2023 Grassroots Women's Peace Conference

Cultural Aspects of Gender-Based Violence
June 17-18, 2023 | Gulu, Uganda

I. INTRODUCTION
Conference Overview

On June 17-18, 2023, the fourth annual Grassroots Women's Peace Conference (GWPC) was convened at St. Monica's Girls' Tailoring Centre in Gulu, Uganda. This gathering brought together eleven Ugandan grassroots women's organizations with the goal of deliberating and formulating solution-oriented initiatives that address the cultural aspects contributing to gender-based violence (GBV) in Northern Uganda. While the GWPC had previously served as a forum for women to share their post-civil war experiences and foster collaboration amongst grassroots organizations, the current conference has evolved to include the more recent consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Notably, last year's conference focused on GBV and teen pregnancy, establishing a foundation upon which this year's discussion was built.

Participating groups acted as representatives of their distinct communities to bring about meaningful discussion. Groups in attendance were National Community of Women Living with HIV/AIDS (Arua), Kitgum Women Peace Initiative, Teso Women Peace Activists, Lango Women's Peace and Development Champions, People's Voice for Peace, Women's Advocacy Network, Nakere Rural Woman Activists, St. Monica's Girls Tailoring Centre, Elderly Catholic Mothers' Association, Daystar Youth Services, Female Journalists Media Initiative, and the University of Oklahoma Center for Peace and Development.

This report is structured around the three group discussions' guiding questions and resulting themes/interests, which included

(1) The different values and roles given to boys and girls
(2) Perceptions and beliefs that lead to GBV and the impact of GBV
(3) Action plans to be put into place to address the cultural aspects of GBV

II. A GIRL CHILD'S PLACE IN UGANDA
Gender Roles & Societal Value

"In our culture, the girl child is a flower, and the boy child is a thorn." - Conference Participant

In Uganda, there are distinct gender roles and expectations placed upon boys and girls. These roles are deeply rooted in traditiona values, which influence the way boys and girls are seen and treated in society. Across the groups, conversations and personal testimonies presented the boy and girl child consistently as follows:

- ➢ Girl Child:
    - ○ **A source of wealth:** Girls are seen as valuable assets that can bring wealth to their families through dowries/marriages.
    - ○ **Property:** Girls are considered the property of their families and later the property of their husbands.
    - ○ **"Beasts of burden":** Girls are burdened with the responsibility of doing most, if not all, of the work within the household.
    - ○ **Commodities:** Girls are viewed as commodities to be consumed or exploited once they reach the age of menstruation.
    - ○ **Carriers of culture/cultural tradition:** Girls are responsible for preserving and transmitting cultural traditions within the family and community.
    - ○ **Domestics:** Girls are tasked with duties such as cooking, fetching water, and taking care of the home, placing the burden of domestic responsibilities solely on them.
    - ○ **Submissive:** Girls are expected by society to be submissive and obedient.
    - ○ **Supporters of society:** Girls are seen as supporters of the larger society, fulfilling their roles through their domestic duties and cultural preservation.

- ➢ Boy Child:
    - ○ **Warrior/"Protector of the home":** Boys are assigned the role of providing security and power to their families They are expected to safeguard their homes and families from external threats.
    - ○ **Inheritors of their clan's legacy:** Boys are viewed as the continuation of the patrilineal family line, responsible for carrying forward the family name and traditions.
    - ○ **Providers/Future heads of household:** Boys are groomed to become the primary providers for their future families and take on the responsibility of leading the household.
    - ○ **Authority/Status:** Boys are seen as authoritative figures, expected to make decisions and exert control over their families and communities. They hold a higher social status and have more power within Ugandan society, especially since they are entitled to inherit property.
    - ○ **Prioritized for education:** Boys are given priority in education, which perpetuates gender disparities and limits opportunities for girls.
    - ○ **Heir of family inheritance:** Boys inherent family property, wealth, and assets.
    - ○ **Boys bring value to households:** Society places significant importance on the birth of boys, and families without male children face negative social stigma. In Acoli culture, if a woman does not produce boy children, she is considered a disappointment.

Origins of Values
"Minds have been impoverished to value girls in these ways." - Conference Participant

Discussion of why people view girls this way stems from various factors, such as
- ➢ **Cultural framework:** The deeply-rooted traditions and cultures of Uganda place girls beneath boys, reinforcing gender inequality and perpetuating patriarchal values.

- ➤ **Incentives within the system:** The existing system benefits men by placing them above women and girls. This further reinforces the status quo of gender inequality, as men may resist efforts to challenge the existing power dynamics.
- ➤ **Fear of social repercussions:** Those who stand up against the status quo of inequality risk becoming social outcasts. This fear stops individuals, both men and women, from challenging gender norms and advocating for gender equality.

"Even today's educated and working women were still raised with specific beliefs around gender and often raise their children in those ways." - Conference Participant

The Importance of the Girl Child

Groups came to the consensus that, even in a society with strong gender roles, girls play important roles and contribute significantly to the well-being and progress of their families and society as a whole. Across the groups, the girl child was considered important for common reasons:

- ➤ **Family orientation and caregiving:** Girls are considered to be more family-oriented than boys.
    - ○ Girls are more likely to return home to take care of their elderly parents.
    - ○ When a parent passes away, women tend to take on the responsibility of caring for their children, while men might abandon their parental duties.
    - ○ Girls are more focused on investing back into their own families rather than their own personal gratification.
- ➤ **Role as child bearers:** Without women, family lines cannot continue. Their ability to have children illustrates their importance and contribution to society.
- ➤ **Social influencer/Teacher:** As girls grow older, they become the primary teachers and influencers within their families able to shape the perceptions and attitudes of their children. They impart important values, education, and guidance, thereby shaping the future generation.
- ➤ **Inspiration:** Despite the lack of priority given to girls' education in Uganda, if a girl child manages to obtain an education, she can become an inspiration for other girls. Her achievements can challenge societal norms, break barriers, and motivate other girls to pursue their dreams and potential.
- ➤ **Homemaker:** Girls often bear the burden of completing all the work within the home. Their contributions are vital for the smooth functioning and support of the family unit.
- ➤ **Inherent value as human beings:** At the most fundamental level, girls should be considered important simply because they are human beings with their own thoughts, emotions, talents, and potential.

Acknowledging the Boy Child

Throughout the conference, participants stated that, in order to address gender-based violence (GBV), they must acknowledge the boy child. Boys and men can also be victims of GBV and play a crucial role in promoting positive change. Their involvement in discussions and action is essential to GBV prevention in Uganda.

III. GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN UGANDA
Defining Gender-Based Violence (GBV)
Across the groups, the term *gender-based violence (GBV)* encompassed different things. Three distinct categories emerged from the discussions:

➢ **Physical GBV:** Physical GBV refers to any form of physical assault or harm inflicted upon an individual. This includes domestic violence, intimate partner violence, assault, rape, and genital mutilation.
➢ **Emotional GBV:** Emotional GBV refers to the use of verbal or psychological tactics to belittle, manipulate, or control individuals. It involves actions/behaviors that undermine a person's self-worth, confidence, and emotional well-being to instill fear, harm self-esteem, and exert power over the victim. Emotional GBV includes insults, threats, humiliation, and intimidation.
➢ **Economic GBV:** Economic GBV refers to the denial of access to financial resources and assets within a marriage or relationship. It can involve men having control over financial capital, such as livestock, or withholding money from wives in order to control them.

It is important to note that boys and men can also be victims of GBV.

From Beliefs to GBV
Conference participants discussed how these perceptions and beliefs surrounding gender perpetuate the unequal treatment of women and ultimately gender-based violence:

➢ **Perceived female submissiveness:** Beliefs in Ugandan society dictate that women should be submissive. This means that girls have less power and are more vulnerable to violence. Boys are raised with the belief that they are superior to girls, which instills a sense of entitlement and dominance. Consequently, any display of independence or assertiveness by women is met with aggression, as it challenges men's perceived superiority.
➢ **Objectification of women:** Women are viewed as commodities or property. When women resist or challenge the expectations associated with their perceived "ownership," their husbands may react violently, driven by a misplaced sense of entitlement and control.
➢ **Inequitable distribution of power and resources:** In Uganda, boys' life opportunities are prioritized over girls'. The perception that boys should have superiority in all aspects perpetuates an environment where girls are more vulnerable to violence.
  ○ **Land disputes:** Property ownership becomes a contentious issue, with men often asserting their dominance.
  ○ **Lack of agency:** Women's lack of decision-making power perpetuates GBV in Uganda. Women, even when occupying positions of authority, are seen as "weak" and are rarely granted the final say in matters.

➢ **Limited trust in the legal and social support system:** Perceptions of an unresponsive legal and social support system in Uganda contribute to GBV. The belief that the law and society will not effectively address instances of GBV prevents survivors from reporting such incidents and lets perpetrators remain unaccountable.

➢ **Sexist cultural beliefs and norms:** Cultural beliefs and norms normalize GBV in Uganda. These beliefs are passed down through generations, shaping attitudes and behaviors that justify and perpetuate violence against women.

➢ **Early marriage expectations:** Girls are expected to marry at a young age and face violence when they do not conform to these expectations, especially since they are seen as a financial burden when they stay at home unmarried.

➢ **Influence of religious beliefs:** Religion is used enforce and justify gender hierarchy, such as polygamy and the expectation of women's subservence.

➢ **Harmful marital practices:** Harmful marital practices, such as bride price and widow inheritance, contribute to GBV.
   ○ **"Bride price":** The practice of dowries, or "better prices," transforms women into property, tying their worth to their reproductive ability and subjecting them to control by their husbands and their husbands' families.
   ○ **Widow inheritance:** This system where women marry a male relative of their deceased husbands reinforces the expectation that women must remain with their husbands' families, even in the face of abuse or mistreatment.

➢ **Cultural v. Legal Systems:** The lack of continuity between cultural and legal systems in Uganda further marginalizes women's rights and protections.
   ○ E.g. A wife married solely through tribal customs faces significant limitations in terms of land and property rights compared to a wife married through the legal system. This discrepancy in rights and protections creates a disparity among women, leaving those married under cultural customs more vulnerable to GBV due to the absence of legal safeguards.

Other Causes of GBV
➢ **Alcoholism and substance abuse:** Substance abuse, most particularly alcoholism, contributes to increased aggression and impaired judgment, leading to GBV.

➢ **Ignorance:** Misconceptions and lack of knowledge about reproductive biology and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) contribute to the perpetuation of GBV. Blaming wives for the gender of their children reveals a lack of understanding that it is the man's sperm that determines the sex of the child. Plus, misconceptions about curing STDs through unprotected sex are problematic.

➢ **Male insecurity:** Insecurity among men, particularly regarding their wives' and daughters' success and potential infidelity, leads to GBV.

➢ **Polygamy:** The cultural acceptance of polygamy in Uganda leads to jealousy, conflict, and the breakdown of families, contributing to GBV. This is driven by the desire for sons or other partners.

Impact of GBV on Individuals and the Community
Groups talked about the consequences of GBV on individuals and the community:

- ➢ **High levels of separation/divorce:** Women experiencing violence often feel compelled to leave their abusive partners, resulting in separation or divorce. This disruption of family units can have profound effects on children and the overall stability of the family.
- ➢ **Suicide:** GBV can cause severe emotional distress, feelings of hopelessness, and a sense of being trapped, which may lead to suicide.
- ➢ **Death/Murder:** GBV can escalate to lethal violence. In some cases, women murder other women (for example, killing their husband's mistress).
- ➢ **School dropouts:** Children growing up in households affected by GBV may face disruptions in their education due to instability, trauma, and the need to assume caregiving roles.
- ➢ **Economic instability:** GBV restricts victims' ability to access education, employment, and economic resources. Financial control and economic abuse can lead to economic instability, poverty, and dependence on others.
- ➢ **Child neglect:** GBV can create an environment of fear and tension within a household, diverting attention away from children's needs.
- ➢ **Physical and mental harm:** GBV can result in physical injuries, disabilities, sexually transmitted diseases, and long-term health issues. Victims may also experience psychological harm, including low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and other mental health issues.
- ➢ **Separation from the community:** Victims may experience isolation, social stigma, and exclusion from their communities, which limits them from support networks.
- ➢ **Perpetuation of harmful masculinity:** GBV reinforces harmful gender norms and perpetuates a cycle of violence. It can contribute to the normalization of harmful masculinity, where aggression and control are seen as acceptable forms of male behavior. It keeps men from engaging in positive coping methods for dealing with their own issues.

IV. ACTIONING TOWARD PEACE
Action Plans
The groups discussed different ways to address harmful attitudes and practices that lead to GBV in order to come up with action plans to combat GBV:

- ➢ **Engagement with parents and family:**
  - ○ Encourage open communication and understanding within families.
  - ○ Promote responsible alcohol use and reduce alcohol intake.
  - ○ Advocate for the value of education for all children (both boys and girls)
  - ○ Allow for two-income households.
- ➢ **Community leaders:**
  - ○ Provide education on issues related to polygamy, family planning, and empowerment.
  - ○ Encourage cultural practices that promote equality and respect.
  - ○ Involve elders and women in important discussions and decision-making processes.
- ➢ **Religious leaders:**

- Encourage prayer and church attendance as a family in order to emphasize values of respect and equality.

➢ **Grassroots organizations:**
- Incorporate community opinions and discussions in program planning.
- Identify and follow up on GBV cases when government response is lacking.
- Conduct more community outreach to raise awareness and provide support.

➢ **Government:**
- Support education initiatives on GBV and related issues.
- Improve response plans to reports of GBV.
- Collaborate with grassroots organizations to better understand community needs.
- Increase access to education for girls, recruit more women in office, and provide scholarships for higher education.
- Establish more shelters and safe spaces for survivors.
- Provide scholastic materials and implement feeding programs in schools.
- Encourage local governments to create by-laws addressing GBV and education.

➢ **Other:**
- Facilitate dialogues targeting men, women, and children to promote gender equality and value all individuals equally.
- Promote shared roles and responsibilities through equal language and training children to share responsibilities at home and beyond.
- Address excessive alcohol and drug abuse through responsible alcohol use, demonstrations against alcohol use, and enforcement of existing laws and enactment of by-laws.
- Advocate for the construction of GBV shelters in all districts.
- Establish GBV committees, child protective ordinances/by-laws, and policies/frameworks at all levels of government.
- Conduct community sensitization and awareness campaigns on GBV, good parenting, polygamy, education, HIV/AIDS, and alcoholism.