

*“It is an Acholi saying: ‘When two elephants are fighting, women suffer the most...’” -
Conference Participant*

1.0 CONFERENCE OVERVIEW

Introduction

After being delayed for two-years, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the third annual Grassroots Women’s Peace Conference (GWPC) convened on June 10, 2022, at the St. Monica’s Girls’ Tailoring School in Gulu, Uganda. Nine grassroots women’s organizations gathered to discuss and produce solution-based initiatives focused on the growing rates of gendered based violence (GBV) and teen pregnancy in the region. Formerly, the GWPC was a space for women to share their experiences following the decade long civil war, and it provided an opportunity for various grassroots organizations to collaborate. However, due to the damaging social impact of the global pandemic, the conference convened with the intention of discussing not only the effects of the civil war, but also the recent effects of isolation and COVID-19 induced poverty.

With this in mind, participating groups worked to provide their unique viewpoints and experiences as prominent agents of change within their distinct communities. These groups included: 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; National Community of Women Living with Aids in Uganda Arua; St. Monica’s Girls Tailoring School; Elderly Catholic Mothers’ Association; Daystar Youth Services; OU Center for Peace and Development; and the Institute for Peace and Strategic Studies Gulu.

As a continuation of the 2019 GWPC decision to include both genders in the conference, one gender-sensitive male was invited to take part in each group discussion and solution-based processes. They were present with the intention of uplifting the voices and concerns of women within the Northern Ugandan community.

The following section briefly describes the ways in which the groups defined and interpreted GBV, and the ways it is maintained within their communities. Each definition is followed by a brief example sourced from the various organizations. The sections subsequent to this one provides an analysis of additional problems within the community that run parallel to poverty and GBV. This is followed by a section outlining the agreed upon solutions to the proposed problems. Out of respect for anonymity, names of conference participants and regional details have been excluded.

Gender Based Violence (GBV)

Across the groups, GBV was defined in different ways. Utilizing the common ways in which it manifested itself in communities, GBV can be categorized as:

- *Physical GBV*: Any form of physical assault that breaks trust and respect in the family unit

- *E.g.*: Men hitting their wives and children or women hitting their children and husbands
- *Emotional GBV*: Verbally demeaning and insulting a spouse, which creates fear and lack of respect. This leads to the victim being unable to speak out against other forms of GBV and induces long-term psychological trauma in children.
 - *E.g.*: Calling husband lazy and useless
 - *E.g.*: Talking down to children and wife
- *Economic GBV*: Being denied access to financial resources and assets within a marriage.
 - *E.g.*: Couples buy assets together, but these are controlled by husbands
 - *E.g.*: Men control finances and large quantities of capital (large animals, gardens, brewing activities)
 - *E.g.*: Husbands won't allow wives to prosper and join local groups
 - *E.g.*: Husbands won't allow women to achieve higher education out of fear that they will become too sharp
- *Martial Rape GBV*: The sexual assault of women within a marriage that works to humiliate and demean them
 - *E.g.*: If a wife doesn't accept her husband's sexual advances after a long day of working, he will rape her
 - *E.g.*: Being forced to have sex in front of children
- *Religious GBV*: The way negative and oppressive religious norms create gendered roles. This proliferates violence in marriages. Decides what individuals can and cannot do within a marriage.
 - *E.g.*: Women are unable to speak out against their husband
 - *E.g.*: Women are told not to turn their backs on their husbands
- *Health and Welfare GBV*: Not receiving adequate medical attention based on harmful gendered biases
 - *E.g.*: Men with HIV don't want people to know they are sick, so they take their wives' medicines
 - *E.g.*: Adolescents who are sexually assaulted do not receive medical attention in order to protect the perpetrator

“Everyone says the war is done but we will have challenges...” -Conference Participant

2.1 ADDITIONAL AREAS OF DISCOURSE

Aside from GBV within communities, further areas of discourse arose out of the various discussions:

- Children of captivity (COC):
 - Are not accepted by new husbands or families
 - Don't have identity cards because they don't know the identity of their fathers
 - Are shunned by the community due their connection to the war
 - Experience a loss of resources

- COC boys are rejected entirely, and COC girls are seen as a source of income (sexually exploited)
- New husbands sexually assault children from captivity
- Children from captivity are often angry and hard to control
- Idle / Forgotten Youth / Street Kids:
 - Not sent to school, lack of jobs, unemployment
 - Leads to bad behaviors: Rape, theft, gang activity
 - Forgotten and suicidal: Child committed suicide and it was not noticed for three days until the dog found his remains.
- Denial of land rights:
 - E.g.: Women from captivity came home and their families were killed - they had no rights to land without proof
 - E.g.: Children selling land for money
 - E.g.: Male relatives claiming land from widows and threatening them with death if they refuse

Denial of land rights was commonly discussed and plagues women from each community. Much like the problems that arise out of GBV, denial of land rights stemmed from an intersectionality of root causes, such as: inequality of gender (male relatives are thought to have more rights to land over widows), poverty, and cultural norms that establish female inferiority.

The phenomenon of the street kid was addressed by several groups and intersected with the dilemma of children from captivity. There was an identified trend of children from captivity becoming idle youth due to their inability to establish a nationally recognized identity and substantial status of vulnerability due to rejection within their communities.

2.2 CAUSES OF GBV IN COMMUNITIES

The first day of discussion focused primarily on the root causes of GBV within the communities represented. These causes were presented consistently across all groups:

- *Education issues*: Illiteracy, lack of education
- *Poverty*: Child sexual slavery, and street kids
- *Substance abuse*: Alcoholism (primary focus), drug addiction
- *Status of women*: Lack of status and respect
- *Government and clan corruption and disorder*: Unable to report assaults to authorities; lack of training for dealing with assault cases; having to pay for services.
- *Parental absences*: Forces children to provide for themselves; single women allow daughters to sell themselves for money; single men assault children when the mother is absent
- *Harmful cultural practices*: Child marriage due to early pregnancy, polygamy, female genital mutilation, boys aren't taught to be good husbands, girls are taught to be submissive, traditional ways of understanding community care, and negative parenting

- *Acceptance of domestic violence*: Marital rape, physical violence, financial power imbalance, restricting healthcare
- *Illness*: COVID-19 Pandemic (changes gender roles), HIV, long-term illnesses
- *Decade-long civil war*: Mistrust within communities, phenomenon of the “street-kid”

The conference participants noted various areas of intersectionality, meaning that oftentimes multiple issues were related to one another. For example, gender inequalities on a domestic level are interconnected with government corruption and harmful cultural/religious practices passed down generationally. Further, poverty was commonly determined to be an all-encompassing cause of other problems, such as lack of education and illness.

“You don’t jump in the garden and start weeding from the middle...” -Conference Participant

2.3 Action Priorities Concerning GBV and Additional Areas of Discourse

Across the groups present, the following action items were decided on by multiple groups:

- *Revival of positive cultural norms*: Addressing cultural leaders; teach children to respect elders and about their history; teach the community to care for one another.
- *Positive parenting*: It is the responsibility of both parents to raise both children; teach children how to be decent contributing members of society
- *Economic status / poverty*: Train the community on rights, family planning, and savings/credit
- *Women’s empowerment*: Show women they can be successful and that it has been done before
- *Dual gendered solutions*: Bringing men into grassroots organizations and allowing them to be a part of the solution
- *Action*: Not letting the conversations of the conference stay in Gulu; these should make their way to each grassroots organizations regional home
- *Sexual exploitation prevention*: Empower victims to report and speak out; provide sex education
- *Government corruption*: Train police and medical professionals on the proper way of dealing with sexual exploitation cases; create a support system within the state for victims; accountability for men who assault women and girls

Across the groups, the concept of educating the community came up frequently. Educating women on their rights, children on ways of being and keeping safe, parents on positive behaviors, and leadership on ways of dealing with sexual assault. This idea of spreading knowledge and positive practices circulated often in the groups.

The second most discussed solution targeted the revival of positive cultural norms and the abolition of negative ethos.