



"Violence against women: a statistical overview, challenges and gaps in data collection and methodology and approaches for overcoming them"

Expert Group Meeting

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The efforts of non-governmental organizations in assessing and documenting the violations of women s human rights in situations of armed conflict: The Isis WICCE experience

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Preamble.

Isis-Women's International Cross Cultural Exchange (Isis-WICCE) is a non-governmental global action-oriented women's Organisation established in Geneva Switzerland in 1974. Since its inception Isis-WICCE has endeavoured to promote justice and women's human rights through documentation of the violation of their rights; facilitating exchange of skills to further empower women to take control of their lives by documenting their realities; strengthening communication mechanisms for the women to be able to generate knowledge about their situations and to share the information, ideas and experiences in order to improve their status and overcome gender inequality.

During the 1970's to 1980's the approach used by the organisation to fulfil its mandate was to document and process secondary information on and about women, and systematically avail its a documentation centre for easy accessibility of the literature to those in need of the information. Isis-WICCE also organised exchange visits whereby women human rights activists from different parts of the world were brought together for a period of one month to share their experiences and learn from one another. The testimonies shared by the participants were then documented, published and disseminated worldwide for raising awareness about the plight of women in various communities of the world¹, as well as lobbying for redress. This approach provided numerous collections of qualitative data on and about women's lives.

By the 1990's the organisation had evolved, necessitating it to be relocated to a region where its outputs were needed most. Africa, where very little information regarding women's lives had been researched on and documented, was identified as the most suitable region where this vibrant and unique women's resource centre could be located. In 1993 Isis-WICCE moved to Uganda with the aim of tapping the voices of the African woman.

The numerous and obvious negative circumstances in Africa dictated the approach the organisation had to adopt in collecting data about women's status. This change in approach was also influenced by two major International Instruments, the 1993 Vienna Declaration, that called for respect of women's human rights; and the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action (**particularly strategic objective D.2, and action to be taken as highlighted in section 129 a, b and c²**), that, among other issues, calls for the "promotion of research and data collection, and compilation of statistics ...relating to the prevalence, the causes, nature, seriousness and consequences of the violence against women...disseminate the findings..."

Challenges in Documenting Women s Realities

The relocation of Isis-WICCE to Uganda opened the organisation to many challenges in its effort to collect data on and about women's realities. These included marginalisation of research as a component in policy formulation, at national level, particularly on issues concerning women's human rights, causing a big hurdle for Isis-

¹ Isis- Journey: A documentary Philippines: Isis-WICCE and Isis-Manila. 2003.Duration 30minutes

WICCE to overcome, since there was literally no base to bu(a)Tj 22 0 TDTj 22 0 TD(s)Tj 19 0 TD(e)

The Documentation Process in Uganda

- *Conducive Environment*

Documenting the experiences of women in conflict situation particularly where states are also involved in the conflict is a very sensitive matter. However, in order for one to get the true situation of the prevalence and magnitude of the violations committed to women particularly on their sexuality, it is necessary to carry out the documentation when the environment is peaceful with less movement of people and little fear of new attacks. In Uganda, the district of Luweero in central part of Uganda was the most appropriate to start with since at the time of beginning the survey (1997), the guns had fallen silent.

Further more, the government of Uganda had put in place enabling political machinery, and a

conflict in Uganda. It was therefore, necessary to determine the nature and extent of the crimes committed against women and girls, and the consequences of these crimes to their livelihood⁶. It was also crucial for Isis-WICCE to document women's coping mechanisms, highlighting the roles they play in the said situations, and how much redress had been done to deal with the aftermath of war to women specific realities⁷. This data has been a vital resource for Isis-WICCE post conflict programmes, and for other human rights activists in planning for advocacy for redress, as well as holding accountable the different actors responsible for women's security and well being.

▪ *Conceptualisation of the process*

After the literature review Isis-WICCE, invited some experts⁸ to be part of the development of a concept document that highlighted the aim and objectives for carrying out data collection on violence against women in conflict situations from a feminist perspective. The objective of the concept document was to: raise awareness to publv

and discuss different issues of concern to the process (i.e the draft questionnaire) with the identified persons.

The national participants included representatives in Parliament, community development workers and women leaders from the proposed study area; some of the known survivors of the conflicts from the areas; and medical professionals and researchers from the academia als

This made it easier for the ordinary local community to internalise the importance of the proposed docu

the quesss

- *Fact finding missions /visits*

Using opportunities availed to Isis-WICCE the organisation continues to collect data on women's human rights' abuses using many other fora. The data collected is mostly quantitative in nature. One of for a being the national and international missions/visits organised by influential groups at both national and international levels, as per the examples below.

- *Parliament of Uganda Mission to Northern Uganda*

In January 2004, Isis-WICCE was honoured to be part of the team of Uganda Parliamentarians who made a fact-finding mission to Northern Uganda. The visit, organised by a consortium of humanitarian and professional support organisation¹², took a team of 30 parliamentarians for a three days fact-finding missions, in Kitgum district, with the aim of assessing the magnitude of the destruction of the 18-year-old insurgency. This was after an outcry made by civil society, bilateral and UN agencies operating in Northern Uganda, such as, the international Rescue Committee (IRC), Oxfam, AVIS, World Food Programme, UNICEF among others. During the visit development stakeholders in the district were able to provide situation analysis to parliamentarians, as well as interview a survivors of the conflict on spot. Most of them highlighting the deteriorating health conditions of the survivors, due to poor feeding and poor sanitation conditions many people live in. The alarming rate of HIV/AIDS infection was also mentioned.¹³

This provided Isis-WICCE an opportunity to incorporate a gender perspective in the programme, and influenced the members of parliament to talk to women survivors too. This process was recorded on video and photographs were also taken. The data is vital for post conflict rehabilitation plan.

- *Women Initiative for Gender Justice*

Likewise, in November 2004, the Women Initiative for Gender Justice (WIGJ), a global women initiative, based at The Hague, whose objective is to monitor the International Criminal court (ICC) performance on the investigation of gender violation in conflict situations, made a fact-finding mission to Uganda by the court. This is in preparation for the on going investigation of crime against humanity to the people of northern Uganda. The mission was organised by Isis-WICCE in conjunction with the women groups in the districts of Gulu, Kitgum, Lira and Soroti¹⁴, as well as women members of parliament of the said Districts. During the 10-day's mission in Northern Uganda, WIGJ and Isis-WICCE were able to document qualitative testimonies of individual interview, and recorded on audio and video equipment for future reference when prosecution begins.

¹² Development Associates in Conjunction with Office of Parliamentarian Professional Development, Community Resilience and Dialogue Project, AVIS and International Rescue Committee.

¹³ UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. A Report on the Mission to Kitgum Districe, 6th to 10th February 2003.

¹⁴ People's Voince for Peace in Gulu; Women peace Initiatives in Kitgum; Lira Women Peace Initiative in Lira; and Teso Women Peace Association in Sor r or d in ScP a

Torture

It is also evident that the

In Gulu th

intervention they would have eve

