

About The African Child Policy Forum

The African Child Policy Forum is an independent, advocacy organisation working for the realisation of child rights. It was founded in 2003, with headquarters in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Its mission is to contribute towards the development and implementation of effective laws and policies to put African children on the public agenda. To this end, it will provide support where the political will exists and exert pressure where it is absent.

The work of the Forum is inspired by universal values, informed by global experiences and knowledge, and guided by the needs and conditions of African children.

The Forum works in collaboration with other non-governmental organisations (NGOs). As well as running programmes, it regularly publishes research that, along with its programmatic focus, aims to:

- ◆ contribute to improved knowledge of the problems that face African children
- ◆ strengthen the capacity of organisations working on child-rights and human-rights organisations
- ◆ assist governments, policy makers and NGOs in developing and implementing effective pro-child policies and programmes.

This publication and others published by The African Child Policy Forum are available online at: www.africanchildforum.org.

About the Uganda Child Rights NGO Network

The Uganda Child Rights NGO Network is a coalition of NGOs working in the field of child rights in Uganda. It aims to uphold the rights and responsibilities that are set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the African Charter on the Rights of the and Welfare of the Child and Uganda's Children's Statute.

Preface

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), as many as 40 million children under the age of 15 are victims of violence every year. Almost certainly, this statistic underestimates the problem and it is clear that violence against children is a serious problem and cause of concern.

Some four years ago, in its resolution 56/138, the United Nations (UN) General Assembly, upon the recommendation of the Committee on the Rights of the Child, requested that the Secretary-General conduct an in-depth study on the issue of violence against children. The Secretary-General thus appointed in February 2003 an independent expert, Professor Paulo Sérgio Pinheiro, to direct the study in collaboration with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and WHO. This report will be based on available evidence, information and a series of regional consultations.

Girls in Africa are particularly vulnerable to various forms of violence - both by virtue of their gender and because of the socio-economic and cultural conditions prevailing in their communities. African girls experience violence in the classroom, at home and in the community, and, in times of conflict and crisis, are special targets of violence. In their communities, girls face physical, sexual and psychological violence, and are harmed through inequalities in access to resources.

This paper aims to provide some insights into the prevalence, nature and consequences of violence against girls in communities within a specifically African context. It highlights practices that are condoned by African tradition including female genital mutilation and child marriage. It also draws attention to other practices such as trafficking and the role parents play in encouraging girls to engage in sexual relationships that have proliferated against a background of increasing poverty on the continent. This paper concludes by pointing to the need for raising public awareness about violence against girls and providing a framework for action.

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Introduction

To understand the concept of violence against girls, it is important to examine it within the broader context of the historical and structural inequalities that exist between men and women in the world. While violence and discrimination against women is not peculiar to Africa, some of the practices, attitudes and values that are prevalent on the continent can exacerbate these vices and need to be confronted. This discussion does not in any way imply that boys and men do not experience violence in the community. They do. But ascribed sex roles, biological differences and community structures mean that girls are more predisposed to violence than their male counterparts. This in turn prevents girls from developing their full potential as human beings and contributing to the community in which they live.

There have been estimates of the number of children, and girls in particular, who are victims of violence. However, such estimates fall way short of actual figures because many communities still condone the practice. It is important to be cautious, therefore, when analysing and interpreting statistics that relate to violence against girls. It is more useful to emphasise the dimensions and perceptions of the problem, and the response within a community.

For the last 40 years, United Nations (UN) agencies and other international bodies have highlighted the problem of violence against girls, and have called countries to take action. Accordingly, most African states are signatories to the various international and regional instruments to prevent discrimination against women - and many have taken domestic measures to enforce these instruments. The fact that the international community now recognises the severity of the problem shows increasing awareness, and is a good indicator of the magnitude of the problem.

It is one thing, however, to make declarations, sign treaties and conventions - and quite another to ensure that violence against girls is eliminated from African society. Socio-economic conditions, attitudes and cultural institutions remain vital challenges to the eradication of the problem. By extension, if violence against girls

in the community remains unchecked, it will gradually transform and permeate state institutions and officialdom, which - while not expressly promoting violence - will tend to condone it.

This paper therefore calls for the examination of the community dynamics that help to perpetuate violence against girls, and the reform of abusive state institutions. It explores the nature, causes and impact of violence directed towards girls in Africa while identifying the policies, strategies and instruments in the community to deal with such violence

The Nature of Violence against Girls in the Community

The nature of violence across Africa is largely similar between countries. While levels of growth, development and the effect of modern religions vary from one country to another, traditional practices, cultural norms, gender roles and a sense of communalism are shared by all. The nature of violence against girls is therefore similar in all African countries, although the magnitude tends to be influenced by each country's socio-economic conditions. The nature of violence tends to fall into four categories: physical, sexual, emotional or psychological, and economic. These classifications are usually closely interwoven - for example, sexual violence may result in physical attack or injuries, though they affect the victim in different ways.

Physical Violence

Physical violence towards girls takes place when visible and direct interaction with a girl is aimed at inflicting physical pain. It can take the form of caning, slapping, pinching, burning and overworking. Although boys generally tend to experience

more physical violence than girls, the nature of physical violence directed at girls has peculiarities that tend to recur in other forms.¹ All over Africa, domestic work and household chores remain the domain of girls and women: boys are free to play, with no obligation to do such chores. Girls are exposed to high-risk work such as cooking, chopping firewood, peeling and looking after siblings. They tend to be over-worked and are often ridiculed, or even assaulted, if they fail to perform to the expectations of the community.

In communities across Africa, reinforced by traditional practices, men and boys want to prove their 'superiority' over girls - and an easy way to do this is by physically assaulting, threatening or ridiculing them.

Some cultural and traditional practices - such as female genital mutilation, teeth removal, tattooing, and many others - also inflict physical injuries on girls. While these are often accepted as part of a young girl's initiation into adulthood, preparing them for their future marital roles, they cause grave bodily harm. In countries such as Sierra Leone, The Gambia, Nigeria, Kenya, and Uganda, millions of girls are subjected to the ordeal of female genital mutilation in the name of promoting traditional cultures. This horrendous practice is perpetuated by community beliefs that girls are incomplete without it - in utter defiance of scientific knowledge and the imperative health risks it poses.

Sexual Violence

Sexual violence is the most rampant form of violence directed at girls in particular, and on women in general. Acts of sexual violence against girls involve forceful sexual acts, touching them against their will, coerced kissing, sexual harassment and being exposed to adults having sex. Sexual violence encompasses not only physical abuse, but enduring trauma too: it dehumanises victims by reducing them to mere objects of men's sexual adventures.

¹ 2005, Violence against Children: The Voices of Ugandan Children and Adults, Dipak Naker, p 19.

The rape of, and brutal sexual violence against, girls is on the rise in all African countries - or is it perhaps that there is more awareness of the sexual violence that exists? In communities, neighbourhoods and on village paths, girls continue to be sexually abused and assaulted from a very young age. When talking of sexual violence against girls, there is a tendency to think that such acts are committed by mindless louts. But the perpetrators such violence is not limited to strangers to the victims: on the contrary, most girls are people known to them, and are often people who have been entrusted to look after them. Perpetrators tend to be uncles, cousins, fathers, family friends, teachers and caretakers. In a further twist, girls who report sexual violence are often tormented and rarely taken seriously.²

Sexual violence against girls is firmly grounded in traditional beliefs, myths and cultural norms. For example, in South Africa, Lesotho, Swaziland and Kenya, the belief that sexual intercourse with a young girl can cure HIV or AIDS has led to an increase in cases of sexual violence against girls, leaving a huge psychological scar on the victims. Traditional African practices such as early and often forced marriages, the payment of a bride price, and polygamy are all synonymous with violence against girls, who are reduced to sub-human assets belonging to men. Early marriage and the payment of a bride price continue to be embedded in traditional heritage throughout Africa, oblivious to changing social contexts. Girls are brought up knowing that they are a source of wealth for their family, and any training they get at home is always tailored towards preparing them for marriage. Boys grow up knowing that their sisters have no rights to the parents' property.

Emotional Violence

Emotional violence against girls is widespread. Although it is invisible, it has an enduring effect on victims. Physical and sexual violence not only traumatises victims, but often attracts psychological violence from the community too – making girls multiple victims. When a girl is raped and exposed to the pain of sexual

² Ibid, p 27.

violence, it is traumatising enough. But when she also contracts HIV from the man who raped her, she can be subjected to ridicule and labelled promiscuous. A community's rejection of such girls and the stigma they suffer is in itself a different kind of violence – emotional violence.

The patriarchal structure of African communities associates promiscuity with women, while exonerating the men. Although many Africans now consider this to be hypocritical, it is often legitimised by tactfully constructing and perpetrating such attitudes with a level of disempowering innocence. Girls are constantly made to feel, and even agree, that they are inferior to boys and men: across the continent songs, poetry, art, and entertainment often contain phrases that ridicule girls and women.

Economic Violence

Economic violence against girls involves unjustly denying them access to resources in the community and exposing them to excessive and exploitative forms of labour. Girls tend to be overworked by domestic chores, as a 13 year-old Ugandan girl described: “I wake up early and then have to sweep and fetch water and cook porridge for everyone. Then when I come from school, I have to wash clothes, pound cassava, cook supper, and wash plates. I am so tired by the time I go to sleep. There is no time to study.”³

This girl's experience is echoed by millions of girls across the continent who are made to work beyond what is reasonable for their age. Few girls have the opportunity to go on to higher levels of education: communities believe that there is less value in educating girls, who will be married off one day, whereas boys will propagate the clan. Girls gauge their success by living up to the expectations of their community. In some communities, girls are even denied basic facilities and needs – for example, some Ugandan tribes believe that women and girls should

³ Ibid, p 31.

not eat certain foods, including eggs, milk and chicken. The reasons for the practice are unclear, although it is thought to be perpetuated by a belief that these foods cause women to become infertile. The result of this belief, of course, is that girls are denied good levels of nutrition while boys and men are not. Most girls in communities in Africa are also denied the right to inherit their parents' property.

Analysing the nature of violence against girls in physical, sexual, emotional and economic categories can help us understand the dimensions of such violence in African communities. It is worth noting, however, that such a categorisation is not watertight: as well as overlapping, the categories are grounded on one common denominator – tradition – and perpetuated by a patriarchal social order. To ensure it remains relevant to the debate, the causes and effects of – and the proposed strategies to deal with – violence against girls must be analysed in a way that reflects both traditional and modern or changing social contexts.

The Causes and Incidence of Violence against Girls in the Community

Before analysing what causes violence against girls in the community, it is important to note that violence does not just happen. Like theatre, violence has actors: the violators who, while influenced by the reigning community environment and traditions, act from their own free will; and the victims, whose vulnerability and ignorance is exploited by the perpetrators. It is important, therefore, to remember that these are deliberate actions – lest we run the risk of attributing them to other, more obscure circumstances.

Traditional Beliefs and Cultural Norms

The role that tradition, cultural beliefs and attitudes play in determining the behaviour patterns of Africans – both individually and communally – cannot be understated. Although not a direct cause of violence, there are elements of traditional practice that condone – and in certain instances, justify – violent acts against girls. Despite warnings of health risks by medical experts, female genital mutilation continues to be practiced all over Africa. The inducements are not material: they are embedded in culture and tradition, with the belief that a girl who is not ‘circumcised’ is not worthy of marriage. While this belief, and the demand for female genital mutilation, is propagated and socially constructed by men, they often feign innocence and ignorance. Citing the knife-wielding women, men have gone past arguing that ‘it is our culture’, and now claim that ‘the girls like it that way’, in order to sustain the practice. Even if girls do say they like it, this is probably because community traditions bar them from condemning the practice.

The knife-wielding women are not merely accomplices of the men, but are also victims of the enduring social order of patriarchy. A conspiracy of silence, based on traditional beliefs and an allegiance to communal authority, sets the scene for the abuse of these girls. Traditional practices also propagate taboos, while myths and legends make girls succumb to violence against them, allowing the perpetrators to go free. A girl who is sexually abused by the father will not report the abuse to the community leader or her mother, because the community will not believe her.

Patriarchy and Unequal Power Relations

Patriarchy – a worldwide problem – is the major underlying cause of violence against girls in Africa. It breeds unequal power relations between men and women, boys and girls, often ascribing dominion to the males over the females.

Tradition and cultural practices make girls believe, and often accept, that they are inferior to boys and men. This status quo is carefully constructed using myths and stereotypes that continually subdue girls and define gender roles, demanding that girls do disproportionately more work than boys. Patriarchy also defines inheritance rights for boys, while denying the same to the girls – in many parts of Africa, its thought that they have no need to inherit paternal property as they will be married off.

Boys and men often exercise this dominion attributed to them by patriarchy over girls in their community by acting violently towards them. Rape, physical assault and intimidation all depict an unbalance in power relations between men and boys and women and girls. The social construction of such inequality in gender roles is a major cause of violence against girls in Africa.

Vulnerability Due to Poor Socio-economic Conditions

Poverty and poor socio-economic conditions are also factors in violence against girls in many African communities. While poverty is not a *cause* of violence against girls, it does create the conditions of helplessness, lawlessness and vulnerability that provide a perfect climate for such violence.

In Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania, thousands of girls admit to having received or anticipated receiving gifts of money and ornaments in exchange for sex, with an overwhelming majority of mothers conceding they encouraged their daughters to do so. Poverty allows the perpetrators to exploit these girls sexually, with the aid of a parent.

In Douala (Cameroon), high numbers of young girls are trafficked from rural areas with promises of jobs, only to find themselves forced into prostitution and hard labour when they arrive in the city. Poverty induces the girls to move to the city centre, where they are susceptible to violence.

Armed Conflict and Instability

Violence against girls in the community takes place in times of war and of peace. However, the extent of violence against girls, and the different forms it takes, in armed conflict situations on the African continent is alarming. From Sierra Leone to Liberia, Côte D' Ivoire to Niger, the Darfur region and southern Sudan to northern Uganda, Angola to Democratic Republic of Congo and Mozambique, Eritrea and Ethiopia to Somalia, African conflicts all resonate with one thing: violence against girls. There is a disturbing pattern in all these conflict areas, whereby combatants deliberately target girls, orchestrating physical – largely sexual – violence against them. Modern guerrilla warfare has become part of the landscape of African conflicts – boys and girls are abducted and coerced into active combat, committing horrendous crimes that defy their age and consent. In addition to coercion, girls and boys in Sierra Leone, Liberia, northern Uganda and eastern Congo have been tortured, mutilated and eventually killed. For those who manage to survive the battlefield, the path to rehabilitation and reintegration is an uphill one – and is even more difficult for girls.

In Sierra Leone, for example, the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) pursued a deliberate strategy of violating the rights of girls and women. Girls were abducted and compelled to fight against their will. Returning to their communities after the conflict was over, they were accused of being combatants in breach of gender roles. Relatives and friends alike shunned girls and women who had been raped, due to the stigma attached. These girls therefore are double victims – of the rebels during the conflict, and then of their communities' hostile attitudes after they return.

The situation is similar in northern Uganda, where thousands of schoolgirls were abducted by the Lord's Resistance Army, then made to fight or turned into sex slaves for the rebel commanders. Some of the girls who have returned from captivity are not only HIV-positive, but have also been ostracised for carrying babies fathered by rebels against their will.

In neighbouring Democratic Republic of Congo, United Nations peacekeepers from South Africa and Bangladesh have joined the rebels and local militia groups

in orchestrating sexual violence against girls. There are international instruments condemning violence against girls and other civilians in conflict situations, but tougher actions are needed from the international community. All parties involved in conflicts in Africa must make an immediate commitment to end sexual violence against girls.

Emerging Social Challenges

The wave of emerging social challenges, the development process and liberal market economies have also contributed to violence against girls in Africa. Liberal reform in the 1990s brought with it vices such as pornography, transmitted through the mass media, magazines and the internet. The sexual exploitation of girls for commercial purposes and trafficking is at an all-time high in most capitals on the African continent. While these practices are caused by a matrix of factors, the proliferation of pornographic materials and the growth in the sex trade are a result of unregulated liberal markets. The process of economic reforms and liberalisation have not been accompanied by the corresponding legal and institutional reforms necessary to respond to social challenges that result from this growth.

In conclusion, none of the factors discussed here are solely responsible for violence against girls in Africa, nor do they represent the only causes of it. Nevertheless, they do offer us a guide to understanding the circumstances in which such violence occurs, pointing to how the causes are linked together.

The Impact and Consequences of Violence on Girls

Like its nature and causes, the impact of violence against girls is varied. The effects can be physical, emotional, psychological and economic – and while we can analyse these individually, they often occur simultaneously.

The immediate and visible effects of physical or sexual violence against girls are usually visible, resulting in bruising, bleeding or even death. In conflict areas, girls can be directly targeted with violence or injured as a direct result of conflict, and often suffer multiple effects from both types of violence. In northern Uganda, for example, girls have been raped, maimed and left bleeding, and permanently disabled by mutilation around the mouth, ears and limbs.

Apart from leaving them deformed, female genital mutilation has enduring health implications for girls – for example, in the Sudan 10 to 30 per cent of young girls die from the practice, especially in areas where medical supplies are not adequate.⁴ Girls can also suffer from urinary retention, infections and reproductive complications.

Sexual violence in the form of rape can produce complications in girls' reproductive systems, and even leave them infertile. It can also lead to unwanted pregnancies and, if the girl is very young, complications in childbirth that may result in death. Millions of girls in Africa have also contracted HIV as a result of sexual violence perpetrated against them by infected men.

The most enduring effects of violence on girls remain the invisible psychosocial dimensions. Girls who are victims of physical, sexual or psychological violence lose self-esteem. Psychiatrists contend that the greatest and most enduring damage of violence is the feeling of rejection and the lack of self-worth. Violence dehumanises girls, robbing them of their sense of belonging to the community. While wounds can heal, it is difficult for victims of violence to fully recover their self-esteem, no matter how much counselling they receive. When a girl is raped, the physical damage may be cured – her wounds may heal, bruises disappear and the bleeding will probably stop. But she may then be exposed to stigma and ridicule in the community: this will haunt her, reminding her of the violence she went through. She may be subjected to mental torment, social discomfort and depression – a daunting fact that many victims of violence have to cope with for the rest of their lives.

⁴ 1994, 'Female Genital Mutilation and the Responsibility of Reproductive Health Professionals', N Toubia, *International Journal of Gynaecology and Obstetrics*, 46: 127-135.

Violence against girls also affects the relationships they engage in after they have recovered. Most perpetrators of violence against girls are people who are close to them: relatives or friends. To the victim, such abuse betrays the trust and confidence she had placed in the person. It is also a sad experience and a reminder to the victim not to put her trust in any other friends or relatives. While this may be a legitimate precautionary measure, the victim will tend to withdraw, and be excluded from their community. A girl or woman who has been raped may never want to engage in any sexual relationships, due to the mistrust that she has for men. Where a child is born out of the rape, the mother may not feel the same levels of love for the child that she would have, had it been willingly conceived. The child may itself become a victim of violence or rejection, if the mother feels anger towards it. The child may grow up to become violent too, thereby perpetuating the vicious circle of violence.

Violence against girls can also disrupt career plans and livelihoods. In Uganda, examples abound of girls who have been forced to drop out of school and marry when their parents have been promised a bride price. A pregnant girl is often asked by her parents to forfeit any career plans and marry, regardless of whether she is physically, psychologically and economically prepared to take on the responsibilities of married life. Early marriage tends to mean women also have more children than they may otherwise have planned. These children are then denied a decent standard of living, as their parents' capacity to provide for them is limited.

All the consequences of violence against girls – whether physical or psychological, long or short-term – are negative. It is worth noting that violence against girls has a tendency to recur and reproduce itself in the victim or those associated with her. This is a cycle that must be broken: policies and interventions to deal with violence against girls must be put in place and implemented.

Policies, Instruments and Interventions that Deal with Violence against Girls in the Community

Most African countries have minimum policies and legislations to combat violence against girls, albeit with variations and gaps in implementation. Internationally, the United Nations and the African Union both have instruments to protect girls and women from violence, including:

- ◆ UN Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) (1979) – a broad framework to promote the welfare of, and equal rights for, women;
- ◆ the Vienna Declaration on Human Rights (1993);
- ◆ the Beijing Platform for Action (1995).

Although they do not directly refer to violence against girls, the Millennium Development Goals (2000) commit countries in Africa to removing all barriers to gender equality in education. As violence against girls in the community is part of the cause of this imbalance, the Millennium Development Goals can be viewed as an instrument to curb violence against girls.

More recent international instruments adopted to protect girls from violence include the UN's Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the Optional Protocol on Pornography and Child Sexual Exploitation. The Rome Statute of 2002, which established the International Criminal Court, also considers the systematic rape of women by combatants in conflict areas to be a war crime. The African Union's Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (1992) has a committee to oversee its implementation in member countries.

Despite the growing list of international and regional instruments to which African states have committed themselves, violence against girls remains unacceptably high on the continent. It is difficult to ascertain the actual magnitude of the problem: available data does not truly reflect the situation, as complex social and

cultural reasons shield the information.⁵ It is difficult to work out what has gone wrong. It is tempting to conclude – somewhat harshly – that African countries use the signing and ratification of these instruments as a ceremonial public relations exercise, and do not pursue the rights of all children under their jurisdiction. Perhaps there are now enough instruments, conventions and treaties – what remains is to ensure that they are implemented. How can any country on this continent pride itself in having signed the CRC, its optional protocols, the CEDAW and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, when violence against girls continues to be widespread? It just does not add up.

African countries are not all at the same level when it comes to developing domestic policies and intervention mechanisms to combat violence against girls and implementing those strategies. All English-speaking countries have laws to punish sexual offences against children – carrying a maximum penalty of death, in the case of Uganda. However, few Anglophone countries have passed a specific legislation condemning female genital mutilation, despite the prevalence of the practice.

On the general principles of legal reform, all African countries are at different stages of consolidating laws into comprehensive and enforceable legal regimes. South Africa has what is perhaps the most progressive legal regime regarding violence against women and girls: upon ratifying the CEDAW and the CRC, it enacted the Domestic Violence Act in 1998 and reformed the juvenile justice system and offences against children. Nevertheless, the laws are not necessarily effective in preventing violence against girls: anyone who has been to South Africa will agree that they are not. In most African countries, the laws in place are old colonial laws, many of which have been overtaken by contemporary circumstances.

Despite the gaps in the formulation and implementation of policies and laws to address violence against girls, civil society organisations across Africa are using varied methods and approaches to fight the abuse. In Nigeria, Social Advocacy against Violence against Women (SAAVAW) launched a campaign against gender violence, with the support of UN Development Fund for Women. Using music and

⁵ 2004, *Stop Violence against Girls in Schools*, ActionAid International, p 5.

drama, they established school clubs to highlight the impact of gender violence and to challenge community stereotypes against women that perpetuate violence. Although this campaign formally concluded in 1999, its unique methods and the participation of girls and boys is something to learn from. Incidentally, it was SAAVAW itself that learnt the most from the campaign: citing the absence of women in key leadership positions in their organisation, they rightly noted that “violence against women cannot be separated from the broader issues of women’s economic and social standing in the country.”⁶ Unequal gender relations remain a major cause of violence against girls in Africa.

Good Practice in Addressing Violence against Girls in Africa

It is rather ambitious to try to find good practice in combating violence in any African country – not just because it is difficult to establish the parameters of good practice, but also because in cases where a country has attempted to implement progressive initiatives to curb violence against girls, it has rarely been sustained for long enough to warrant being regarded as good practice. Given the size of the continent and the specific contexts of each country, it would also take too long to establish and document good practice. However, these two brief case studies highlight some interventions that can make a positive impact on the practice of violence against girls.

Case Study 1: Breaking the Silence on Sexual Violence in Sierra Leone

During the conflict in Sierra Leone, violence was perpetrated against girls by both RUF rebels and the government forces. Girls were forcefully enlisted in combat,

⁶ July 2000, ‘Nigerian Women Target Gender Violence’, Michael Fleshan, *Africa Recovery*, vol 14, no 2, p 5.

mutilated and tortured, and suffered horrendous sexual violence. However, it was the psychological violence inflicted on them by their communities – the accusations that they had breached gender roles and participated in direct conflict – that continued to torment girls during their recovery process. Faced with rejection and stigma from their communities because they had been raped, many girls remained silent for fear of being alienated.

The Lomé Accord – a response to past injustices and the violation of rights during the conflict – brought the war to an end. Conflicting parties agreed on a South Africa-style truth and reconciliation commission, which provided all victims with the opportunity to narrate the violations that they faced during the war. For many girls – whose violations had hitherto been met with denials and who had been silenced by the hostile attitudes of their communities – it was a relief to break the silence, and to do so before an audience that listened in confidence. While it is still too early to tell how successful the truth and reconciliation commission will be, it has at least achieved one thing: it has broken the silence of thousands of girls who were physically and sexually abused during the conflict. In a letter to the Commission, Ms Chinsia Caesar asserts her expectation of a new Sierra Leone: “I hope to see a Sierra Leone offering equal opportunities to boys and girls from cradle to the grave. In particular, I want to see a country where girls are not left out, but are encouraged to reach the highest peak of their potential.”⁷ The only way to allow girls like Chinsia to achieve this dream is to promote education for girls and protect them from abuse and all kinds of violence.

Reflecting on thousands of testimonies in its final analysis, the Commission made recommendations to the government, including:

- ◆ reform of Sierra Leone’s legal systems, abusive police institutions and the judiciary to enable girls and women to report cases of violence against them freely without any intimidation;
- ◆ repeal of discriminatory customary laws in marriage that deny girls the rights of inheritance and property ownership;
- ◆ political representation of women in government and all elective positions.

⁷ January 2005, ‘Sexual Violence, an “Invisible War Crime”: Sierra Leone Truth Commission Condemns Abuse, Discrimination’, Nirit Ben-Ari and Ernest Harsch, *Africa Renewal*, vol 18, no 4, p 1.

If fully implemented, the above recommendations will help to tackle the causes of violence against girls and women that we noted earlier: tradition, patriarchy and the socio-economic context. While contexts may vary, Sierra Leone's post-war experience may offer a good lesson for other countries emerging from conflict.

Case Study 2: Civil Society Campaign against Ritual Servitude in Ghana

The second case study, also from west Africa, is a campaign against ritual servitude in Ghana. Civil society organisation International Needs Ghana (ING) is battling the three-century-old tradition of *trokosi* – literally 'wife of god' – a practice that also exists in Benin, Nigeria, Togo and perhaps beyond. If someone commits a serious crime, traditional leaders order that a young girl from the family be sent to a shrine as a form of atonement. Far from the claims of community leaders, the girls often end up being exploited sexually and as slave labour.⁸ This is a situation where tradition not only condones and justifies violence against girls, but is also used to perpetrate violence.

With support from the UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), ING embarked on an anti-trokosi programme, despite threats from traditional leaders. Apart from providing vocational training and psychosocial counselling, the programme focused on campaigns aimed at raising awareness of laws and changing trokosi practices. In 1998, ING successfully lobbied Parliament to outlaw trokosi and all forms of ritualised labour. This position was later endorsed by the President, who declared that, "girls must go to school and not to the shrines."⁹ By 2001, ING had rehabilitated 2,800 trokosi women and children.

Despite all the progress made in the elimination of trokosi, a challenge still remains, as many people remain ignorant of the practice and the law banning it.

⁸ December 2001, 'Liberating Girls from Trokosi – Campaign against Ritual Servitude in Ghana', Nirit Ben-Ari, *Africa Recovery*, vol 15, no 4, p 26.

⁹ Ibid.

Members of ING have also been accused by traditionalists of undermining their culture and the right to freedom of religion. It is never easy to change a status quo built on centuries-old traditions and mythology – especially where economic benefits for the perpetrators are at stake.

ING's intervention in addressing the tradition of ritual sacrifice and servitude is one that offers lessons to most – if not all – African countries where similar practices exist. It is not enough to rehabilitate victims of this abuse and educate people on the law: proactive lobbying of the authorities to address this practice through legislation and law enforcement is critical. Changing centuries-old practices is not going to come easily – it calls for determination and courage, as those who try to do so will be subject to physical threats and accusations of treachery.

The experience of one local NGO in Ghana offers a learning opportunity for other NGOs in Swaziland, Cameroon, Kenya or Chad. While trokosi itself may not exist in these countries, there might be other traditional practices that violate the rights of girls in heinous ways, which they could tackle using a similar approach.

These two case studies highlight the responses communities can make to address violence against girls in Africa, in times of war and of peace, and when tradition seems to dictate otherwise. Humble as they may appear, they both played vital roles in transforming communities and changing attitudes and practices. Both cases involved breaking a conspiracy of silence on the oppression of girls, and a status quo established on a centuries-old mythology. They demonstrate that causes of violence with roots in tradition are diverse – so interventions to tackle them must equally be multi-faceted.

Strategies and the Way Forward

It is disturbing to note that violence against girls is on the increase, despite efforts at national and international levels to combat the practice. Most African countries have committed themselves, at least in principle, to implementing the various

international conventions and declarations to protect girls and women against violence. However, the fact that violence against girls – sometimes in very barbaric forms – continues to prevail, defeats the noblest intentions and initiatives to curb it. For African States and civil society, it is time to move away from resolutions, declarations and diplomatic niceties and actually get our hands dirty. No resolution will change the situation of the millions of girls who endure violence every day in all corners of this continent, unless it is implemented. The following strategies will help to curb violence against girls, but it should be noted that they are neither new nor exhaustive.

Creating Awareness and Education

With all the growth in education and the proliferation of information across Africa, it remains evident that there is a huge knowledge gap on the continent. It is not a gap in intellectual knowledge. The gap in knowledge is rather found in attitudes, perceptions and belief systems. When grounded in these, violence against girls becomes easy to justify and accept.

When Mahatma Gandhi was asked what three things he thought India needed most, he responded in a satirical, yet emphatic way: “education, education and education”. It seems that this is also what is needed to curb the violence against girls in Africa today: education of the mind, education of attitudes and education of the hands. We need education on the universal values and principles of child protection, and the principles of non-discrimination. We need to learn afresh that African girls are no less human than their male counterparts or their contemporaries in other parts of the world – developed or developing. We also need education to help change our attitudes, to drop negative traditional practices that run counter to the universal principles of child protection and non-discrimination. This kind of education is not the preserve of universities and colleges: it can only be achieved through the active involvement of civil society,

communities, local, provincial and national governments. It is this type of knowledge that will drive the enactment of laws and policies to prevent ritual servitude, early marriage and female genital mutilation.

Establishing Legal Protection Mechanisms

African states need to put a legal framework in place, reinforce it and ensure that domestic legislation is in line with international standards and instruments that protect girls from violence. African countries that have yet to ratify and implement international conventions that protect girls from violence need to be reminded that they are holding back the development of their own citizens. Civil society should raise the level of engagement with their governments and seek international alliances, such as The African Child Policy Forum, to push their countries into action. It is time for domestic laws to depart from customary practices and norms by: establishing a minimum age for marriage (18 years); abolishing bride price in all its forms; providing equal inheritance rights to girls and boys; and criminalising all violence against girls. Nevertheless, laws and policies alone cannot protect girls from violence: protection can only be guaranteed if these laws are implemented. Civil society needs to be vigilant, using laws and policies already established to protect girls against violence and constantly analysing, identifying gaps and lobbying for these laws to be reviewed.

Reporting and Documenting of Cases of Abuse

As discussed earlier, traditional attitudes and social relations mean that cases of violence against girls tend to be under-reported, giving a false impression that all is well. It may, for example, be the case that in countries with a low reported incidence of violence against girls the true incidence is in fact much higher. As such, cases of violence against girls and other gender-specific abuses must be well documented, to enable us to establish the actual magnitude of the problem. Establishing confidential reporting systems for abused girls, such as toll-free telephone help lines, is important to encourage reporting. As the Sierra Leone case study suggests, this could open up space for the girls to speak out about their experiences and seek redress for violence perpetrated against them. Once the magnitude and extent of abuse is clearly established, appropriate interventions can be designed to overcome them. Documentation will also help government and civil society organisations to measure the impact of interventions, map any gaps that exist, and harness coordination between stakeholders for a more efficient allocation of resources.

Empowering Girls to Campaign against Violence

We have to begin a deliberate strategy of empowering girls and women to spearhead the campaign on violence against them. This can be achieved in part through providing proper education for girls and promoting political representation of women at all levels of leadership. Equitable education and the political representation of girls and women can help to break the unequal power relations between men and women that exist in most countries in Africa – a situation that we have already observed is a major cause of violence against girls. Although it is

likely to be a long time before we see the results of participation and political representation, it will help to demystify centuries-old patriarchal societies that perpetuate imbalances in the community.

Accountability to Regional and International Bodies

Many African countries have already signed international conventions, treaties and policies. Civil society must now develop channels of communication with national governments to ensure that they report regularly to the treaty bodies, with particular emphasis on violence against the girls. This should help to hasten the development of very strong alliances at local and international levels to combat violence against girls in all African countries.

African families remain the best place to protect girls from abuse, although many recorded abuses occur within families. To nurture this opportunity, we need to adopt deliberate education and income-generation strategies that will empower families and communities to protect girls from violence. It is difficult to protect a girl who cannot afford basic necessities such as sanitary pads, books and other school materials from her abuse, when a luring perpetrator can use her need for such materials to his advantage.

Conclusion

The question of violence against girls cannot be seen in isolation. It is part of a broader pattern of discrimination against women, interwoven with many other social challenges that countries in Africa have to contend with. Any analysis of its nature, causes, impact and interventions can only be designed while taking these

social challenges into account. While governments and individuals have a particular responsibility to protect girls from violence and abuse, communities remain central to such efforts, when it comes to changing attitudes, traditions and belief patterns. The protection of girls from violence and abuse is the responsibility of everyone in the community.

As civil society organisations advancing the rights of all children and advocating for the elimination of all forms of violence against girls, we have a duty to:

- ◆ raise awareness in communities on the cost of violence;
- ◆ lobby institutions and governments for laws and policies to protect girls from violence;
- ◆ facilitate the participation of girls in campaigns against violence.

The task before us is not an easy one – nor will it be achieved through a one-off event such as the Second International Policy Conference on the African Child: Violence Against Girls in Africa. It requires a commitment that may go beyond the call of duty. We should be willing to build alliances to learn from each other, and to explore new and even unconventional initiatives of remedy. If we abdicate this responsibility because it is too uncomfortable or costly, then history will judge us harshly.

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