



What if we responded to sexual violence in conflict as an existential threat?

Statement for International Day for the Elimination of Sexual Violence in Conflict, 2020

Introduction

19 June 2020 marks the 5th year since the United Nations General Assembly established (through resolution A/RES/69/293) the International Day for the Elimination of Sexual Violence in Conflict to sustain support for ending sexual violence in conflict, and to honour millions of victims and survivors globally. This year the focus is on Empowering Survivors of Sexual Violence during the COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, COVID-19 has heightened the challenges of survivors/victims of sexual violence. Recently dubbed the ‘shadow pandemic’ due to the heightened challenges that survivors/victims grapple with amidst global lockdown, the need to eliminate sexual violence cannot be overstated.

On this day some people ponder as to why sexual violence in conflict continues to present its ugly face despite advances in science and technology. Such debates may hold some merits but they also limit understanding of the complex nature of, contexts, and impacts of sexual violence in conflict. As a Civil Society Organisation that has for decades been working closely with survivors and victims of conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV), we pose a question we believe is worth asking; “What if we responded to sexual violence in conflict as an existential threat?”

COVID-19 has proven that humans listen if they feel that their survival is threatened. We believe it's worth reflecting on the progress garnered thus far in the fight against COVID-19, as a pandemic but also as an existential threat – lessons which could help in the struggle against sexual violence in conflict. There is no vaccine against sexual violence in conflict, and no investment to find one on anything like the scale of resources being pumped into finding vaccines against COVID-19. Nonetheless, we can contribute to the Elimination of Sexual Violence in Conflict as an existential threat in a number of ways;

Promoting proactive means of evidence collection and tackling under-reporting: COVID-19 has shown how underreporting hinders the fight to flatten the curve of new infections. Similarly, thousands of survivors or victims of sexual violence grapple in silence and that affects the national statistics – a situation we can avert through massive screening for experiences of war-related harms, including sexual violence. Our experience screening over 6,000 refugees and hosts to date shows that, given a safe environment in which to report,

and making it worthwhile to report by ensuring that the reported needs are responded to, can generate strong evidence.

Tackling stigma and discrimination head-on: Stigma and discrimination of survivors of COVID-19 have earned the utmost condemnation they deserve as the media got awash with unspeakable ordeals of survivors. If only survivors of sexual violence as heinous forms of human rights abuse were accorded the same media response we could have gone a step closer to enabling disclosure and learning pertinent lessons for the elimination of sexual violence.

Reprimanding perpetrators without compromise: For a very long period, emphasis has been on prosecution and holding perpetrators to account. Whereas most perpetrators of conflict-related sexual violence hardly get reprimanded, legal and policy reforms may act as deterrence factors. If SV is treated as a pandemic, perhaps in Uganda we would have levelled ‘attempted murder’ charges against those accused. Therefore, as Uganda and the rest of the world amend their law books, may this day remind us equally to close the loop-holes and make our laws fit for purpose. The current Sex Offences Bill will go a long way in providing cover for male survivors of sexual violence in particular.

Tackling ‘root’ causes: The several episodes of lockdown induced by COVID-19 with the aim of ‘listening’ to where the problem is coming from is an important reminder to address the root causes of problems. Looking back, had the international community imposed dramatic approaches including locking airports, closing international borders, banning public transport, forbidding public gathering, and imposing ‘scientific approaches of business continuity’, perhaps we could have dramatically achieved mileage in tackling sexual violence in conflict. It’s not new to the world that the primary cause of SVC is conflict itself. As such, adopting much more proactive measures against conflict would itself take us a step closer to eliminating sexual violence.

Strengthening health systems: COVID-19 has not only highlighted the worrying condition of most health systems but also demonstrated the need for equipping existing hospitals and health centres. Health workers are among the first points of contact for survivors/victims of CRSV. Access to and uptake of timely and professional health services are vital for speedy recovery and also enable timely disclosure of experiences of sexual violence. However, many health centres remain like hollow shells; they have ‘beautiful’ physical infrastructures but few health officers and empty drug stores. To make matters worse, most health workers are ill-trained on how to provide inclusive services - including how to treat male-survivors of CRSV. To move far, and to avoid survivors self-medicating, it is vital that hospitals’ hardware and software systems be in sync.

Investing in public awareness and information: Ignorance perpetuates silence and affects the reporting of cases. With COVID-19, states have particularly adopted creative measures of ensuring that information on the pandemic reaches all people in their borders, in languages they understand, and by use of all available offline and online platforms. When the general

public are informed, we see significant collective responsibilities in supporting the noble cause, as well as a cadre of concerned persons. Had states invested in distribution of radios, bought airtime, and printed media space for education of masses against sexual violence, perhaps we could have moved closure to eliminate sexual violence by now.

Supporting front-liners: No one is immune to sexual violence including first responders. If we had treated SVC as an existential threat, the world would have actively listened to the concerns of front liners and first responders. The shocking photos of health workers from countries including Italy, as well as security operatives testing positive to COVID-19 while on the line of duty, reminded the world of the often-ignored recommendation on physical, psychological, and financial support front-liners. In the context of CRSV, the front-liners often grapple with vicarious trauma, while other human rights defenders and organisations struggle to breathe from suffocation from state organs.

Financing prevention and response initiatives: Addressing SVC requires a dramatic increase in budget for research, and to support direct service provision to survivors as well as support to the justice institutions to effectively respond to reported cases. Uganda could do more in financing the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, which is mandated to address all issues related to gender.

Engaging the Private Sector: Whereas the private sector at times supports conflicts, their potential role in the support of victims/survivors of SVC is amply demonstrated by the billions of shillings injected by the private sector in the fight against COVID-19. May this day remind state and non-state actors to work closely with the private sector, and also make a wish to that day when double-cabin cars, ambulances, and food items are donated to support service provision to victims/survivors of conflict-related sexual violence.

Bold Political Leadership: From communities through to national, regional, and international fora, COVID-19 has drawn unprecedented political commitment. In April 2019, the UN Security Council reiterated, through Resolution 2467, the need for complete cessation by all parties to armed conflict, and with additional demand for time-bound commitments to ending sexual violence. In March 2020, the UN General-Secretary appealed to warring parties globally to 'lay down their weapons' in support of the battle against COVID-19.

As actors relentlessly supporting global appeals to end sexual violence in war, its time international dignitaries renewed their commitment to ending the armed conflicts that are major breeding grounds for sexual violence in conflict. Let us learn from the response to COVID-19: Wouldn't it be a game-changer if heads of state the world over were to have periodic televised sessions on the elimination of all forms of violence - including sexual violence in conflict?

Nice Commemorations! Contact: info@refugeelawproject.org