

‘Unless documented and shared; it didn’t happen’: Upskilling ‘First Responders’ to do so

Dear Reader,

Despite tremendous technological advancements, increase in number of ‘experts’ with spectacular understanding and emergence of documents, laws and policies to make this world a better place, international community still grapple with disturbing cases and statistics of human rights abuses including conflict-related sexual violence. Consequently, the need to empower national and international practitioners on documentation and investigation has suffused among humanitarian and development actors as one of the measures of tackling impunity and guaranteeing non-repetition of human rights abuses and violations.

Since then several documents have been published to strengthen capacity of especially ‘first responders’ on documentation including but not limited to the FCO's [International Protocol on the Documentation and Investigation of Sexual Violence in Conflict](#), Women’s Initiatives for Gender Justice’s [Guidelines and Methods to address Gender-Based Crimes in Armed Conflict](#), and World Health Organisation’s [Ethical and Safety Recommendations for Researching, Documenting and Monitoring Sexual Violence in Emergencies](#).

The second edition of the [International Protocol on the Documentation and Investigation of Sexual Violence in Conflict](#), for example, warns against non-professional documentation, and as a ‘General Principle’ expresses concern that “If practitioners do collect physical evidence without proper training, they may contaminate evidence, making it unusable”. In line with the ‘do no harm’ principle, the protocol further warns that “...Practitioners without the appropriate training and experience should refrain from interviewing victims and other witnesses.” (Refer to Pg. 161).

Since 2016, Refugee Law Project (RLP) has been training a blend of state and non-state actors including the Uganda Police Force, Uganda People’s Defence Force (specifically the Uganda Battle Groups), and Civil Society Organisations on the International Protocol. Adding onto promising outcomes and impacts of previous internal capacity building initiatives, RLP continues to upskill its staff on documentation of best practices. Recently, trainings on International Human Rights Law and International Criminal Law was incorporated so as to equip staff with the necessary knowledge and skills on documentation of war-related harms.

Owing to this background and keen to advance documentation of experiences of war, I’m privileged to have benefited from yet another high-level training organised from 11-13 November 2019 by RLP in collaboration with Justice Rapid Response (JRR) and Project Expedite Justice (PEJ). The training was made possible with funding support of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of the Netherland through the project “Securing Refugee-Host Relations through Enhanced Protection SRHR-EP” from which hundreds of testimonies and success stories have been recorded to demonstrate accomplishments of intervention as well as to provide in-depth accounts of refugees and hosts’ experiences of war.

The training aimed at solidifying RLP's work on documentation in line with its 'Screen, Refer, Support, Document' (SRSD model) of client's intervention from which over 5,000 refugees and hosts have been screened for experiences of war, with 1,500 of them so benefited from professional medical and psychological rehabilitation support. The major contribution of the concluded training was to upskill RLP staff and create a professional cadre to contribute to national, regional, and international initiatives on documenting war-related experiences.

Given that training is a form of empowerment, investing in human capital offers substantial contributions in transforming our world especially at a time when contemporary conflicts are more deadly for civilians, highly protracted, and with average years in exile stretching between 18-20 years. As such, capitalizing in documentation of war-related experiences is crucial in realising conflict transformation, peacebuilding and support to victims/survivors of violent wars and extremism as well as in strengthening justice processes.

With thousands of datasets of screening statistics and several hundreds of pages of testimonies recorded from our clients whom we have successfully rehabilitated, I believe this training is timely, and a SMART approach in complimenting humanitarian and development intervention in Uganda and elsewhere.

In the [nursing profession](#), it's often said: "If it's not written down; it didn't happen...". I hope we cross path soon or later in documenting war-related experiences as well as cases of human rights violations in our communities and elsewhere, and I implore you to join practitioners who believe that "Unless documented and shared; it didn't happen".

Till next time, enjoy your first week of December 2019.

Thank you.

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