

Through our eyes: participatory video in West Africa

by Tegan Molony, Zeze Konie and Lauren Goodsmith

In 2005 the American Refugee Committee (ARC)¹ and Communication for Change (C4C)² launched a community-based video project to raise awareness of and help prevent sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) in conflict-affected communities.

Since the end of Liberia's 14-year long civil war some 70,000 refugees and over 314,000 IDPs have returned. One of the enormous challenges they face is the impact of violence, including SGBV. It is estimated that 40% of all Liberian women are survivors of conflict-related sexual violence, including rape, gang rape, sexual slavery and physical assault.³ In a survey conducted among Liberian refugee women in camps in Sierra Leone, 74% said they had suffered sexual abuse prior to displacement

and 55% during displacement.⁴ There is little awareness, however, of the health and psychosocial impacts of SGBV, nor of the link with reproductive health issues, in particular sexually-transmitted infections (STIs) including HIV/AIDS. Reported cases are usually dealt with by local leaders and response services are seldom available.

Since August 2004 ARC has been implementing prevention and response programmes in eight

districts of Liberia, as well as a cross-border information and referral programme for refugees repatriating from Guinea. Prevention activities include community education around issues of gender, human rights, reproductive health and SGBV. Crisis response activities include referral to ARC-trained counsellors and training of local health, protection and security providers to prevent, identify, respond to and appropriately refer cases of SGBV.

The 'Through Our Eyes' participatory video initiative was piloted in Guinea and Liberia. Participatory video activities can initiate a dynamic process of engagement and dialogue on issues of local concern, including highly sensitive topics. From conception through production



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Marie Tamba, GBV counsellor, ARC Liberia, practises her camera work with support from colleague Albert Pyne and video trainer Hamidou Touré. Lainé camp, Guinea.

and public screening, the process is driven by individual community members. Themes and topics are relevant to local audiences and presented in culturally appropriate ways. People are always keen to see their own community members on screen. Video helps amplify voices for change from within the community and fosters peer-to-peer outreach.

In early 2006, C4C carried out a two-week training workshop in participatory video at Lainé refugee camp in Guinea for ARC field staff and members of camp committees responsible for referring SGBV cases to ARC. Participants learned how to use the equipment, engage community members in project goals, carry out interviews and develop team skills in programme planning and filming. At the end of the training course they made a documentary on early/forced marriage and short dramas on rape and community response to domestic abuse.

Survivors of SGBV should never be pressured into sharing their stories. Several options were developed for survivors who wished to speak out but remain anonymous. Some did wish to testify. One refugee woman chose to share her story on camera in order to urge her peers to abandon the practice of forced early marriage that had blighted her own life. For many survivors the act of speaking out can be deeply empowering – a step in the gradual process of healing.

Liberia-based ARC staff returned home with their video equipment and proceeded to share their skills with community peers who had been trained in SGBV prevention and response. This new team soon

produced their first video: a profile of a local man, a former alcoholic who used to abuse his wife but who had overcome his addiction and become a responsible husband and father. This was followed by a production on the consequences of settling rape the 'family way' and of not treating STIs. The video team has plans to address the issues of stigma and HIV, child abuse, rape and the law and the importance of girls' education.

Community screenings – 'playbacks' – of the team's

video productions have prompted many individuals to seek ARC's services. Community peers and field staff open the sessions by describing ARC's GBV programme and services. After the screenings, which are usually attended by 30 to 100 people, audience members are encouraged to discuss the issues raised. Some share personal stories or offer ideas on how to tackle the problems.

Viewers regularly seek assistance for problems depicted in the films they have just seen and field staff report an increase in reporting of rape as a result of participatory video activities. Audience members identify with what they are shown. A scene in which a doctor informs a woman that her daughter is infertile due to the consequences of rape prompted a viewer to break down in tears and declare: "That's the same thing that happened to my daughter during the war." As Marie Kolenky, GBV Programme Manager in Liberia, says, "You see other foreign videocassettes... but it's always something that somebody just made up." In contrast, she highlights the powerful impact of "seeing a Liberian talking on the video and explaining their own life story."

Community video helps those SGBV survivors involved in the production process to tell their own stories, shed some of the stigma associated with their experience and help others. They also benefit from learning new technical, interpersonal and team skills. The participatory process strengthens a sense of community as teams reflect together on the kinds of violence that have affected their

lives, the messages they want to deliver and how best to deliver them.

In addition, participatory video:

- is easily incorporated into existing GBV prevention and response activities
- is an effective tool for awareness-raising, promoting community dialogue and encouraging the reporting of incidents
- is accessible to all, regardless of educational level
- motivates field staff: the entire ARC GBV team enthusiastically supports the video project and its continuation
- has wide-ranging applications: the ARC video team proposes to use their new-found skills to produce films about evolving conditions in Liberia for the refugee community and to showcase success stories from ARC's microfinance and community development activities.

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An 11-minute video on the project is at: <http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-4020371656680454444&q=american+refugee+committee>

1. ARC currently has programmes in the Balkans, Guinea, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Rwanda, Darfur, South Sudan-North Uganda, Pakistan, Thailand and Sri Lanka. www.archq.org
2. C4C provides training in the use of participatory video to support social development, health and human rights goals www.c4c.org
3. IRIN Web Special on 'Violence against Women and Girls during and after Conflict', September 2004 www.irinnews.org/webspecials/gbv/gbv-webspecial.PDF
4. *Broken Bodies, Broken Dreams: Violence Against Women Exposed*, IRIN/OCHA, November 2005, pp.187-199.