



# *Refugee Law Project*

*School of Law, Makerere University  
A Centre for Justice and Forced Migrants*



## Refugee Law Project's Model of Addressing Conflict-related Sexual Violence

Speech delivered at the training of Religious Leaders on  
International Protocol on the Documentation and  
Investigation of Sexual Violence in Conflict  
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### **Organisers**

Association for Religious of Uganda  
Plot 518, Nsambya Hill, Along Nsambya Estates Road  
(Behind the American Embassy)

### **Presenter**

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## **Introduction**

Good afternoon everyone. It's a great day for me to be with you today and I'm honoured and humbled to have been invited on behalf of my Director, Prof. Chris Dolan, to share with you some of our best practices on documentation and investigation of sexual violence in conflict, and how we have been able to utilise the International Protocol on the Documentation and Investigation of Sexual Violence in Conflict. Whereas I have been given only 10 minutes to navigate through my presentation, I would like to begin a bit differently by reflecting on my own past and perhaps demonstrate why I fervidly do what I do.

I stand before you today with strength because some people in your capacity helped me when I was a child. I was fed, educated, and mentored by the Catholic church, and I have a lot of respect for religious workers in this regard. Without the support of kind-hearted people like you, I doubt I would be where I am today. While I thank you for the great work, I also remind you that what you're doing today will yield fruitful results in the future, and perhaps raise other passionate and committed activists keen to ensuring justice for all – so please continue supporting to the best of your ability.

Back to my presentation, and as introduced by the moderator, I am Onen David Ongwech, I grew up in northern Uganda and Gulu to be specific. I manage the Gender & Sexuality Programme of the Refugee Law Project, School of Law, Makerere University. As part of an institution that works to ensure that all persons live dignified lives, I'm glad to have been a team that over the years has proactively pushed boundaries and modelled best practices in addressing conflict-related sexual violence. My presentation today provides an overview of Refugee Law Project's work on systematic screening, of key findings on sexual violence, and of how we have used the information to strengthen service provision to survivors and to advance evidence-based research and advocacy on sexual violence in conflict.

## **About Refugee Law Project (RLP)**

RLP was established in 1999 following a research showing that refugees in Uganda do not fully enjoy their rights. Initially established to provide legal support to refugees, RLP has since expanded to a leading centre for justice and forced migrants. Currently, we are structured in 5 thematic programmes (Access to Justice, Gender & Sexuality, Media for Social Change,



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Mental Health & Psychosocial Wellbeing, and Conflict, Transitional Justice and Governance). RLP envisions a context where all persons enjoy their human rights irrespective of their legal status and a mission to empower asylum seekers, refugees, deportees, IDPs, and Host communities to enjoy their human rights and lead dignified lives. RLP has a mandate to promote protection, influence debates, empower forced migrants and be a resource. For time purposes, I cannot expound more on these programmes but invite you to visit our website ([www.refugeelawproject.org](http://www.refugeelawproject.org)) for more information about what each programme does.

As an institution, I'm proud to note that we are the first organisation in Uganda to initiate training of uniformed personnel on the *International Protocol on Documentation and Investigation on Sexual Violence in Conflict*. To date, we have trained 1,000 uniformed personnel on the protocol and with specific emphasis on how to strengthen documentation and investigations of reported cases, as well as protection of civilians. Participants for these trainings are drawn from the Uganda People's Defence Forces, Uganda Police Force, Women's Activists, and Civil Society Organisations.

Whereas we have garnered enormous successes in these trainings, which we can talk about later, we have yet to work with religious leaders on the same. Obviously, there is a gap that we ought to have filled but we believe it's not very late, yet, and we also thank the UK Government for supporting the publication of the first and second edition of the protocol and for supporting a training on the same for religious leaders in Uganda. Undoubtedly, there is a lot to learn from each one of us and from the protocol itself on how we can join hands to support victims of sexual violence, and how to end sexual violence in general – and certainly, the Catholic Church has been doing a commendable job in supporting vulnerable people including survivors of sexual violence.

## **RLP's Model 'Screen, Refer, Support, Document'**

Today, I will share with you our model on working with survivors of conflict-related sexual violence – we refer to the model as "Screen, Refer, Support, Document". This is what guides our work with clients and also informs our evidence-based research and advocacy. Whereas we have been working with survivors of conflict-related sexual violence for a long time now,



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our approach radically changed in the recent years, with generous funding support from the US State Department (Bureau of Population, Refugee & Migration - BPRM), the Global Disaster Preparedness Centre (GDPC), and, most recently, the Royal Netherlands Embassy in Uganda in a project titled “*Securing Refugee-Host Relations in Northern Uganda through Enhanced Protection*” which is being implemented in Adjumani, Kiryandongo, & Lamwo district.

Since January this year [2018], we have so far screened 3,917, identified 1,842, and supported 595 Refugees including hosts with war-related injuries. In **Kiryandongo**, we have screened 1,427 (390m, 1029f, 8SGNC), identified 653 survivors of war-related injuries, and supported 213 (78m, 135f) to access professional medical and psychological services. In **Adjumani**, we have screened 1,191 (494m, 697f), identified 536 survivors of war-related injuries, and supported 232 (116m, 116f) to access professional medical and psychological services. In **Lamwo**, we have screened 1,299 (431m, 864f, 4SGNC), identified 653 survivors of war-related injuries, and supported 150 (61m, 89f) to access professional medical and psychological services.

Although we are yet to do a comprehensive analysis, you can see clearly from the above figures that nearly half of those we have screened present with some form of war-related injuries, including injuries arising from sexual violence. From our Kampala office, our experience shows that nearly half of the women that seek services at our office report one or multiple forms of conflict-related sexual violence. The men are no exception; as you have already covered in your previous sessions they too are victims of sexual violence. In our Kampala office, approximately 20 percent of men seeking services at our office have experienced sexual violence.

As you can imagine and as presented in the international protocol, the legacies of sexual violence are gross and require holistic, inclusive, professional, and timely medical and psychosocial support. From our screening, the following physical conditions are often reported by refugees; bullets or bomb fragments lodged in bodies, bullets wounds, severe back, waist and chest pain, paralysis in legs and arms, reduced functionality of the body parts as a result of physical and sexualized torture, severe lower abdominal pain, vaginal prolapse,



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abnormal menses, infertilities, vaginal spot bleeding, urination and bowel movement problems, and anal pain among others.

Many of these physical and psychological conditions often linger for long before survivors report and or seek services. As you have been told, disclosure, reporting, and service seeking remains a nightmare for many survivors partly because of the systematic silencing and disabling environments. As a result, many survivors grapple indoor without timely professional support – all of which compounds the day-to-day distress of being a refugee. It is not uncommon for a large fraction of our clientele to present with symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorders (PTSD), depression, Isolation, nightmares, feelings of helplessness and hopelessness among others.

## **How has RLP been able to utilise the data collected?**

I must emphasise that the findings from the screening coupled with the insightful protocol which you are trained on today has helped us tremendously in modelling best-practices, shifting discourse and debates on conflict-related sexual violence, as well as evidence-based research and strategic advocacy on the same.

**Modelling best practices:** As an institution, we believe that for us to address legacies of conflict-related sexual violence, we must first understand the forms, contexts, and effects of the same. Above all, our work is guided by the slogan 'From Response to Prevention'. As the phrase goes, we learn from direct service provision to survivors of CRSV be they males, females, or gender and or sexual minorities. The numerous testimonies collected from thousands of clients have not been a waste of time and effort – they have helped us to push several boundaries in modelling best practices in strengthening services to all survivors in a friendly, humane, and non-discriminatory, inclusive, and client-centered manner.

From such interventions, we are happy to report that we continue to document testimonies of positive transformation in the lives of survivors that we have supported to receive comprehensive rehabilitation – some of which have been recorded in videos that we currently use in many of our training and advocacy activities. Herein, we have documented cases of clients who were bed-ridden but can now engage in basic domestic and community activities.



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We have seen male clients who were unable to gain and or sustain erection due to sexual violence and sexualised torture now with expecting wives – all of which contributes to household and community harmony as well as socio-economic transformation.

**Survivor-led Peer Support and Collective Activism:** Following successes realised from the screening, referrals, and support, survivors have embraced the need for survivor-led peer support and collective activism. So far, we have 16 refugee led peer support groups in Kampala, and 3 each in Kiryandongo, Adjumani, & Lamwo respectively. We strongly believe that such groups, when supported and nurtured can radicalise work on war-related violence, sexual violence, and refugee engagements from community level through to national and international fora.

**Strengthened Capacity Building Initiatives:** The findings from our screening, combined with experience of training multiple stakeholders on the international protocol, has revolutionized our capacity building activities. As a methodology, after obtaining professionally documented consent from our clients, we screen short video clips made by our own videographers, and these bring uniqueness to our trainings. Besides, we also bring along survivor facilitators to share their stories to our training participants. That way, participants are able to connect and ground the presentations to realities on the ground. Over the years, we have trained thousands of Uganda People's Defence Forces (UPDF), Uganda Police Force (UPF), Uganda Prisons Service (UPS), Citizenship and Immigration officials, Civil Society Organisations, Women's Activists, Role Model Youths, Health workers, Medical and Legal students, Refugee Leaders, Community leaders, and now religious leaders, and I can attest that it works. RLP undoubtedly "walks the talk" in ensuring transformative participation and ensuring that survivors are proactively engaged on issues that concerns them – and guided by the principle 'Nothing About Us Without Us'. We have demonstrated that this model works, and I urge you to embrace similar methods in the future where possible.

**Support to Strategic National and International Advocacy:** Closely related, our work with refugee survivors has significantly contributed to national, regional, and international advocacy on conflict-related sexual violence, and other specific refugee issues. Over the years, we have not kept quiet on challenges that refugee survivors grapple with while in



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asylum, and we have utilised spaces including International Association for the Study of Forced Migration, and UNHCR Annual Consultations, to highlight the plight of refugees, and also call to action relevant stakeholders to ensure that they provide professional and inclusive services to all forced migrants. Of course, we all know that some changes take time but that should not frustrate us from continuing to do due diligence and support all persons of concerns in our programming and within our mandate.

**Contextual Reminder:** As we gather today in this very important training on the International Protocol, may I remind you that contemporary conflict now presents with three features; 1) deadly to civilians, 2) highly protracted (20 years in DRC, 24 years in Somalia, and with Sudan still counting), and 3) prolonged years in exile (17-20 years in limbo in exile). As we keep our fingers crossed that sustainable peace is achieved everywhere, we need not to forget that majority of refugees flee with severe physical and psychological injuries. As we sit here today, let's remember that many have bullets in their bodies, and/or have been tortured, mutilated, and sexually abused among others. Therefore, there is need to find measures of identifying survivors early, and to intervene accordingly. On behalf of RLP, I pledge commitment to continue screening for experiences of war.

**A Call to Action:** Therefore, and perhaps more than ever, your support is needed by all survivors. I am cognizant of the challenges that you are grappling with, and with more to come your way. Indeed, there are unspeakable challenges ranging from overwhelming demand, over expectations, frustrating bureaucracies and referral pathways, structural and mandate limitations, understaffing, and underfunding among others. Nonetheless, there is a way where there is a will. The fact that we have gathered here today and having come from various parts of the country, may this training give us more strengths and courage required to face the unforeseen as God guides us through the journey to help all persons that seek our support.

The support of religious leaders will forever be required in transforming our society for the better. The Inter Agency Standing Committee Guidelines 2005 (pg. 69) and 2015 (pg. 4) recognises the that religious leaders play important roles in providing community support for survivors. I add that you have more roles that those highlighted in the documents, and I urge



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you to continue discussing about sexual violence in conflict and support for survivors, and to establish systems for confidential referrals and support. With the knowledge and skills being taught about the international protocol, may your documentation and archival to be strengthened.

**Individual Responsibility:** As individuals in this space, I ask you to build proactive rapport, listen proactively to survivors, be empathetic, observe confidentiality, conduct home visits to document recovery, and observe body languages (the unspoken), and above all, continue providing God fearing services to all persons seeking your services and or support. You do not have to be an 'expert' to tackle CRSV. The 'little' things we do mean a lot to survivors and in facilitating access to justice. Let's be reminded that non-official documentation evidence including reports of crimes received by religious leaders, and contemporaneous notes made by victims or other witnesses counts!

It's challenging but it's necessary, and it's possible that we inclusively support survivors of sexual violence in conflicts, strengthen our documentation, and support investigation of all cases.

May you all be blessed in the struggle to end sexual violence in conflict, and we look forward to future collaborations on the same.

**#TimeToAct** - Thank you.

Onen David<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> David Onen is the Manager of the Gender and Sexuality Programme of the Refugee Law Project, School of Law, Makerere University with a background in Psychology, Gender, & Anthropology, Mr. Onen has 10-years of progressive experience in working with persons with special needs (PSNs), identifying and offering inclusive physical and psychosocial support to survivors of conflict-related violence. Subsequently, he has significantly contributed to national and international advocacy and training of Police, military, health workers, UN agencies, and CSOs on inclusive response to and prevention of conflict-related sexual violence, and on the *International Protocol on the Documentation and Investigation of Sexual Violence in Conflict* (First & Second Edition), including the annex on men and boys. Email: [gender@refugeelawproject.org](mailto:gender@refugeelawproject.org) Tel: +256 772 184 247



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