



INVEST IN COMMUNITY STRUCTURES, BUILD THE CAPACITY OF WOMEN, GIRLS, BOYS AND MEN TO RESPOND TO VIOLENCE

November 28th, 2017- As we commemorate the 16 days of activism on violence against women, the Gender coalition that has been implementing the TASO-Global Fund project of the Gender and HIV intervention, for the last 18 months wish to add our voice to other stakeholders on issues that continue to challenge our responses to violence against women in the country.

Under the project, partners trained 429 police officers in identifying and responding to GBV cases, equipped 572 health workers in responding to GBV in the context of HIV, trained 130 Stop GBV community champions in GBV concepts, prevention and response, engaged 42 Prosecutors on how to prosecute GBV crimes and explore ways to address barriers that impede justice.

Partners have held dialogues with 3240 cultural and 270 religious leaders, engaged 540 youth to mobilize communities to address GBV. Additionally, a total of 60 women members of parliament have been engaged, 72 magistrates are yet to be trained in HIV, Human rights and Gender issues and 116 batches of 1000 copies of police form were donated to each district in the country. Partners also established 46 Male Action Groups across the country, trained 926 Male Action Group Members, increased male Involvement in FSG Groups by 10% and reached over 700 Men reached for testing and Health Talks through Outreaches

This is the first GBV focus grant meant to address barriers to violence prevention, HIV prevention, and access to essential services. These interventions as it was envisioned would enable communities work with government systems to ensure that voices of people living with HIV and other local communities would be heard and closely collaborate with systems of government such as Health workers, Police officers, office of the prosecutors (DPP) Judicial officers to ensure concerted efforts in addressing the gaps. Some of the outputs include;

Our findings as a coalition indicate that Violence against women continues to be a challenge to our public health systems, development and a violation of human rights in the country. Violence is caused by societal, economic and cultural factors. It occurs in forms such as Physical Violence, Psychological/Emotional Violence, Sexual Violence, Treatment of women as

commodities, Economic Violence and Harmful cultural practices e.g. early marriage, wife/widow inheritance among many.

The Uganda Demographic Health Survey (UDHS) 2011, indicates that 56.1% of women and aged between 15-49 have experienced physical violence, while 27.8% of women have experienced sexual violence

Violence escalates the spread of HIV and other Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs). It is a major obstacle to development, productivity and economic growth. It undermines family stability, increases incidences of unwanted pregnancies and leads to aggravated poverty. Women in violence-affected households experience mental and behavioral disorders including depression. Worse still it puts a strain and burden on the already challenged health and legal services.

The Gender coalition notes that despite the enactment of laws such as the Domestic Violence Act 2010 and its regulations 2011, Guidelines for the Establishment and Management of GBV shelters 2013, the National Referral Pathway Guide for Prevention and Response to Gender Based Violence Cases in Uganda 2013 and Sexual Harassment Regulations 2012; amongst others, there are still challenges in addressing violence against women in Uganda due to the following factors:

Patriarchal beliefs that value male supremacy and women's subordination. The power imbalance between men and women in this country continues to ensure that many women are not able to make decisions about their own health and lives. Many women in Uganda do not have the final say on their own healthcare, on safer sex practices or on family property.

Structural and financial constraints of the health and legal system: While some efforts have been made by the Uganda Police Force and the judiciary to address violence against women, enforcement of the laws is limited by structural and financial constraints. Justice continues to elude victims due to challenges such as police surgeons being thinly spread on the ground, shortage of police form 3As, continuous adjournment of cases which demotivates victims as well as their witnesses in following up cases, lack of counselling skills by the police, understaffing, lack of space to effectively interact with the survivors of violence within the police stations, inadequate reception centers among others.

The health system too is challenged due to lack of human resources, supplies and equipment in responding to survivors of violence. This tends to keep away survivors from seeking the care they need. If they are to seek services, many turn up late, making it near impossible to effectively manage their cases.

Harmful cultural practices and norms: These continue to reinforce unequal power dynamics between men and women. These dynamics limit women's choices, opportunities and access to information, health and social services, education and employment. For example, some women still require the consent of a spouse/partner to access sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services. It is indeed true that our norms are meant to protect us all. It is however unfortunate that some communities continue to hold dear norms that expose women to violence. For instance,

cultural acceptance of violence, either as a normal method of resolving conflict between couples or as a usual part of disciplining children.

Poverty: Poverty increases women's vulnerability to violence. Some women stick to a violent relationship because they are dependent on the man; the need for economic support by vulnerable families may partly drive early/child marriages. Women who are economically challenged have little choice but to enter relationships that expose them to violence and abuse. The risk of trafficking and sexual exploitation is also higher for young women and adolescent girls living in poverty. Much as there are government programs aimed at improving livelihoods, it is unfortunate that such government support towards women projects does not reach the poor uneducated rural woman.

Information gaps and attitudes: Engagements with the community leaders as well as traditional leaders show that there is still a knowledge gap on violence against women. Communities tend to have attitudes that fuel violence against women. For example, women report that being beaten by their husbands is justified if they either go out without permission, neglect the children, argue back, refuse to have sex, or burn the food. This is unfortunate! This is made worse by an information gap in the communities on how to report and handle cases of violence. Lack of knowledge among rural women and girls on their rights incapacitates them from reporting GBV cases. Communities don't know what to do when violence happens, they are unaware of processes to address violence against women and who to report to. Many consider violence against women a regular occurrence that should not raise eye brows. They even code it 'bedroom matters' that do not have to come out to the public.

Our audience (The police, Judiciary, religious leaders, cultural leaders, male action groups and health workers) all committed to end violence but showed great enthusiasm and committed to end violence in their respective communities and roles. There is however, need to support this commitment technical and financial assistance including information. This can be through scaled up and increased investment by partners like PEPFAR, Global Fund, government and other bilateral agencies.

CALL TO ACTION:

- Empower women and girls through training, programmes that will keep girls in school and increase knowledge of their rights, where to report etc. Focus needs to be put in empowering them to report any cases and demand for protection etc.
- Improve health, legal/judicial systems to handle cases of violence against women through training, improved documentation and research on violence. Make the whole system more welcoming to survivors of violence.
- Invest/budget for community structures such as the cultural and religious institutions and their structures, district structures to respond to violence against women. Establish structures where they do not exist and continuously create awareness on violence against women and how to respond to it.

- Engage Men more to enhance male activism on violence against women; strengthen capacities of adolescent boys, young people and men to respond to the issue; and increase public awareness that women’s rights and violence against women are the concerns of both men and women.
- Work towards improving the livelihoods of families so as to address economic violence, focus on economic empowerment of women and girls to reduce on their vulnerability to violence

