



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

Background

In Northern Uganda, a two-decade long conflict led to population displacement and 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 the determinants of HIV among sex workers within conflict-affected settings, including Northern Uganda.

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:

- **135 (34%) were living with HIV;**
- 45 (33%) were new or previously undiagnosed.

Abduction & Incarceration

- 32% had been abducted by the LRA, with a median age of 13 at time of abduction;
- 27% reported lifetime incarceration, primarily for sex work-related charges or public disorder.

After adjusting for age of sex work entry and education:

- **Lifetime incarceration** was independently associated with HIV; and
- **History of wartime abduction** was marginally associated with HIV.

The Policy Implications

There is a need for more research to better understand and address human rights and the impacts of criminalization among marginalized sex workers in conflict-affected settings.

Much needed are programmes and policies supporting the health and human rights of sex workers:

- *Preparedness efforts* to integrate HIV and sex work into planning;
- *Emergency response efforts*, such as outreach, HIV, sexual and reproductive health services; and
- *Long-term efforts* to reduce vulnerability and address structural issues, including sex work-led approaches addressing human rights violations and ensuring sustained access to care.

Goldenberg SM, Nguyen P, Muzaaya G, Akello M, Birungi J, Shannon K. War-related abduction and history of incarceration linked to high burden of HIV among female sex workers in conflict-affected Northern Uganda. *JAIDS*, 2016.