

Understanding the causes of gender-based violence

by Roselidah Ondeko and Susan Purdin

Surveys of Sudanese refugees in the Achol-pii refugee settlement in northern Uganda in 2000 and subsequently in the camp in Kiryandango to which they were relocated in 2002 have highlighted a high incidence of gender-based violence (GBV). Using a participatory approach, researchers from the International Rescue Committee (IRC) have investigated and assessed the causes of GBV and coping mechanisms in order to work with the communities to design appropriate intervention strategies.

Main causes of GBV

Only basic necessities are provided to camp residents. As the ordinary means of survival have been disrupted, traditional divisions of labour have broken down. Because refugees in Achol-pii had no land to cultivate male tasks disappeared while women continued to undertake their traditional tasks such as fetching water and cooking. The survey showed that the men worked only four hours a day, while women worked about 20 hours a day. Men spent most of their time socialising at the market. Domestic violence is one of the negative consequences of enforced idleness and the ensuing frustration.

Four-fifths of such valued household assets as bicycles and radios are owned by men. Women's possessions are mostly confined to low-value assets such as cooking utensils, jerrycans and food. This is often a source of conflict in the home. *"When the men are drunk they beat us and ask for good food like meat"* - which the women cannot afford. Instead they cook vegetables which are considered a poor man's food.

In Kiryandango, where refugees have access to land, alcohol abuse is rampant in October, November and January when the refugees are able to generate a bit of income by selling the food they harvest. *"The little food we get is taken by our husbands to exchange for alcohol. When they get drunk, they beat us and they expect good food."* However from April to

June the rate of drinking alcohol decreases since most people are busy in their fields. Alcohol abuse is directly linked with increases in domestic violence. One woman said: *"My husband forces me to have sex with him in the presence of my daughters due to the influence of alcohol."*

Defilement - a term used in Ugandan law to describe sexual relations with an adolescent - is widespread. Girls as young as ten may be forced into marriage. Insufficient shelter increases exposure to abuse. Tents are grossly overcrowded and at night parents in search of privacy may send away teenagers to spend the night with neighbours or relatives, thus exposing them to sexual exploitation.

When and where?

Informants reported common instances where the risk of GBV is particularly severe:

- At markets people not only trade goods but also gather to socialise and to drink. Many girls skip school on market days to sell alcohol in bars and discos, exposing themselves to risks of sexual abuse.
- Around water sources or boreholes, low water yields force girls and women to wait late into the night to fetch water. If not accompanied by a security guard, they are vulnerable. Girls who spend long hours at the borehole are said to get involved in 'bad company'.
- When women go out to collect firewood or to do casual labour to supplement family incomes they may be abused. Women have had to consent to sex before being paid by employers.
- When boys and girls gather together for church attendance and choir practice, many linger and do not immediately return home.
- At schools many teachers have sexual relationships with students, luring girls into relationships by promises of gifts and high marks.
- Poor girls are forced to depend on

wealthy older men in the village and those lucky enough to have formal employment.

- When girls are forced by poverty to work as maids in local houses male householders may sexually abuse them or coerce them into marriage.
- When a woman loses her husband, one of his male relatives may demand sexual favours or steal her property.
- In marriages where the age difference is great, levels of domestic violence also tend to be high.

Conclusion

Through the participatory approach, it was possible to discuss GBV - a culturally sensitive issue - with the community. The data collected has been important for redesigning, monitoring and evaluating the programme. The survey results emphasise the need for:

- a multi-sectoral approach based on improved understanding of cultural norms
- community-wide participation in order to enhance community ownership and programme sustainability
- raising men's awareness and challenging the male perception that GBV only occurs outside the family
- tackling taboos preventing young people from discussing sexual matters

Roselidah Ondeko at the time of the study was Reproductive/HIV/AIDS Manager with the International Rescue Committee (IRC) but is currently working as an RH Consultant with UNHCR, Geneva. Email: ondeko@unhcr.ch

Susan Purdin teaches in the Program on Forced Migration and Health, Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University. Email: sjp98@columbia.edu

The views expressed are personal and not necessarily shared by IRC or UNHCR.