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STRENGTHENING WOMEN AND YOUTH AT RISK OF GENDER BASED VIOLENCE

Challenges and opportunities for enhancing resilience, with a focus on urban contexts and adolescent girls

This learning brief documents challenges, capacities and opportunities of women and youth at risk of gender based violence (GBV), in particular in urban areas in Northern Uganda. It summarizes key findings from various studies of the [Women and Youth Resilience Project](#) (WAYREP), including two Rapid Gender Analyses, the baseline, knowledge model papers, and a qualitative assessment.

The learning brief informs WAYREP's learning agenda which aims at:

- **Gaining a better understanding of the livelihood and safety, security, and wellbeing challenges** that marginalised and vulnerable communities face in urban poor and settlement settings with a focus on girls,
- **Identifying and documenting effective and sustainable support strategies** to alleviate challenges, namely poverty and gender-based violence (GBV), in the nexus, urban and COVID 19 context.

WAYREP's overall **objective** is to “**Strengthen the resilience of refugee and Ugandan women, girls and youth to live a life free from violence in Uganda**”. WAYREP focuses on women and girls' empowerment within the context of some of Uganda's most pressing current challenges such as rapid urbanization, regular and high rates of displacement and migration across and within Uganda's borders and a very young and largely unemployed population. In 2020, this fragile context was further exacerbated with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic not only in terms of its health implications, but also in terms of its impact on livelihoods, safety and security.

“For us girls we face a lot of challenges, when we run out of basic needs such as sanitary pads or soap in the house. We need soap and smearing oil to maintain our hygiene. When you try to ask it from the parents, they just start abusing you and use bad language. Some will say that you are a big girl now and that you should stop bothering them. Often, this forces girls to go out and look for men to provide for them the necessary basic needs; and along the way they are exposed to the risk of getting pregnant.”

16 year old girl, village 4, Omugo settlement

Prevalence of GBV in urban locations and with a focus on girls

All WAYREP studies confirm that **gender based violence (GBV) is widespread** in the communities and has even risen since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. **Survivors of GBV face several obstacles to report a GBV incident** and to receive support, such as cultural norms, lack of knowledge about GBV and referral pathways, as well as the fact that GBV referral pathways are rather uncoordinated in particular in urban locations, and that GBV service providers are often under-resourced. GBV programs are relatively rare in the urban context, as most development partners focus on rural areas in Northern Uganda.

Patriarchal and traditional gender roles are upheld in the majority of households, which materializes e.g. in view of the division of labour and decision-making powers. There is a **low level of civic and community engagement amongst women in particular**. However, in the urban context, important **gender dimensions are starting to change**, mostly as a consequence of requirements of the cash economy. WAYREP’s [Rapid Gender Analysis 2019](#) showed, for instance, that women and female youth started to take more important decisions in the household and to take on roles that were predominantly dominated by men. Also in rural areas, gender roles are shifting, especially due to women empowerment projects and programs.

Despite **ongoing discrimination with regard to basic rights** such as inheritance or land ownership, women - through empowerment programs - were found to have **easier access to some resources, training and social capital** than men. Particularly in urban areas, government authorities provide specific opportunities to women, e.g. economic programs such as Uganda Women Entrepreneurship Programme/ UWEP or EMYOOGA. In comparison to rural communities, urban citizens have easier access to local authorities, information and services, such as government or banking services. **Younger female youth, however, continue to have little to no decision making power**. They also feel **less confident to express dissatisfaction with government and other services** than any other group interviewed during the [WAYREP baseline assessment](#).

The **COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated existing inequalities and gender based violence**. A Rapid Gender Analysis from May 2020 showed that women and girls’ **unpaid care burden had increased** and that the pandemic had a **severe impact on livelihoods**, affecting in particular persons working in the informal sector. As the majority of WAYREP’s impact group reports working in the non-agricultural sector, such as petty trading, they faced particular challenges to provide for their families. Inadequate food was a serious issue in all project locations and particularly alarming in the refugee settlement. The **COVID-19-related restrictions on movement were cutting off access to vital resources and services** for the most vulnerable parts of the population, including GBV and Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights services. **Limited access to phones as well as the gender digital divide** are serious challenges **hindering in particular women and girls to access information** but also other services such as mobile money.

There was a **high school dropout rate** among WAYREP’s impact group even before the pandemic. School closures in March 2020 have contributed to even **greater GBV risks for girls**. As a result, there has been an increase in pregnancies and forced marriage. More **youth are reverting to harmful coping mechanisms such as alcohol or substance abuse or transactional sex**. Even though schools have re-opened in 2022, many girls do not return to school as parents still prioritise boys’ education and children often need to earn income. Teenage mothers are facing particular

challenges and discrimination.

In particular in urban areas, parents are often occupied with income generating activities and not able to take sufficient care of their children. Comprehensive sexuality education is very controversial in Uganda and very few youth have appropriate knowledge on sexual and reproductive health and rights.

Underlying causes of GBV and livelihood challenges

All WAYREP studies demonstrate that **poverty and gender inequality** are the overwhelming drivers of gender-based violence (GBV): “The need for survival, the lack of basic resources and income, and the right to a dignified life are all triggers to creating an environment or the conditions, which increase the likelihood of GBV. Social norms, culture and religion are drivers for GBV for non-nationals and Ugandans alike.” ([Rapid Gender Analysis 2019](#))

A qualitative assessment shed further light on the underlying causes of challenges related to livelihood, safety and security and wellbeing, from the impact group’s perspective. **Limited cooperation and support at home** were frequently mentioned by all age groups and locations. In this context, participants referred to diverse household members, including spouses, partners, children, caretakers, etc. – depending on the household composition. According to the baseline, a significant number of impact group members does not have a current partner. About a quarter of WAYREP’s project participants are female youth below 19. **Forced early marriage** is another key challenge in particular for youth.

In accordance with the CARE Gender Equality Framework, the underlying causes for GBV and livelihood challenges can be structured according to CARE’s Gender Equality Framework, that is **agency, relations and structure**. **Access to and control over resources** played an important role in the participants’ reflections and, thus, are added separately:

AGENCY	RELATIONS	STRUCTURE	RESOURCES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unfulfilled basic needs (e.g. food, menstrual hygiene, cloths, decent housing) • Lack of education, incl. literacy • Limited skills and knowledge • Negative attitudes • Lack of decision making power • Experiences of GBV and sexualised violence <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stress • Care work • Teenage pregnancy • Drug abuse/ alcoholism <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sickness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited/ no support from family, partner, parents, children • Violent communication at home • Violent relationships (e.g. physical, economic, psychological violence) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gender Norms • Harmful peer pressure • Living in forced marriage, polygamy • Living in divorce and/or as a single mother 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inadequate health support (e.g. drug shortage, limited access to health centers due to discrimination, distance, cost) • Bad governance/ leadership • Lack of professionalism (health, police) • Limited access to police • Risky locations, e.g. night clubs and bars 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited market opportunities • Socio economic consequences of COVID 19 • Lack of resources such as capital, tools, livestock... • Limited job opportunities, incl. casual labour • Limited access to land (mostly refugees) • Dependency on limited food ratios (refugees)

Opportunities to overcome GBV & livelihood challenges

Participants in the qualitative assessment were asked about opportunities to overcome the challenges facing them. At a more **personal and relational level**, they underlined the relevance of **good cooperation and support at home, as well as from other community members**. Examples beyond the household level were the positive influence from Youth/ Village Saving and Loans Associations (Y/VSLA) groups or solidarity actions such as looking for firewood or water as a group.

Most opportunities that the participants mentioned referred to **external support**, for instance:

- At the **agency level**: opportunities for acquiring skills and education; V/VSLA and related trainings; psychosocial support services; women empowerment programs; awareness raising on and protection from risks (such as alcohol, drugs, night dances); programs on substance abuse
- In view of **relations**: The existence of spaces and activities that strengthen social cohesion and relations, e.g. youth recreation centers
- At a more **structural level**: market and job opportunities; existence of adequate health care services and facilities, adequate food rations and the easing of COVID-19 restrictions.

“Initially I used to stay with my husband with whom I had children. Unfortunately when the situation became worse my husband abandoned me together with the children. He left to live with other women who were better off than us. I began taking care of the children single handedly, going to the garden alone and having further chores in the home. The situation worsened even more. I realized that I could no longer manage or handle the situation, so I decided to go back to my parents. While I was there, I got to know of the WAYREP project through a Community Based Trainer who did community sensitization (especially with topics on GBV). That is when I joined the YSLA group. I was later selected for apprenticeship to do training in tailoring and here I am now, after completing this course. My life will never be the same again.”

Female youth, at the Emiliana Training institute in Gulu

Factors contributing to self-efficacy and self-reliance

WAYREP’s goal is to increase the resilience and self-reliance of the impact group members. One relevant indicator for this is the feeling of self-efficacy among impact group members. In the baseline, **refugees expressed a very high level of self-efficacy**. The qualitative assessment confirmed this finding: refugees seemed to be more optimistic and positive minded as long as they felt physical strength and health. The other impact groups were also rather confident to be able to achieve their goals, but to a significantly lesser extent. A qualitative assessment helped to better define what self-efficacy means for the impact group members, what makes them feel confident in their future.

In a first step, participants defined their goals for the next 5 years. In particular in the cities, many participants **aimed at constructing a permanent house. Numerous youth envisioned starting their own business venture**. Other goals in the different locations were: to buy **assets** (e.g. tools for business, livestock, household utensils, land or a bicycle, motorcycle or car), to complete their **education**, to ensure the education of children, to be able to afford a **wedding and family planning**... and to be happy! 😊

Being asked how confident they were to achieve these goals, participants in the city highlighted particularly **agency and relations related aspects** that increased their self-efficacy, that is:

- **Skills, knowledge and good education**
- Reduced **burden of care work**, which particularly means having more **time**
- **Savings**
- **Good communication, cooperation and relations at home** (with family, spouse, parents, children etc)
- **Being a member of a group and having friends**

According to WAYREP’s knowledge model papers, the urban population is **characterised by a high mobility, lack of time and less in-depth knowledge of their fellow community members** compared to people in rural communities. WAYREP experience shows that men, in particular, are often spending much time away from home and are more hesitant to attend awareness raising sessions or other activities that are not related to income generation (“You cannot eat rights”).

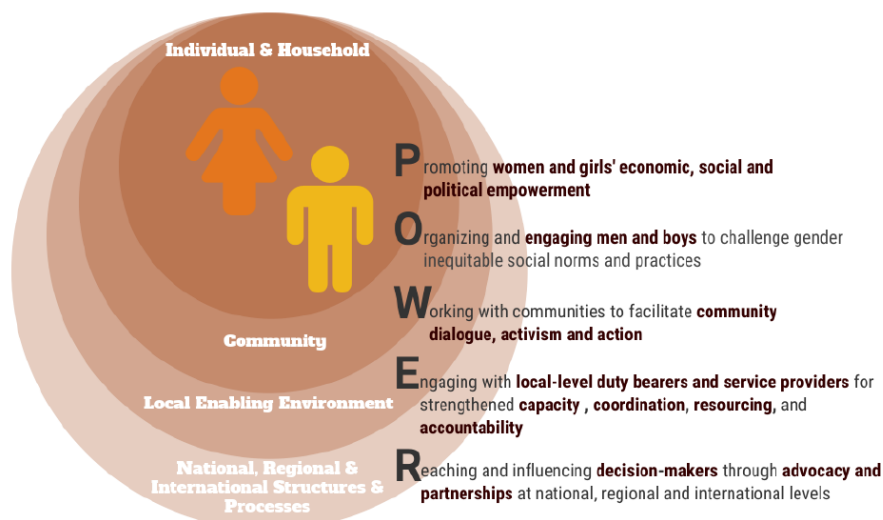
In Omugo settlement, **self-confidence, optimism and health** were key in the reflections. Both in Omugo settlement and host communities, access to and control over resources played an important role as well, such as **access to land and livestock and running a (small) business**.

Conclusion

All the above findings confirm WAYREP’s assumption that key drivers of GBV are poverty and gender inequality. Access to and control over resources, prevention and response to GBV and the promotion of gender equality by transforming agency, relations and structures are all key elements to strengthen resilience of women and youth at risk of GBV. This underlines the relevance of the WAYREP intervention and its activities, which are based on the POWER! framework for GBV programming in the Great Lakes sub-region (see figure below).

WAYREP’s research and learning also indicates areas for improvement and recommendations that would strengthen WAYREP programming and the POWER! Model further.

The ‘POWER’ GBV programming model for the Great Lakes Region



Lessons learnt and recommendations

Working in Urban Areas

- **Ensure the buy-in and ownership of city authorities for GBV coordination mechanisms:** As there are few GBV partners in urban locations, it is even more important that the Community Development Officers (CDO) take up the role of chair and promoter of GBV coordination mechanisms. A learning brief on impacts, lessons learned and recommendations on coordination mechanisms such as case conferences can contribute to their institutionalisation.
- **Intensify the engagement of men, in particular young men (age 15-30):** an assessment would help to better understand e.g. the background and daily routines of young men in urban areas, and to involve them more effectively in WAYREP activities, such as couple session or awareness raising activities.
- **Identify potential synergies with further relevant GBV coordination mechanisms:** As one avenue to enhance access to justice, for instance, ascertain the functionality and potential benefits in participating in the District Chain linked Committees, chaired by the Resident Judge.

Strengthening Self-Reliance and Resilience

- **Put more efforts in developing the agency of project participants:** A particular focus should be put on soft skills that help project participants develop a positive attitude and self-confidence, and to build and maintain supportive relationships. This contributes to enabling persons to fulfil their potential, achieve their goals and live a healthy life. Relevant soft skills are communication and negotiation skills, decision-making skills, coping and self-management skills, enhanced self-esteem, etc. Youth/Village Saving and Loan Associations (Y/VSLA), apprenticeship and skills training activities have proven to effectively contribute to enhancing self-esteem and relevant skills.
- **Provide Functional Adult Literacy training:** Some adults, especially women, do not know how to read and write. This affects their confidence to express themselves and speak out. Acquiring Functional Adult Literacy would contribute to building their confidence.
- **Ensure that youth have access to Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR):** Promote in particular access to comprehensive sexuality education and relevant SRHR services.
- **Encourage project participants to set own goals and to reflect on opportunities and challenges for achieving them:** The qualitative assessment showed that the development of a personal road map empowered and motivated participants to generate solutions for their problems and plan for their future. Some groups, for instance, asked to keep their write up so that they can track their progress. Goal setting motivates the participants to focus on achieving their goals, and the life they desire. Practical tools such as visioning and problem/change action tree help them own the process and accept the solutions as theirs. Goal setting should therefore be encouraged for WAYREP activities at household or community level, including but not limited to all the savings groups.
- **Aim at strengthening project participants to aim higher and identify new opportunities:** Be more proactive in exposing project participants to new opportunities and inspirations, and in linking impact group members to opportunities beyond the project itself, e.g. job opportunities, GBV support services, trade shows or business incubation centers. Encourage learning exchanges of project participants between groups and locations.

- **Be more deliberate in enhancing relations and promoting gender equality at household level:** Conduct structured dialogues, e.g. seminars for couples or parenting session. Make use of opportunities such as Y/VSLA meetings to engage husbands or care takers. Further incentives are required to ensure men's participation in such dialogues in particular in urban areas (e.g. lunch allowance).

Advocacy

- **There is need for continued advocacy to ensure affordable health care provision:** government health facilities need to be equipped with medical supplies and well managed to serve the population. This will also contribute to the empowerment of women as they are mostly taking care of healthcare issues at household level.
- **Advocate for enhanced support to and protection of GBV survivors in the healthcare system:** This includes the availability of relevant medication for GBV survivors, in particular Post Exposure Prophylaxis and emergency contraceptive pills, and improved infrastructure for handling GBV cases while ensuring confidentiality, safety and privacy of the survivors (in particular in Arua City).
- **Advocacy efforts on girls' education need to be intensified.** As a consequence of COVID-19, even more girls are out of school and risk not going back.

Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning

- **Refine tool to measure self-efficacy:** Measuring self-efficacy requires that the respondents first define what their goal/vision is and reflect on the challenges and the opportunity to achieve the goal. Against this backdrop, they are better positioned to reply to the questions and scale adopted from the CARE International indicator guideline for measuring self-efficacy. We recommend to consider this approach for subsequent project evaluations.
- **Ensure that data collection tools are adapted to different target groups, especially the younger target groups:** Some statements of the Gender Equitable Men (GEM) Scale, for instance, do not well apply to the situation of girls.
- **Monitoring should also include conversations with individual project beneficiaries.** This will provide further insights into the progress and challenges at the personal level, and allow persons who are hesitant to speak in a group to share their experiences (e.g. teenage mothers)



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