

The Loud Silence: The plight of refugee male survivors of conflict-related sexual violence

“At first I even never told the doctor about what happened to me, because it is not easy to talk about it...” – Male survivor of conflict-related sexual violence based in Kampala.

Sexual violence against men and boys is not a new phenomenon in many parts of the world, especially in war zones and post-conflict communities but, surprisingly, the vice has continued to receive very little attention and recognition both at policy and program levels. Additionally, the many legal jurisdictions have narrow definitions of sexual violence offenses that recognise female counterparts, but not male victims.

Having worked close to a decade with male survivors of conflict-related sexual violence at Refugee Law Project, I have observed with deep empathy how men and boys still grapple with unspeakable pain and shame because of one or multiple experiences of extreme forms of violations, especially anal rape. And yet, ironically, they have challenges sharing their ordeals with service providers, let alone their spouses – all of which has profound negative impacts in service access and uptake as well as devastating consequences for communities at large.

From my daily interaction with the survivors, they present multiple issues including loss of respect from community and household members. Studies and experiences have shown, and using the ecological model of healing, that recovery and rehabilitation largely depend on household and community support. However, gender socialization processes present men and boys as strong; male victims reporting an experience of sexual violence risk having characteristics - including ‘weak men’ - attributed to them by their own communities and families which they very much trust. Even worse, male survivors are sometimes reminded by their own family members of what they have gone through, and thereafter stigmatized and isolated from service provision. In addition, the severe effects that can result from sexual violence such as anal bleeding, difficulties passing stool, walking and sitting, swellings and wounds in the anus, and post-traumatic stress disorder among others continue to impact negatively on their lives.

Unlike female survivors of sexual violence who more often open up and share their conflict experiences during screening for such violations, my experience with male survivors is the opposite. Is it that male survivors don’t want to share their ordeals or it is the usual complex questions of masculinity? This question and many more are worth deeper and broader contemplation; are there safer spaces to enhance disclosure? What happens when a man walks to a service provider and reports a rape experience? Could it be that survivors are not heard or there are no services available for them? From experience, several male survivors have reported

that few service providers, community and families provide time to listen to them, nor are there safer and friendly spaces where they can share their ordeals.

But what's the breadth of the issue? Male survivors in Kampala continue to struggle for safer spaces, have challenges seeking audience of trained and experienced medical, legal or psychosocial providers who can listen without stigmatizing and doubting the experiences at the very first instance. For those who have tried to seek support, a significant fraction have struggled through with embarrassing questions from ill-informed service providers – many of whom have difficulties differentiating between consensual and non-consensual sex, and as such, quickly label male survivors as homosexuals.

Some of these unfortunate situations have forced male survivors to resort to isolation, self-harm and self-blame for having failed to defend themselves and their families from the aggressors. Besides the shame, such situations compound phobia to disclose experiences and as such push them further to uncomfortable corners of silences and intense suffering – with likelihood that failure to address the trauma could lead to inter-generational trauma.

In addition, posters and SGBV referral pathways currently developed by the majority of service providers, especially in refugee hosting areas, seldom depict men and boys as survivors of sexual violence. Rather, they portray men as perpetrators worthy of police custody, and women and girls as survivors. This has negative consequences on information sharing and service uptake. From my close interaction with male survivors, it takes a great deal of time and courage for a male survivor of sexual violence to 'finally' share his sexual violence experience with a service provider.

While the situation is indubitably uncomfortable and requires urgent interventions, getting men to 'report' experiences of violence is possible. However, it requires a lot of rigour and intervention techniques. Firstly, rapport building between service provider and known survivors is an important entry point. It also means that service providers exercise courage with 'open hearts' and non-judgmental approaches towards men and boys. Also, with the information available, service providers need further training on working with male survivors of sexual violence including through sharing best practices with psychological and health service providers already working with them.

Besides professional support, survivors need spaces within which they are comfortable to share with fellow survivors. At Refugee Law Project, and through the support groups created for refugee male survivors in Kampala, Gulu, and Isingiro, we have documented progress in increasing disclosure, peer-to-peer support as well as service-seeking attitudes and uptake. This has essentially been achieved through strategic capacity building of the support groups and encouragement of the members to actively participate in their own projects as well as those of

RLP and other partners. Currently, RLP works closely with male survivor self-help groups including Men of Hope in Kampala, Men of Peace in Nakivale and Men of Courage in Acholi sub-region in the aspects of recovery, healing, justice and livelihood so that they feel at home even when they are away from their home country. As far as disclosure and self-help support is concerned, these groups continue to be a home away from home for survivors – important spaces within which male survivors not only support one another but also share experiences for healing.

But how did RLP achieve this? How has it been possible to get male survivors in self-help groups? As is often said, 'Innovation is Life'. RLP has over the years embraced proactive means of enabling survivors (both men and women) to disclose experiences of sexual violence in a more timely manner and with specialized services. How has this been achieved? Through supporting survivor-led community awareness sessions on conflict-related sexual violence from which many more survivors have since acquired spaces in which to report their own experiences of sexual violence. Also, and through an innovative model dubbed "Screen-Refer-Support-Document" model, RLP has proactively been asking questions which other service providers have ignored, and have henceforth successfully identified thousands of survivors - including male survivors of sexual violence – from which equally large numbers have since obtained professional physical and psychological support.

What lessons do we learn? Where do such innovative approaches lead us to? While such questions are eminent and worth pondering about, its high time service providers understood the dynamics confronting male survivors including underscoring the fact that men and boys can be raped and that male survivors are as vulnerable as women and girl survivors in the community. It's prudent for us to break the cultural barriers and stereotypes around issues relating to sexuality and sexual violence against both men and women and embrace inclusive programming (including safer spaces) for all survivors – be they male or female. It is worth re-echoing that avoidance and denial of realities in confronting sexual violence against men and boys will only ease the process of burying our heads in the sand but will not enable us to progress with the struggle in tackling 'real issues', including the plight of male survivors of sexual violence.

This is a struggle that requires leaving no one behind, leaving no stone unturned. Above all, it's a struggle that begins with attitudinal change – and it begins with you and me. Together we can achieve a more peaceful society and reduce sexual violence in conflict!

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