



Risk and incidence of sexual violence in conflict and post-conflict zones

A Systematic Review Policy Brief



Q. How effective are initiatives to reduce the risk and prevalence of conflict and post-conflict sexual violence in low and middle income countries?

Sexual violence in conflict and other humanitarian crises is widespread, with at least one in four women affected. Men and children are also at heightened risk. In these contexts, sexual violence may be committed:

- as a tactic of armed conflict
- opportunistically due to situational vulnerability
- as a form of sexual exploitation by peacekeepers or humanitarian staff
- as familial or community violence exacerbated by weakened social or legal structures.

KEY FINDINGS

- **Strategies appear more effective when they have multiple components including survivor care and community engagement.**
- **Risk to women can increase where court processes or other programs are delivered with inadequate attention to protection, stigma and the risk of retaliation.**
- **Evidence suggests that firewood provision, patrols and alternative fuels may reduce women's risk of sexual violence during firewood collection.**
- **Despite extensive efforts at the policy level, implementation of conflict and crisis related-sexual violence initiatives on the ground remains very limited.**

This is the first Systematic Review to examine the evidence of the extent of implementation and outcomes from initiatives aimed at preventing sexual violence in conflict and crisis.

Policy and program implications

- Interventions for preventing and addressing conflict and crisis-related sexual violence should:
 - be required to incorporate robust and resourced outcome evaluation
 - be multi-faceted inclusive of survivor care, community engagement, systems and security, personnel and infrastructure measures
 - strengthen local capacity and work with pre-existing systems, capacity and traditions.
- Anonymity and confidentiality should be ensured in survivor care responses, survivor services and reporting points.
- Gender equality programs that target women need to recognise the tensions that can arise and seek to include men as appropriate.
- Separate consultation with different community groups by age, sex, and cultural background on design and implementation is required. Consideration should be given to trialling initiatives that engage leaders of non-state militias to adopt zero-tolerance cultures.
- Systems for holding offenders accountable that require survivor participation should privilege survivors' needs for protection and avoidance of re-traumatisation.

Principles for future research and evaluation

The literature suggests that successful interventions should incorporate planning for prospective evaluation that are conducted independently to reduce reliance on consultants and agency reports. Priority should be given to well-designed studies that provide clearly

defined interventions and outcomes and consider contextual factors. Research and evaluation initiatives should also include representation from practitioners and community groups to reflect the concerns of those on the ground.

Evidence for reducing risk, incidence and harm from sexual violence

Due to the limited number and nature of evaluations to date, the Review concluded that there is presently insufficient evidence to confidently determine overall intervention effectiveness. However, some emerging insights relating to effectiveness were identified:

- effectiveness of initiatives to prevent sexual exploitation and abuse by peacekeepers in settings where enforcement of policies was visible to the community
- the harm-reduction impact of medical care and follow-up trauma counselling for victims
- firewood provision, patrols, and alternative fuels have reduced the risk to women during firewood collection.

The Review also identified some responses that inadvertently increased risk for survivors, particularly legal interventions where witnesses were unprotected and exposed to stigma and retaliation.

Extent and nature of evidence

Forty studies were subjected to detailed analysis. Although much of the broader literature focuses on sexual violence committed by armed groups, the majority of interventions identified address sexual violence committed opportunistically or within the family or community. Studies were undertaken in 26 countries but predominantly on the African continent and the former Yugoslavia. No studies from the Pacific were identified.

Twenty studies reported only on the implementation of interventions, while the other 20 also reported outcomes. Most described interventions for sexual violence in post-conflict settings, whereas few addressed prevention or conflict contexts. Only one study specifically addressed a natural disaster setting.

The literature identifies seven different strategies to reduce sexual violence:

- survivor care interventions
- livelihood initiatives (to reduce women's vulnerability through financial independence)
- community mobilisation
- personnel initiatives (e.g. gender specific

METHODOLOGY

Systematic reviews identify, synthesise and assess all available evidence around a specific research question.

- **Scope:** Studies published from 1990 to September 2011 containing primary empirical data describing implementation or impact of interventions to reduce, risk, incidence or harm from sexual violence occurring in conflict, post-conflict or other humanitarian crisis in low and middle income countries .
- **Searching:** 2656 studies identified from 23 major databases and 26 relevant websites
- **In-depth review:** Analysis was conducted on 40 studies around reported outcomes, contextual factors and underlying program mechanisms.

recruitment)

- systems and security, predominantly firewood patrols or fuel alternatives
- interventions using a combination of these strategies
- legal interventions.

Most interventions were focused on women. Two disarmament and demobilisation programs were specifically established for young people, but neither reduced risk nor incidence. No studies focused on men specifically as victims. Most studies were assessed as low or medium-low weight of evidence using a quality of evidence tool. This reflects the difficulty of conducting research in crisis settings.

It is clear that despite extensive efforts at the policy level to develop guidelines and training courses implementation of initiatives on the ground remains limited. This was a unifying finding of the three studies with the highest weight of evidence.

Further reading

The full Systematic Review will be available from April 2013 on the AusAID research webpages: www.ausaid.gov.au/research

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This document is an output from research funded by AusAID. The views and opinions expressed in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of AusAID or the Australian Government.