

“IMPROVING ACCESS TO COMPREHENSIVE CARE FOR SURVIVORS OF SEXUAL AND GENDER BASED VIOLENCE”

A Keynote address presented at the Official Opening of the Second Annual Sexual and Gender Based Violence Awareness Week

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Introduction

Sexual Gender based violence (SGBV) refers to any act of violence or threat including, coercion or other deprivations of liberty directed at a particular individual or group on the basis of their gender.

In Uganda SGBV takes many forms and includes rape, defilement, commercial child sexual exploitation, domestic violence, trafficking of women and girls, sexual harassment and discrimination. It also encompasses other traditional and cultural forms of violence such as female genital mutilation, widow inheritance, and early marriage.

The most commonly reported form of SGBV is domestic violence. Sexual violence, including rape, defilement, sexual assault and exploitation, is generally under-reported. Survivors do not speak out because of fear of further violence, shame, social stigma, ignorance about available services and a lack of services that fully respect their rights. Therefore, all actors must assume and believe that SGBV is under-reported in Uganda.

SGBV normally takes place in homes or outside the home environment and seems to affect almost all age groups. The direct and indirect health and social economic effects on individuals, the family and the community as a whole tend to be profound.

In Uganda most cases of SGBV reported to police are not taken to court for prosecution of the offenders. For instance, in 2004 out of 11,012 cases of defilement reported in Uganda, only 3,428 cases (31%) were taken to court.

Failure to adequately address SGBV in all its forms poses a serious challenge towards achieving the goal of poverty eradication and improved quality of life in Uganda especially for women and children. It also makes it very difficult for Uganda to achieve the Millennium

Development Goals especially MDG 3 which is to “promote gender equity and women empowerment”.

Comprehensive services for survivors of SGBV

Psychosocial and legal support services for survivors of SGBV need to be comprehensive. This means a package of assessment, treatment, rehabilitation, legal support, documentation and appropriate referral. There must be compassion empathy and an environment where the survivors are assured of personal security. The following basic elements are necessary for ensuring that services for survivors of SGBV are comprehensive.

Rights based approaches

Ensuring access to justice for survivors of SGBV requires preventative measures that ensure that the rights of people who have experienced S/GBV are recognized and protected. These include the right to information, the right to quality treatment and rehabilitation, the right to confidentiality and others. There is also need for systems and strategies for monitoring and responding when rights are breached.

Making the relevant laws operational

Uganda has ratified and signed various international conventions and declarations. There has also been some progress though slow to domesticate these and also to revise others for instance those relating to sexual offences. H.E the President recently signed the Domestic Relations Law which outlaws widow inheritance and marital rape. There is also the law on genital mutilation. There is need however for commitment by all relevant sectors to make these laws operational by developing appropriate policies and strategic plans.

Community based programs

There is need to develop a sense of ownership of SGBV programs in the various Communities. This means active participation by the community in identifying the necessary strategic interventions, allocating resources especially human resource and in monitoring services.

Evidence based interventions

Policy makers and service providers in the area of SGBV need to be empowered to carry out operational research and direct studies to be able to appropriately plan and to deliver quality services for survivors of SGBV. There is need for instance for studies into the current preventive strategies and the current counseling approaches used.

To be able to have SGBV policies and strategic plans that are effective, information is vital. This requires SGBV to be incorporated into the existing Management Information Systems. This information should not only be collected but should be analyzed and disseminated to the key actors.

Developing the Human Resource Capacity

There is need to ensure that there are adequate numbers of personnel in the various sectors (health sector, community services sector, justice law and order sector, etc) who have the appropriate knowledge, skills and attitudes for responding appropriately to SGBV. Motivation is also vital. There are several studies showing the benefit of paid community workers as opposed to volunteers. There is also evidence that professionalizing the police in terms of recruiting social workers, psychologists, etc enhances the effectiveness of the police in ensuring that the rights of SGBV survivors are protected. There is need for victim friendly community social services, victim friendly health services, victim friendly police services and victim friendly courts.

Networking and Collaboration

In Uganda where resources are limited effective SGBV programs require inter-sectoral and intra-sectoral collaboration. Furthermore, there is need to involve the private sector with public-private partnerships encouraged at the national and community levels as regards policy making, resource mobilization and service provision. Networks between service providers will facilitate the sharing of information and lessons learned.

Quality assurance in service provision

Survivors of SGBV have a right to services that will facilitate their recovery and enable them to reintegrate into their families and the society. This means that psychosocial rehabilitation programs need to aim at improving the quality of life of survivors. Services for survivors need to have guidelines and protocols in place that clearly indicate the roles and responsibilities of the various service providers. There must be referral systems established within the communities and efforts made to ensure that survivors and their families are aware of them.

Awareness and Advocacy

There is need for awareness and strong advocacy targeting decision makers and the general public about the challenges of gender based violence and coercion against women and children and its implications for health.

Political Commitment

Finally, there are lessons to be learned from the HIV/AIDS campaign where political commitment at all levels, right from H.E. the President of Uganda down to the grass root communities, was very influential in overcoming challenges and ensuring success.