War-Related Abduction and Incarceration Linked to HIV among Sex Workers in Northern Uganda

Background
In Northern Uganda, a two-decade long conflict led to human rights violations including abductions of young people and children by the Lords Resistance Army (LRA). In conflict-affected areas, young women may engage in sex work to meet economic needs, but there has been little research on factors associated with HIV among sex workers in within conflict-affected settings.

The Question
How are structural factors such as war-related abduction and incarceration associated with the HIV burden of sex workers in conflict-affected Gulu, Northern Uganda?

The Study
A research team made up of the Gulu branch of The AIDS Support Organization (TASO), sex workers, and community organizations in northern Uganda interviewed 400 young women in sex work in northern Uganda between 2011 and 2012. TASO offers comprehensive HIV testing, care and treatment to over 80,000 people living with HIV, through 11 branches in Uganda. The Gulu Sexual Health Project is a joint research project launched in 2009 between TASO and the Gender and Sexual Health Initiative (GSHI), supported in part through the Gender, Violence and HIV Team.

The Results
Of 400 sex workers interviewed:
- 34% were living with HIV;
- 33% were previously undiagnosed.

Abduction & Incarceration
- 32% had been abducted by the LRA, with a median age of 13 at the time of abduction; and
- 27% reported having been incarcerated (jail or prison), mainly for sex work-related charges or public disorder.

The Policy Implications
There is a need for more research to better understand and address human rights violations and the impacts of criminalization among marginalized sex workers in conflict-affected settings. Programmes & polices that support the health and human rights of sex workers are needed, including:
- Preparedness efforts to integrate HIV and sex work into planning;
- Emergency response efforts such as outreach, HIV, sexual and reproductive health services;
- Long-term efforts to reduce vulnerability and address structural issues, including sex work-led approaches to addressing human rights violations and ensuring ongoing access to care.