



# **Exploring Community Perceptions and Women's Experiences of Violence Against Women and Use of Services in Bugesera District-Rwanda**

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# INTRODUCTION

- Violence is a common feature of Rwanda's recent history. At least 250,000 women were raped during the genocide. Bugesera is one of the areas that were hard hit by the genocide.
- The Eastern Province which includes the Bugesera area is also a high risk area for violence against women (UNFPA/United Nations Rwanda/Ministry of Gender, 2008)
- Rwandan Women's Network has been providing services for the genocide rape victims and we are increasingly seeing survivors of intimate partner violence.

## Research Aim

- The overall aim of the study was to generate information about VAW and survivors' use of services to inform the expansion and strengthening of VAW prevention and response strategies by RWN and other stakeholders in Bugesera District.

## Research Objectives

- To explore the perceptions and experiences of VAW within the community of Bugesera
- To explore what services women need and how they use the services if they do
- To explore the capacity of service providers such as anti-GBV committees, health sector providers and the police to respond to the needs identified by the survivors.

# Methodology

## Qualitative study

### In-depth Interviews:

- ❖ 12 survivors of VAW;
- ❖ 10 key service providers and stakeholders (police, local leaders, Abunzi, women council, high school teachers, Service providers at Health center & Courts);

### Focus Group Discussions:

- ❖ 10 FGDs were held with community members, local leaders, Abunzi, Anti-GBV committees & police. FGDs in all involving 100 participants.
- ❖ Study followed WHO Ethical and Safety Guidelines

### Analysis:

- ❖ Interviews were audio-taped and transcribed; Opencode was used for data analysis

### Validation and Reporting Back:

- ❖ A validation meeting was held in Bugesera District with more than 45 participants including local leaders, representatives of the health sector, education sector, the army, the police, RWN community paralegals and community women.

# KEY FINDINGS

## *Experiences of VAW as described by the women*

- Beatings
- Broken limbs
- Burned with hot water
- Cheated on
- Forbidden to attend meetings and ceremonies
- Forbidden to meet friends
- Denied control, access and ownership of land
- Forced to have sex
- Verbal abusive using degrading words
- Abandoned
- Chased from the home
- Refusal to provide food while using money for alcohol
- Bad treatment by in-laws
- Not valuing work done
- Forbidden to visit children
- Nails thrown at you
- Forced to take care of and feed co-wife
- Agricultural produce destroyed, or stolen and sold

# *Assistance from Informal Structures*

## *1 - Family members and neighbors*

Most commonly reported as the first people to assist/intervene.

A woman who did not really want to report her husband said:

*“I ran naked to the neighbor and she got a bottle of cooking oil and smeared it on my back (she was burned with hot water). Then she (the neighbor) also ran and called the local leaders and other neighbors even my mother-in law came and they asked my husband why he did it and he started explaining that it was an accident”.*

But it in most cases not useful with the main form of assistance from all was seeking to reconcile the husband and wife

*“His mother in that discussion consoled me by telling me that all married people experience this. She told me to persevere that with time my husband will change”*

## 2- Assistance from community and Civil Society Organizations

Assistance provided by other community women and NGOs was encouraging and was valued by the women and this was mainly in providing emotional and financial assistance to women and their children.

*‘I used to seek advice from some of the women who were my neighbors and they could comfort me telling me that it’s life and later they gave me some start-up capital and I started selling some food stuffs in the market’. Another woman said “An old lady who was my neighbor told me that instead of being killed I should come and she provided me with a small room to stay in”.*

## *Seeking Assistance from Formal Structures (Local Leaders, Police & Hospitals)*

The way in which local authorities work with community members in assisting women are explained by a Social Affairs official

*‘When a woman is for example beaten or hurt the first people to intervene are the neighbors, local leaders and they call community policing. Together with the lady from the women council they find out what the problem is and when violence is not so serious they try to reconcile them. When it is serious e.g. beating someone and needs to be taken to the hospital, they take the victim there and also either take the perpetrator or call the police. Normally each level makes a report and sends it to the next level i.e. the village leadership makes a report and sends it to the Cell level to the Sector level then to the Police’.*



## Assistance from Mediators/Abunzi and Anti GBV Committees

The role of the mediators was explained “*As mediators our role is to mediate between two parties who have a conflict. So most of the cases we receive include land conflicts, family relationships, couples with misunderstandings, etc*”

However such advice and assistance was limited because mediators and local leaders could not enforce a husband’s promises and commitments

A woman said: “*Then we went together and we explained everything and the leaders requested him to sign that he brings back what he had taken from home and even to take care of the children and he signed. But he has never done any of what he signed for up to now*”

# Why women are reluctant to seek assistance

Cultural beliefs/norms, Dependence on husbands, Poverty & Fear /

Both financial dependence on husbands and the Rwandan culture of keeping family matters private were confirmed by the women interviewed as reasons why survivors do not seek assistance

*“It’s not good to reveal your private affairs to anyone”, “I feel like leaving him but feel scared about people’s comments”, and “he will complain that you exposed him, what kind of wife are you who expose home secrets”*

# Barriers to provide assistance identified by service providers

- Multiple challenges were mentioned with most of them revolving around constraints of limited resources – as one service provider explained

*“We have a problem of lack of enough transportation for helping emergency cases. Another one is those women who do not have the capacity to go for treatment so that we get evidence and when it exceeds three days we release him as the law states. Another problem is that at the hospital women do not have specific doctors to receive them and it takes long which affects evidence. This is so because these victims are considered as other patients and a doctor cannot leave a dying person to first treat the woman”*

# Conclusions and Recommendations

- Most women who sought help did not get the assistance they needed.
- Some support from other community women and assistance to start business was helpful.
- Limited role by the church as a support structure for abused women therefore the recommendation to train and work with religious leaders to promote and guide a process of change
- Need to continue with efforts in raising awareness and training of both men, women and service providers around human rights with a specific focus on women's rights at all levels in the communities,
- Open up safe spaces to provide temporary shelter for victims of VAW as well as encourage women's spaces for psycho-social support and solidarity groups
- Strengthen legal aid programs

# Conclusions & Recommendations Cont....

- Ensure adequate resources to all government structures and other stakeholders to ensure women's protection and safety;
- Training of health personnel & consider mental health care as a critical aspect in the provision of assistance for survivors of VAW

## Lessons Learned

*Being part of this process has had the following impact:-*

- RWN research skills have improved
- Evidence data on which to base the RWN programs at the Polyclinic of Hope Center in Bugesera District
- New contacts

**THANK YOU  
MURAKOZE**

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