How gender norms are reinforced through violence against adolescent girls in two conflict-affected populations

Marni Sommer[a],*, Miguel Muñoz-Laboy[b], Anaise Williams[c], Yana Mayevskaya[c], Kathryn Falb[d], Gizman Abdella[e], Lindsay Stark[c]

[a] Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University, Department of Sociomedical Sciences, 722 W. 168th Street, Room 537, New York, NY, 10032, United States
[b] School of Social Work, College of Public Health, Temple University, Ritter Annex, 5th Floor, 1301 W. Cecil B. Moore Avenue, Philadelphia, PA, 10122, United States
[c] Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University, Department of Population and Family Health, 60 Haven Avenue, B-4, Suite 432, New York, NY, 10032, United States
[d] International Rescue Committee, 122 E. 42nd Street, New York, NY, 10168, United States
[e] International Rescue Committee, TK International Bldg. 6th Floor, Bole Rd, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

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ABSTRACT

Violence against women and girls is a global concern, and particularly salient in humanitarian settings. Successful efforts to prevent gender-based violence in humanitarian settings must address a wide range of issues, from discriminatory laws to explicit community support for violence, and yet, at the core of these efforts is reducing oppressive gender and social norms. This study examined local attitudes towards and social norms around responding to physical and sexual abuse of girls through interviews conducted with adolescent girls (n = 66) and with caregivers (n = 58) among two conflict-affected populations: villages in South Kivu in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Sudanese and South Sudanese refugees in Ethiopian camps. The findings suggest how communities use violence as a tool to enforce the importance of girls practicing community-defined "good" adolescent girl behavior, and have implications for gender-based violence programming among other conflict-affected populations.

1. Introduction

Gender-based violence (GBV) poses serious threats to the lives and health of adolescent girls and young women worldwide (Michau, Horn, Bank, Dutt, & Zimmerman, 2015). GBV is particularly salient in conflict-affected communities and displaced populations (Tappis, Freeman, Glass, & Doocy, 2016). Under the UN General Assembly Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women, GBV encompasses physical, sexual and psychological violence, within families, in the general community, or condoned by the State (Sullivan, 1994). Sudan, South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) remain conflict-affected contexts with recognized high rates of militaristic and domestic violence against girls and women (UN, 2017). A systematic review of the literature on the prevalence of sexual violence in humanitarian contexts globally suggests that one in five refugee and displaced women experiences sexual violence (Vu et al., 2014). Adolescent girls are at increased risk of GBV given deeply rooted domestic and societal gender inequalities, and girls' frequent economic vulnerability in humanitarian settings (Henttonen, Watts,

Roberts, Kaducu, & Borchert, 2008; Wirtz et al., 2013). There is also evidence suggesting that societal acceptance of intimate partner violence (IPV) is associated with an increased risk of exposure for adolescent girls to varying types of violence (Lichter & McCloskey, 2004).

While violence against girls has gained global attention, evidence on the effectiveness of GBV prevention programs and strategies remains limited, especially among conflict-affected populations (Noble, Ward, French, & Falb, 2017; Tappis et al., 2016). Existing evidence suggests that GBV can be prevented through interventions that target the root of the problem: unequal power dynamics and harmful gender norms; yet such interventions are difficult to implement, and to achieve transformative outcomes (Michau et al., 2015). A study in South Kivu, DRC found that attitudes about traditional gender norms influence both adolescent girls' exposure to violence and perceived hope, and suggests that gender norms-transformative programming can increase girls' levels of resilience in conflict-affected populations (Stark, Sommer et al., 2017; Sommer et al., 2017). However, many programs may, for a variety of reasons (e.g. limited time or funding), implement GBV-prevention approaches without sufficiently acquiring a deep understanding of responses to abuse that are considered socially appropriate in the local context and how these might counter-act messages disseminated by the program. Such rapid implementation can result in programming insufficiently adapted to the local cultural context, or be limited to a focus on only one sub-group, such as women, limiting their ability to achieve transformative change aimed at preventing GBV. In addition, individual-level interventions, such as those focused solely on girl's empowerment, may be less effective than those combined with community-level interventions in achieving transformative change (Michau et al., 2015). Unless interventions work within the systems that enable or eliminate girl's voice and agency, and that affect girls' economic and social vulnerability, girl empowerment and a decrease in violence may not be achieved (McLean & Modi, 2016).

In considering the importance of the larger community and cultural systems around girls, social norms research has consistently found that the way norms infiltrate different layers and sections of society can shape a community's view of an event of violence against a girl as an occurrence caused by the girl herself (Chapleau, Oswald, & Russell, 2008). So, for example, social norms, and more specifically *injunctive norms* (the belief one has about what others approve or disapprove of in a given society) can cause the victim to believe she is the cause of the violence (Cialdini et al., 2006). Prior studies have documented victim-blaming as a product of (*injunctive)* social norms that perceive certain forms of GBV as justifiable, particularly when the victim violated traditional gender roles or displayed society-defined 'risky' behavior (Chapleau et al., 2008; Flood & Pease, 2009; Grubb & Turner, 2012; Klein, 2004). Social norms, both *descriptive* (the belief one has about what others commonly do in a given society) and *injunctive*, prescribe appropriate behavior of genders, shape legal responses, label what is community-defined violence, and can protect certain groups from legal jurisdiction. First understanding and then aiming to influence such norms, and *injunctive* norms in particular in the case of GBV, may be an effective way to prevent violence against girls in a given community or context.

A further challenge with GBV interventions within conflict-affected populations is that they may fail to address GBV comprehensively, and only focus on objective acts of assault. For example, some programs have focused on preventing violence by strangers, or providing services to girls and women only in cases of violence by strangers or the military (Tappis et al., 2016). While violence perpetrated by armed forces is a concern, much of the violence inflicted on girls and women in such contexts is by intimate partners, relatives, and members of their communities (Stark & Ager, 2011; Stark, Sommer et al., 2017). However, there is still a comparatively limited understanding of the dynamics and perceptions surrounding IPV within conflict-affected populations (Stark & Ager, 2011), and it is potentially more challenging for programs to address violence in the private sphere (as is the case with IPV) than violence that occurs in the public sphere (whether it is committed by random individuals or as part of military tactics). Interventions that are focused on changing embedded social norms, such as beliefs around IPV, are far more difficult, yet far more impactful, in terms of their potential ability to prevent future violence against girls.

One approach to better understanding how to address harmful *injunctive* social norms that contribute to or exacerbate adolescent girls' experiences of violence is to use Heise (2011) adapted ecological model to situations of violence against women (Michau et al., 2015) as a framework for interpreting such realities and contexts. Michau and colleagues adapted the Heise model (see Michau et al., 2015) to organize the key drivers and outcomes of violence against women and girls within four levels of the environment: individual, interpersonal, community, and societal (Michau et al., 2015). Drawing on this framework, one can perceive how inequitable gender norms that privilege men and boys at a given community level are often driven by and result in stigma, shame, and the silencing of women's and girls' voices. At the individual level, gender norms around behavior and abuse are subsequently internalized by girls and women and reproduced through their acceptance of submissive femininity and dominant masculinity within their families and communities, and thus such violence is perpetuated, and therefore legitimatized, by the policies and laws of the state in which these adolescent girls and women are embedded (the community level). At the societal level, *injunctive* social norms that serve to justify certain cases of abuse may thus contribute to an inter-generational silence around violence against women and girls. Therefore, it is essential to explore the mechanisms through which gender inequality and violence are socially produced and reproduced in the context of conflict-affected populations. This in turn may inform GBV prevention, risk-reduction, and violence response programming.

In this paper, we draw on data from a larger parent study, an evaluation conducted of the COMPASS program (Creating Opportunities through Mentoring, Parental Involvement and Safe Spaces), which sought to prevent and reduce violence against girls (Stark, 2014). Our approach uses primarily female voices, and a few male caregiver voices (as explicated below) to understand perceptions of violence. We explore both findings that relate to risk-reduction and responses to violence, which we hope can be used to inform preventative efforts. The Heise model provides a framework for our analysis through its articulation of how different aspects of society can serve to both imbalance and balance power. For example, at the intrapersonal level, inequitable norms such as religious and cultural justification for violence can perpetrate gender inequality, while an enabling environment and supportive social networks can lead to community outreach that creates public debate about potentially harmful cultural justifications for