



Refugee Law Project

Faculty of Law, Makerere University



Welcoming Remarks at the Opening of Refugee Law Project's first SGBV Week (2-6 March 2009), given at Sharing Hall, Nsambya, Monday 2 March 2009

Dr Chris Dolan, Director, Refugee Law Project

To our Chief Guest, Honorable Hussein Kyanjo, MP for Makindye West, to all of the organizations represented here, to refugee communities and individuals who have survived Sexual and Gender Based Violence, whether in countries of origin or in exile, to those of you who marched with us today, and to those of you who joined us here at Sharing Hall, I would like, on behalf of Refugee Law Project, to extend a warm welcome to this week of presentations, discussions, films and entertainment. It is a whole week simply because there are so many issues to address.

This is the first time the Refugee Law Project has had an SGBV Week, and we are glad to be able to focused on the issue particularly as it affects refugees and Internally Displaced Persons. You might think it is not something the Refugee Law Project deals with, but in fact the opposite is the case: SGBV is something we are confronted with on a daily basis, whether when providing Legal Aid, offering Counseling, or conducting research work.

It is also an issue which many other organizations are dealing with, many of whom we collaborate with when working with individual clients. These include African Centre for Treatment of Torture Victims, AIDS Information Centre, UNHCR, OHCHR, Sexual Minorities Uganda, Amnesty International, Hope After Rape, and others. Many of them are represented here in the course of this week, and there will be opportunities to use this venue to exchange notes, materials, contacts and experiences.

Sexual and Gender Based Violence, or SGBV, is a very big, wide, umbrella term. It covers an awful lot of issues and dynamics. In the course of the week we shall touch on many of the key issues which take shelter under this umbrella terminology; Defilement, Sexual Exploitation, Early Marriage, the rape of women – these are all things which spring to mind for all of us. But what about hate acts against sexual minorities – who of course are also present in the refugee communities? What about forcible recruitment of young men? Human trafficking? The rape of men? These too are all forms of Sexual and Gender Based Violence.

One of the problems with SGBV is that no reliable figures for the overall extent of the problem exist. No statistics are available to tell us whether refugees and asylum seekers are disproportionately affected by SGBV relative to the general host population. Suffice to say, we know from the lives of our clients, that it is a huge problem for many of them.

We also know that it is an issue which can affect ANYBODY: girl, boy, man, woman. We have had cases of six year old children who have been raped, just as we have had cases of eighty year old grandparents who have suffered the same fate.



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That is why we say, as you have seen on some of our T-shirts and on our poster, ***NOBODY IS IMMUNE!***

It is because *anybody* can be affected, and because we also know little or nothing about the levels of many of these forms of abuse and violation, that we actively encourage everybody to **BREAK THE SILENCE**. Pretending that some people can be raped and others cannot is not a solution to the problem of SGBV. As something which can affect anybody, it is something which everybody needs to be aware of, sensitive to, and able to respond to.

Which brings me to our second slogan for this week: *Gender for Men? Gender for Me!* For too long our communities, governments and international aid organizations have fed us the story that gender is really about women only. If you go to your average refugee or IDP man and ask him about gender, he will almost certainly say that gender is something for women and has nothing to do with him. And if Gender is for women only, then by extension, SGBV is associated primarily with the sexual violence done to women.

One of the several objectives of this week is to change that by opening up the discussion about what gender means for men as well as for women. While it is crucial to highlight SGBV as it affects women (and certainly in terms of sexual violence, the sheer number of women affected almost certainly outpaces the number of men affected), this should not be done by ignoring and thereby belittling what happens to all the other victims of SGBV. As Human Rights Activists we know that rights belong to everybody, not to the majority alone. Furthermore, if we are really to address some of the terrible consequences of SGBV, and to achieve some healing of the wounds it causes, then it is very important to open up the discussion of SGBV as something that can affect Anybody.

Some time back I interviewed an old man in an IDP camp. Twenty years ago he was gang-raped on several consecutive occasions. When we suggested that he might prefer it if his wife was not present during the interview, he responded that she had been present when it happened, she had stayed with him ever since, and that he was very comfortable for her to be part of the conversation. It was an extraordinary example of solidarity within a family. The old man himself said that, even though he had spent two months in hospital getting over the physical damage, he had dealt with the trauma a long time back because he had all the support he needed from his family.

Which brings me to the third and last slogan of this week: *It takes one person to harm but it takes a community to heal.* SGBV does not just break trust between the victim and the perpetrator, it frequently breaks the trust between the victim and her family and/or community. Many communities prefer to blame the victim than to deal with the perpetrator. But this silence and this stigmatization only deepen the wounds already affecting the victim. **It should not be the responsibility of the victim alone to break the silence: that is for all of us!**

With these few words I would like once again to thank you all for being here, and to welcome you to this week.