Reconstruction Plan in Conflict-Affected Areas of Eastern DRC (STAREC). The sexual violence element of the strategy is limited in its ability to address the needs in conflict zones since STAREC mainly focuses on more stable areas. This means that prevention activities under the strategy will be less focused on the unstable conflict zones where some of the most brutal cases of sexual violence occur. In the sections of the strategy that deal with prevention, impunity is by the far the strongest element, while other areas like security sector reform, prevention and protection activities have received less attention or strategic thinking.

In May 2010, Refugees International (RI) staff met with local women's groups in difficult-to-access conflict-affected areas. Women told us that rape survivors often tell them that even when medical care is available there is no point in seeking it because they have to go back to the fields where they were attacked in order to provide food for their families, and they know they will only be raped again.

Under STAREC, there are plans to work with communities to agree on

protection risks and to try to find ways to avoid them. However, there were no community strategies on prevention in the communities RI visited.

Local civil society groups are often active in areas where international organisations do not work due to insecurity or inaccessibility, and it is important to support their work with communities to set up sexual violence prevention committees.

The fight against impunity

Combating impunity has long been a focus for donors when addressing prevention of sexual violence, particularly in DRC. In 2006 the Congolese government passed a law on sexual violence that looks good on paper — but there has been very little implementation.

The hope for the fight against impunity in DRC is that increasing criminal convictions and sentences for sexual violence will deter potential perpetrators but the civilian court system struggles to respond adequately to sexual violence cases. Most conflict-related sexual violence takes place in rural areas far from the towns, and it is hardest in these remote

areas for women to access police, lawyers, courts and medical services in time to obtain medico-legal reports (as well as to obtain vital medical assistance). All of these services suffer from a severe lack of staffing, training and infrastructure outside the provincial capitals. Increased support for mobile courts would help.

In the provincial capitals there have been some convictions for sexual violence but the sentences handed down tend to be short. According to some, judges are reluctant to add to the problem of prison overcrowding. The fight against impunity cannot be successful without improving the prison system more generally; in too many cases men convicted of sexual violence have managed to escape or bribe their way out of prison within a few days.

In conflict-affected areas, the majority of perpetrators are armed men, many of whom are members of the Congolese army. Training and awareness raising to inform potential perpetrators, particularly within the army, about the consequences of sexual violence for survivors and for perpetrators are essential to any prevention strategy.

In 2009, President Kabila issued a statement saying that there would be zero tolerance for perpetrators

A group set up by a survivor of rape to support HIV-positive women and survivors of gender-based violence in North Kivu developed into a network that assists survivors of sexual assault by accompanying them to ensure that they get access to medical help and, if they want to report their case to the police, legal assistance.

They also run a counselling centre (maison d'écoute) where women can stay overnight, and they help survivors of sexual assaults who have been abandoned by their families restart their lives by providing them with training in crafts, agriculture or animal husbandry. They run awareness-raising sessions with communities on

violence against women and on HIV/AIDS to try to overcome the stigma suffered by many survivors of rape.

Like far too many of the local NGOs, this group receives minimal financial support. It is always difficult for UN agencies and international NGOs to determine which local NGOs have the capacity to run programmes, handle funds transparently and be sufficiently independent of political influences. Yet no comprehensive national sexual violence strategy can be successful if it fails to involve the people most directly affected by it, namely the local women's groups that will continue to provide support long after the international agencies have left.

of sexual violence in the military. And there are reported to have been more convictions by military tribunals for sexual violence, which is having some positive impact. But these military prosecutions have not been of high-ranking officers, and often commanders refuse to allow their soldiers to be tried for sexual violence. The Congolese government needs to bring to justice high-ranking commanders of units responsible for sexual violence. And every conviction for sexual violence needs to be publicised, to enhance its deterrent effect.

Changing the thinking about prevention

While there is increased focus on the fight against impunity in the DRC, more thinking must be done on prevention outside the traditional parameters.

The link between alternative economic opportunities for women and sexual violence prevention needs to be made. Survivors of sexual violence emphasised that if they could gain skills to support themselves by other means they would not be forced to walk for miles to farm fields in remote areas where they are at greater risk of sexual violence.

Sexual violence also occurs in settings where women are forced to live in overcrowded and undignified conditions which do not allow them any personal space. This is the case for many of Congolese women living in displacement sites or with host families. UNHCR is working on reducing overcrowding with host families; this type of initiative should reduce displaced women's vulnerability.

More effective prevention requires more effective communications systems, especially in remote areas. The ability to prevent sexual violence will always be limited in areas where communications systems do not function. Local authorities and women's groups pointed out that they feel especially vulnerable to violence when they cannot raise the alert about impending attacks. In areas where there are no mobile phone networks, no matter how much work has been done to set up community prevention committees and improve the work of police and peacekeepers

in addressing sexual violence, physical protection will be virtually impossible to arrange in time unless alternative methods of communication, such as radio, are set up.

Security sector reform is another key area of work on prevention but donors who fund this rarely link it with the fight against sexual violence. Training of the army is essential but more should also be done to support local community groups to lodge complaints about any abuses by the security services in their area.

Finally, it is difficult to plan prevention activities without having a clear picture of the trends in incidents and perpetrators of sexual violence. It is always extremely hard to obtain accurate statistics on sexual violence because only a small proportion of survivors come forward to report cases. Under the new comprehensive sexual violence strategy, the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) is the lead agency on data and mapping but they do not currently have the resources to conduct the incident mapping effectively. Further, some agencies have refused to hand over to UNFPA data that they consider sensitive because of concerns about the confidentiality of the system.

UNFPA in DRC is now instituting use of the Gender-Based Violence Information Management System – a database developed at the global level by UNFPA, UNHCR and the International Rescue Committee.¹ This should allow agencies to react quickly to fill the gap in information on incidents and assistance provided to survivors of sexual violence. Since the database has been validated at the global level, this will address some organisations' concerns about confidentiality.

Some measure of prevention has been provided by the UN Stabilization Mission in the Congo (MONUSCO, formerly MONUC). The presence of the peacekeeping force is a deterrent to some, although there have been occasions when the peacekeepers have failed to protect populations from attack, often as a result of lack of effective communications systems having been established with local communities. Any premature withdrawal of peacekeeping military and civilian staff would

leave women at even greater risk. In some areas MONUSCO does respond to community requests, such as conducting farm patrols to accompany women going to their fields, but peacekeepers need more training in how to address sexual violence and where to refer survivors.

Conclusion

Donor governments should provide more funding for the humanitarian response to help local groups working in conflict-affected areas and to expand coverage in eastern DRC so that prevention activities can have a real impact. They should also fund the new government-backed sexual violence strategy.

There are many vital activities that can be undertaken to prevent sexual violence in the DRC but the most important prevention activity of all is bringing about an end to the conflict. Donors need to increase pressure on the Congolese government to address the long-running conflict in the east, and find peaceful solutions in order to improve the lives of women and girls who continue to be targets for horrific violence and rape.

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1. <http://gbvims.org>

Sexual violence: weapon of war, impediment to peace

FMR issue 27 explores the challenges and opportunities for combating sexual violence in conflict, post-conflict and development recovery contexts.



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