

Engaging men in preventing sexual violence in South Sudan and the Central African Republic: a qualitative study

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Introduction

Sexual violence remains commonplace in conflict settings and has a devastating impact on the physical and mental health of survivors. We built on previous research by the ICRC, examining local norms and values surrounding violence, by focussing on how young men and their communities perceive sexual violence and its prevention. The ICRC seeks to protect and assist people affected by armed conflict and other situations of violence, and has been present in South Sudan since 1980 and CAR since 1983.

Methods

We carried out a qualitative study, including 79 interviews and 16 focus group discussions. Participants included purposively selected young men and women (aged 15-33 years); community leaders (such as chiefs, cattle herders, traditional court members and health-care providers), and key informants with expertise in the field of sexual violence. Sites in South Sudan (Unity and Lakes States) and CAR (Bangui) were chosen because of the ICRC's ongoing presence and the availability of referral services if required. Interviews and focus groups were conducted in French, English, Sango, Arabic, Nuer, and Dinka, transcribed and translated before being coded and thematically analysed using NVivo. Informed consent/assent was obtained from all participants.

Ethics

This study was approved by the ICRC Ethics Review Board, the Comité Ethique et Scientifique of the University of Bangui, CAR, and by the Institutional Review Board of the Ministry of Health, South Sudan.

Results

Findings from both countries linked male perpetration of sexual violence with prolonged conflict and insecurity; the presence of weapons; a weak justice system and impunity; revenge and punishment, and strong gendered norms and ideas around masculinity. Some men believed that women were to blame because of their behaviour or clothing. Participants saw the need to engage young men and their communities in prevention activities, but few were able to reflect upon their potential individual role in this. Strong community values and a sense of male responsibility were present in all study sites, and involving male leaders was believed to be essential for prevention activities. Interviewees in both countries suggested that providing information about HIV could be an entry point to talking about sexual violence with potential perpetrators.

Conclusion

Studies on sexual violence often understandably focus on survivors, and this is the first time the ICRC has conducted qualitative research of this kind with young men. Results, including discussions around local norms of masculinity, will contribute to and serve to strengthen existing sensitisation sessions and dialogue on the prevention of sexual violence. Strengthening existing partnerships with other actors is also essential. Whilst we found that participants were willing to discuss sexual violence, some may have been uncomfortable sharing their thoughts with the research team.

Conflicts of interest

None declared.



Emilie Venables

Dr Emilie Venables is an anthropologist with over 15 years of research experience. She has worked in contexts including Liberia, South Africa, Lebanon, DRC, Italy, Greece, Mozambique, Cambodia, and Kenya on issues such as Ebola, HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, migration, torture and malaria. Emilie holds a PhD and MSc in African Studies from the University of Edinburgh, an MSc in Development Studies from the School of Oriental and African Studies, and a BA in Social Anthropology from the University of Cambridge. Emilie worked for MSF as an anthropologist and qualitative researcher with the South African Medical Unit and MSF's Luxembourg Operational Research Unit between 2012-2019. She then joined the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) as an operational researcher in the Centre for Operational Research and Experience and is currently based in Geneva. She is a member of the ICRC Ethics Review Board.