

Refugee Law Project Hosts Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV) Awareness Week, March 2-6

Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) during conflict has reached epidemic proportions, and refugees are particularly vulnerable in both their country of origin and in that of asylum. To respond to the growing incidence of SGBV perpetrated against women, men, and children, the Refugee Law Project hosted an SGBV Awareness Week from March 2-6 at Sharing Hall, Nsambya in Kampala.

The conference began with a march from RLP offices in Old Kampala to Sharing Hall. The mood was festive, with refugees, RLP staff, and community members carrying banners and led by the Chief Walker and conference opener, Honourable Hussein Kyanjo (MP Makindye West), and a marching band along the route. Some participants received caps, T-shirts, and posters with slogans communicating the week's themes: "It Takes One Person to Harm. It Takes a Community to Heal," "Gender for Men? Gender for Me!" and "NoBODY is Immune: Break the Silence on SGBV!"

The week's activities included showcasing by partner organizations; distribution of materials detailing services available to refugees; free voluntary counseling and testing (VCT) by AIDS Information Center; and presentations, panel discussions, and documentaries on SGBV-related issues. Representatives from RLP, UNHCR, Raising Voices, ACTV, UNFPA, Save the Children, the Ministry of Gender, Uganda Police, OHCHR, Amnesty International, and OXFAM made remarks on a series of topics, from the physical and psychological effects of SGBV to its legal implications to the role of international organizations and NGOs in its prevention. Refugees and asylum-seekers attended the sessions in encouraging numbers, and were attended to by French, Kiswahili, Somali, Amharic, and Kinyarwanda interpreters. Each discussion promoted interaction between presenters and the audience, and the subsequent question-and-answer sessions provoked debate and comments from those in attendance. The conference ended on March 6th with a closing by Honourable Nabillah Naggayi Sempala (Woman MP Kampala).

As a result of the conference, RLP communicated to refugees and to the wider public the tragic effects of SGBV on female, male, and child victims. By including a wide variety of service organizations, the conference provided an opportunity to distribute important information to refugees. In addition, many refugees took advantage of the free VCT on the conference's first day. Finally, presenters were given the opportunity to hear about refugee concerns directly from refugees themselves, even as the refugees were given the chance to learn more about those organizations providing them with services.

At times, it became evident that many refugees continued to be seriously troubled by the effects of the SGBV they had experienced, and it became clear that the week-long conference should be succeeded by follow-up sessions to encourage healing for individuals as well as for the refugee community as a whole. **The first follow-up session, "Still Hurting, Still Healing: A Women's Follow-Up on SGBV," will be held on April 9, 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. at Sharing Hall, Nsambya.** While this first session is intended for the female refugee population, a second follow-up will be directed at the male refugee population (date TBD). The four-part series will conclude in late 2009 with a final session for all refugees during which concerns raised at each follow-up will be discussed as a community. SGBV Week raised the issue of SGBV as a community-wide issue; its follow-up sessions will draw out gender-specific concerns and allow each

gender a 'safe space' for free and open discussion. The concluding program will reunite the refugee community, thus emphasizing the power of unity in the fight against SGBV and the need for community support for the healing of its victims and survivors.

RLP recognizes SGBV as a serious problem among the men, women, and children of the refugee and asylum-seeking populations. Acknowledging the issue and promoting education regarding the prevention of SGBV and the treatment of survivors is crucial to helping this community heal its wounds, move forward, and continue their lives in dignity. Please join RLP for its women's follow-up, "Still Hurting, Still Healing," on April 9th from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m., or its men's follow-up to be scheduled in the coming weeks. Together, we can work together to heal from and prevent SGBV in our community.