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Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV) in Post- Conflict Northern Uganda

Emily Thomesen

There is a sweet odor of earth and mangos as the sun rises over the fields of rice and pineapples. The silence of the morning is broken by the rising voices of women congregating together to worship as their little children dance to the music of their mothers' voices. In the center of the African safari a refugee has been established for these mothers struggling under the weight of war and poverty. They learn the skills they need to provide food for their families, and counseled through the trauma of their pasts. Seven years ago this land was site of their trauma. A bloody massacre destroyed the former village, as a rebel group descended on the community as the army, meant to protect them, remained passive from a distance. The decaying walls still remain on the outskirts of this refugee serving as a reminder of the violence they survived. Now, there is another violence waiting for them when they leave the safety of this center to begin their lives in their new homes. This project is a platform to present the compilation of the stories told by these women to understand the cultural violence that tolerates the sexual and gender based violence (SGBV) in their communities. The purpose of this research was to analyze the change in the culture after a chronic civil war that agitated this violence, and to listen to the voices of these women calling for compassion.

I was interning with ChildVoice International over the summer of 2014 to investigate the cultural norms that relate to SGBV in post- conflict Northern Uganda. We were stayed at a small center, just outside Gulu, Uganda, comprised of huts, classrooms, mango orchards, a well, and maize fields. ChildVoice International takes in young mothers who escaped from the Lord's Resistance Army, and those that are highly vulnerable to poverty. They are provided with housing, child- care, trauma counseling and vocational skill training over the course of 18 months. Once these mothers have finished the program they have the skills to grow their own food, earn an income, and have the supportive network to overcome past war traumas. When they move back into their community they continue to receive support in developing their businesses and receive counseling.

The purpose of my internship with ChildVoice was to analyze the cultural norms that tolerate SGBV in this post- conflict region. I conducted interviews to listen to the post-graduates, from ChildVoice, about the violence they have faced, and the services they need to remain safe from abuse. In addition to these interviews, I attended 3 government assemblies and a school function that addressed this issue to listen to the views of the community, and the measures they have taken to hinder the abuse. Achyo Winifred (Winnie), the head counselor at ChildVoice International, was key to the integrity of this project. Winnie was the interpreter during the interviews and helped connect with the targeted demographic of this research. Most importantly, she provided a safe environment for the women being interviewed as she counseled all these interviewed women through their trauma. This allowed the mothers to answer freely to the questions I asked about the violence they survived. Without providing a safe environment for the women answering the questions the interviews would have no integrity, or any useful information pertaining to this issue.

Before the war, the main practice to teach children respect and the traditions of the Acholi culture was to gather them around a fire and listen to the stories of the elders. These stories would have lessons that would teach the children about their roles in their community and the history of their people. This practice died in the war, leaving little guidance to the development of the youth. This project will be presented to reflect is former relationship of the elders and children as the stories of these women are retold to magnify their strength, survival and desire for compassion.

