

PARTNERSHIP: ICGLR-Regional Training Facility (RTF) and The Populace Foundation International (TPFI)/ The State of the Union (SOTU) Commemorated 16-Days of Activism with Victims and Survivors of SGBV other Grassroots Women in the Post-Conflict Communities of Northern Uganda and the Borderline Communities in the Cross-Border Region between Uganda & South Sudan.

In executing its mandate, **ICGLR-Regional Training Facility (RTF) on Prevention and Suppression of Sexual & Gender-Based Violence in the Great Lakes Region** partnership with **The Populace Foundation International (TPFI)** and in strategic collaboration with **The State of the Union (SOTU)** culminated into a joint **Commemoration of 16-Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence (GBV)** under the Global (Year 2022) Theme: *“UNITE! Activism to End Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG)”* in the remote parts of Northern Uganda and the borderline communities in the Cross-Border Regions between Uganda and South Sudan. Indeed, it was quite an experience.

In the last week of November 2022, a joint team of experts from specialized entities was dispatched in the post-conflict communities, hot-spots and conflict-prone areas in Northern Uganda. The three-day maiden trip - which provided in-depth insights on the plights of SGBV victims and survivors was meant to assess the major concerns and the extent of critical needs (for the holistic care) of the victims and survivors of SGBV as a result of tensions amongst borderline communities in Northern Uganda, Karamoja Sub-region and the Cross-Border Region of South Sudan in the Great Lakes Region (GLR). Preliminary findings revealed the aggressions and or tensions experienced by these communities in post-conflict, hot-spots and conflict-prone areas are real and require redress.

The choice for Northern Uganda is due to its uniqueness as the Region that suffered for over 2-decade armed conflicts (coupled with the Karimojong invasions on the neighbouring ethnic tribes) inflicting havoc e.g. loss of property, lives, cultural norms and practices, abject poverty. Ranging from rebels' abductions to IDP camp life, many women and girls were subjected (by both insurgents and soldiers) to forced sex and violence which left them in need of psychosocial and economic empowerment.

Over 65% of the communities in Acholi Sub-region lived in IDP camps and the people abducted and sexually humiliated - most of whom have not received any psychosocial support to overcome their ordeals. Camp scenarios have left women and girls extremely vulnerable to SGBV that are perpetrated in the intimacy of the households and within local communities – and with lifelong negative effects. Even resettlement packages, particularly those tailor-made programmes and initiatives meant for recovery, reconstruction, resettlement and rehabilitation of Northern Uganda, over 60% of households are still living in absolute poverty. Latest report ranks Acholi as the poorest in Uganda. This aggravated SGBV incidences especially is the case with early marriages and quest for bride price.

Earmarked as one of the Sub-regions with a high level of sexual and gender-based violence, the visiting team led by RTF Regional Director, assisted by RTF Master Trainer (Police) and with support from TPFI's Executive Director, Board Member, Organizational Staff and Community Host Representative went for the three-day assessment trip in the Districts of Kitgum and Lamwo. Dubbed **“Women Peace & Security (WPS) Programme: Securing Accountability for Conflict-Related Sexual & Gender-Based Crimes in Northern Uganda**, the initiative **presented a short-term approach to address the huge information gaps and community vulnerability in the areas of violence against women (VAW) and gender-based violence (GBV), access to justice, human rights, and gender inequality etc.**

To ensure ownership of the action steps, the team employed integrated, consultative and participatory approaches that were multi-disciplinary and innovative in nature- while undertaking the various strands of interventions. The partners interfaced with District and Sub-County (lower local government) leadership authority structures and communities—documenting all emerging issues raised by the locals.

Officiated by the RTF Regional Director, the awareness and sensitization, the consultations and other community outreaches that were blended with activities that are tailor-made to the 16-Days of Activism against GBV offered intriguing or hilarious experience– to both the visiting team of experts and target groups: *the victims and survivors of SGBV, the general citizenry, police and prison officers, healthcare workers and other service providers, women and youth leaders, elders and opinion leaders, local government leaders, security personnel, women’s rights activists, CSO representatives and the media.*

In concrete terms, the following achievements/ outputs were realized;

1. SGBV partnerships strengthened and GBV concerns, peace and security related issues raised by the locals documented.
2. Brainstorming sessions held with local authorities and community members- where increased understanding and appreciation of the current challenges for peace and security affecting the post-conflict and borderline communities in Northern Uganda and beyond.
3. Trees (symbolically) planted in designated spots in the District and Sub-County H/Qs underscoring how women are impacted by climate change and women’s role in fighting it.
4. Candid interactions were held with In-Charges of designated Health Centres (H.C.) IIs and IIIs Police Post and Prison in Kitgum District (*Orom Sub-County H/Qs and Tikao Prisons*)
5. Courtesy visits paid to designated places in Lamwo District (*Madi Opei, Lokung.*) and candid discussions held/ courtesy visits paid in designated victims’ homesteads in Lokung (Lamwo).
6. Radio talk show regarding GBV and its associated issues was conducted on Mighty Fire FM.
7. Individual and group interviews and discussions equally held - where victims’ and survivors’ stories and personal testimonies gathered from them and other selected women within the borderline communities at Madi-Opei Border and Aweno-Olwi Border.
8. Individual and group interviews and other candid discussions held with local leaders (at the borderline communities) at Aweno-Olwi Border and equally with security personnel, customs officials and other regulatory bodies manning Madi-Opei and Ngomoromo Border Posts.
9. Courtesy visits, inspection and documentation conducted with security personnel, customs officials and other regulatory bodies manning the border at Madi-Opei Border Post. The impromptu interaction with these customs officials and security personnel was so telling – they are not aware of the existence of any regional instruments and their associated/ related protocols – which therefore calls for their orientation and other specialized trainings to be offered to them.

We therefore highly recommend the trainings and capacity building sessions and learning visits (for local leaders) and economic empowerment and skills development (for victims and survivors and other grassroots women and girls) through drives/ initiatives that make meaningful economic empowerment to help the different homesteads to develop their local economies. This will reduce incidences of SGBV by enhancing the human security of the population and creating conditions conducive to sustainable reconciliation, peace and development in the post-conflict and borderline communities in Northern Uganda, Karamoja and the Cross-Border Region of South Sudan in the Great Lakes Region.

In conclusion, the 3-day assessment mission was a good strategy and should be emulated in other areas. Since the communities visited are highly susceptible to SGBV, they should be profiled for assistance, and RTF experts and other specialized teams can be sent out to these communities to train, sensitize, and identify more victims for psychosocial counseling and reintegration. Preferably RTF’s Regional Office should make follow-up and monitor progress because a one-off activity is not all that effective.

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