

Violence against girls in conflict-affected populations reinforces gender norms

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In some areas affected by conflict, adolescent girls and young women are perceived as responsible for their own safety and considered as burdens and threats to family honor should they become victims of violence or pregnant prior to marriage, according to a study just released by Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health. This latest research on gender based violence (GBV) also indicates that girls need to take responsibility for managing their interactions with boys and men. The findings are published online in the journal *Child Abuse and Neglect*.

The study, part of a larger intervention trial conducted by the International Rescue Committee and Columbia University, was conducted in two conflict-affected settings: fourteen conflict-affected towns/villages in South Kivu in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and three refugee camps with primarily South Sudanese/Sudanese populations in western Ethiopia. The three camps in Ethiopia include populations of refugees fleeing multiple conflicts in Sudan, as well as smaller numbers of refugees from South Sudan and DRC. More than 20 ethnic groups lived in the camps.

Caregiver and [adolescent](#) girl participants with a diversity of experiences based on gender, age, married or unmarried, in school and out of school were included in the study.

Three themes related to adolescent [girls'](#) and young women's experiences of gender based [violence](#) and of sexual violence, emerged: perceptions of responsibility for girls' safety; perceptions of girls' responsibility for interactions with men and boys; and community perceptions of appropriate responses to physical violence and rape committed against girls.

"What became clear from the data suggest that many girls and caregivers deemed adolescent girls themselves to be responsible for their safety, through the enactment of perceived good

behavior," said Marni Sommer, DrPH, MS, associate professor of Sociomedical Sciences at the Mailman School. "This in particular related to girls' outward appearances or how they dressed, and the respect they showed their elders and community members and family."

Similarly, girls were perceived to be responsible for managing their interactions with boys and men, and thus to some degree at fault if physical, emotional or sexual violence occurred. Lastly, the communities in both contexts held differing perceptions about appropriate responses to experiences of violence, with those occurring through marital relationships as to be expected and mediated but not rebuked, while those occurring from boyfriends or strangers as warranting police involvement but only if a girl was severely injured.

"Our study adds to the ongoing conversation on how to prevent and address violence against adolescent girls within conflict-affected populations through gender norms change," according to Lindsay Stark, DrPH, associate professor of Population and Family Health at the Mailman School of Public Health and director of the CPC (Child Protection in Crisis) Learning Network.

"The evidence on how both [adolescent girls](#) and caregivers conceptualize abuse and respond to different cases of abuse within the Ethiopian and the DRC refugee camps suggests that programs should work with community structures and leaders to address victim-blaming, silence surrounding experiences of violence, and justification of abuse," said Dr. Sommer.

Provided by Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health

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