

Conference Voices:

Building Futures Without Violence

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Introduction

This series of mini briefings lifts up the voices and perspectives from workshops, plenaries, and breakout sessions at the 10th Africa Conference on Sexual Health and Rights (ACSHR). You can access the full set of briefings and framing reflections [on the ACSHR website](#).

It is possible, and necessary, to end sexual and gender based violence (SGBV) in this lifetime. This bold proposition animated countless discussions across the 10th ACSHR, as activists from the Continent and beyond, built a shared, comprehensive understanding of sexual and gender based violence. We reckoned with the devastating reality of violence and recommitted to uprooting patriarchy, the social structure that justifies male power over and violence against girls, women and LGBTQIA+ communities. This includes ending FGM and child marriage, which we will only achieve with girls and young feminists in the lead. As Sierra Leone's Black Tuesday movement demonstrates, when we build broad, inclusive movements, we win. A world without violence is possible and necessary!

Namina Forna is a Sierra Leonean author and screenwriter. Her debut novel *The Gilded Ones* (2021) was on the New York Times and Indie Bestseller lists. Namina gave a keynote speech at the 10th ACSHR.

Accelerating the Elimination of Sexual and Gender Based Violence in Africa

While 'Accelerating the Elimination of Sexual and Gender Based Violence in Africa' was the overarching theme, and all the discussions were linked to this theme, sessions like these focused directly on strategies for eliminating SGBV:

- On the Front Line – The Reality of Wartime Sexual Violence
- What do we do When Nation States and Justice Systems Fail Us?
- How do we Respond to Gender Based Violence in Crisis Contexts?
- Access to Justice, Human Rights and Accountability Mechanisms on the Continent

We have shared some of the messages from those sessions below for you to reflect on.

Nowhere is safe, no one is safe.

The high rates of sexual and gender based violence across Africa are alarming, and the numbers have increased significantly in the past three years. In every country, there are harrowing stories of survivors of all ages. From those just a few months old to those in their 90s - no one is safe. This violence occurs in homes, schools, the workplace, or even in the middle of the day on a busy street - nowhere is safe.

Our justice systems are failing us.

Our justice systems are failing us - survivors are ridiculed when they report cases at police stations, their case dockets with the evidence collected are 'lost', their e-cases

are not investigated. The stigma and victim blaming directed at survivors of violence in their communities is already a deterrent to report cases and to seek help. So, the negative treatment they receive in institutions meant to support them, further deters survivors from reporting cases. Those who do report rarely see the perpetrators face justice.

Holistic services are needed for survivors of violence

Comprehensive and inclusive service delivery is needed for survivors, including services that support the emotional and mental wellbeing of survivors. Our advocacy initiatives must go beyond changing legislation and the provision of basic health services, to ensuring that survivors can access long-term support for their mental health.

To end violence we must uproot patriarchy.

To end sexual and gender based violence, we must take action at many levels. We must focus on both response and prevention. We must commit to digging violence out from the root by upturning the power imbalance that favours men and perpetuates the narrative of women and girls as subordinate beings. Violence against women and girls is rooted in patriarchy. Our friends, families, communities consciously and subconsciously perpetuate the culture of violence, by upholding patriarchy. This manifests in a number of ways, for example, the refusal to have comprehensive sexuality education in schools, or the lack of consideration or young people with disabilities in information and service provision.

Men must contribute to ending sexual and gender based violence.

Girls' and women's rights organisations have been at the forefront of designing and implementing strategies to tackle SGBV and know best what works and what doesn't. But men must be held accountable, and share responsibility for eliminating SGBV. We cannot treat SGBV as a 'women's issue' that only girls and women must resolve when largely, men are the perpetrators. This is why we must not leave out boys and men out of our solutions to ending SGBV, they too must learn about feminism and unlearn the long held beliefs which perpetuate violence against women and girls.

“Hands off our girls’ is more than a slogan. The solution is with the men. The day men decide not to rape a girl again or marry our children, there will be no need for ‘hands off our girls.’”

- Her excellency, Fatima Maada Bio, First Lady of Sierra Leone

We must tackle all forms of violence.

Furthermore, we must recognise that there are multiple forms of violence. We cannot prioritise only a few or those we feel disrupt our norms and beliefs the least. We cannot be against SGBV but then remain neutral or silent on marital rape or FGM.

Survivors' stories are theirs to tell, at their own time, if they choose to share.

Survivors' stories are indeed important. They help those who have been desensitised by hearing only statistics on the extent of violence to remember that these numbers refer to actual people who have suffered different forms of violence.

Many have not survived. While sharing stories can be a form of healing, telling their stories over and over again can also re-traumatise survivors. While these stories can be an effective strategy to change mindsets, beliefs, practices, they can also cause significant harm and can be a form of exploitation.

“If you’re a survivor of any kind of violence, you need to take care of yourself. Some spaces that encourage telling your stories can be exploitative”

- @LeylaHussein

Change takes time, but we can move quickly if we move together.

We are trying to dismantle narratives that have stood for hundreds of years. There will be backlash and resistance, and change will sometimes be slow. Despite this, we must move urgently and move together. The daily incidences of different forms of violence, the number of deaths per week, per day, per second, necessitate that we move with speed and with the radical hope that we can indeed eliminate SGBV in our lifetime. It may feel like a mammoth task - but only if we move as singular, disjointed, individual organisations and collectives, as opposed to forming strong movements for radical change.

#collectiveatwork

“To accelerate the elimination of SGBV we cannot work in silos, compartmentalise our movement or live singular lives. We can be holistic and bring everyone along in all our diversity.

- @TheOlaAbagun

“Solidarity is a continuous process of never letting someone stand alone. The more we connect, the more powerful it makes us.”

- Azaria Baker

Movements are a powerful force for change: The Black Tuesday Movement in Sierra Leone

A movement was born after media personality and campaigner Asmaa James led a group of young women and men in black to protest the horrific rates of sexual violence in Sierra Leone. The Black Tuesday movement is a feminist space for dialogue, healing, and direct and collective action. The movement is bringing a range of actors from across Sierra Leone together under the common vision of ending SGBV. in Sierra Leone. The Black Tuesday movement has gained unprecedented support and secured unparalleled wins in Sierra Leone over the last two years.

In just two years, the Black Tuesday movement sparked action and contributed to significant change, generating political will for legislative change and concrete actions to prevent and respond to SGBV:

- A state of emergency for sexual and gender based violence was declared;
- The Sexual Offences Act was amended to make the punishment for rape a minimum of 15 years for adult offenders (previously a maximum of 15 years);
- The government developed a strategy for the involvement of men in reducing SGBV;

- The 116 hotline was set up to give information on access to services for survivors;
- The government & Rainbo Initiative have signed a memorandum of understanding; Rainbo is providing free access to holistic services for SGBV survivors. Rainbo Initiative provides free medical treatment, psychosocial services and age appropriate treatments for survivors of Sexual Gender Based-Violence (SGBV) in Sierra Leone.

The Importance of Political Will in Ending SGBV

In a session on strategies and tactics to end gender based violence, a participant highlighted the importance of political will in ending SGBV, and the role of individuals in applying the necessary pressure to generate this political will by holding our governments accountable. We, as activists, need to know how much money is allocated for preventing and responding to SGBV and where it is allocated. We need to know what treaties our governments have signed and ratified that uphold human rights. When they fail to live up to the commitments they have made, we must work collectively to take them to international human rights courts.

“African govts are going into elections this and next year and we need to make equality a part of the political debate! We need to inform ourselves about those political processes, this is the time for us to insist on the change we want to see.”

- @OlajideDemola

We have seen in Sierra Leone how political will to end violence and protect the lives of women has led to political actions: a state of emergency over sexual and gender

based violence in 2019, the introduction of the Radical Inclusion Bill in 2021 and the announcement of the Safe Motherhood Bill in 2022 at the 10th ACSHR.

“I hope after this conference we will be part of building a world we know is possible. Violence must end in this lifetime, we have no choice. Our lives depend on this.”

- Her Excellency Fatima Maada Bio, First Lady of Sierra Leone

“I am determined to break the culture of violence against women and girls in this country and to work with you to make Africa safer and freer for all of us.”

- His Excellency President Julius Maada Bio, President of Sierra Leone

Female Genital Mutilation & Child Marriage are Forms of Violence.

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and child marriage are prevalent across the Continent, and the rationale for these practices is often the same: that they are a part of African culture. Both practices have existed for generations and are a manifestation of patriarchy in our societies, and while not always considered forms of violence, they very much are. FGM and child marriage are both ways in which girls' bodies and sexuality are controlled and violated. To build a world free from violence, where girls can enjoy their full rights, we must end FGM and child marriage.

The sessions that explored FGM and child marriage included the voices of survivors, activists, allies and funders. Participants opened up rich discussions on strategies to end these forms of violence. The discussions focused on how to support girls' resistance and leadership in eliminating these practices because girls are a powerful force in the journey to end FGM and child marriage. ***Girls' resistance, in itself, contributes to dismantling the narratives on girlhood that portray girls as***

victims and passive beneficiaries of development programmes, as opposed to actively engaged in their own liberation.

The discussions held on FGM and child marriage recognised that there have been significant advances in the past decade:

- There is increasing opposition to both practices across Africa (and beyond), as reflected by calls to cease the practices by civil society organisations and traditional and religious leaders;
- There have been changes to legislation to act as a deterrent;
- There have been substantial increases in funding towards ending FGM and child marriage.

Despite this, girls continue to be forced into marriages and undergo FGM.

“Okay, you cut my clitoris because you don't want me to be promiscuous! I am now married & a doctor, can you please hand over my clitoris back to me? The damage caused by FGM is irreversible & remains an extreme violation of the rights of women and girls.”

- Costly Aderibigbe

It may be jarring to hear and read phrases like “you cut my clitoris,” but as participants in the session titled ‘Ending FGM On the Continent – What is the Way Forward?’ noted, this is exactly what is happening to girls. We must name it and use the discomfort to propel us to act and support initiatives aimed at ending these practices. ***Language is key to contributing to the elimination of child marriage and FGM.*** Referring to them only as ‘harmful’ practices, as opposed to forms of

violence, distorts the real impact on girls' lives. FGM and child marriage are forms of violence! Referring to these forms of violence as our culture creates a reluctance to stand against them. Rather than calling them our culture, as Dr. Hussein shared, we must call them 'abuse'.

"Touching a child's genitalia is not a culture that we Africans should embrace, so we need to start calling it what it is: abuse. Language is key."

- Dr. Leyla Hussein, [@LeylaHussein on Twitter](#)

The panel gave way to rich intergenerational discussion on the reasons why Sierra Leone has not seen more momentum on safeguarding girls from FGM. Participants named speaking with a collective voice as a critical strategy for change. Vickie Remoe shared this call to action:

"What needs to happen next is an intergenerational town hall where all women's leaders can meet, heal and find common ground. Like our aunties, we must find a way to advance the cause of girls and women in a toxic-free environment. We cannot allow the lack of resources and opportunities for the women's movement to make us enemies of our progress."

Our shared voice helps dismantle the patriarchal norms that enable these forms of violence. This collective voice cannot be one that excludes the people experiencing this violence; it must include girls, as they are most affected by these forms of violence and know best what is needed for meaningful change. ***Their leadership and resistance must be supported.***

“How can we dismantle the patriarchal structures that limit women’s participation in government, the formal economy, and society if those that make them second-class citizens from girlhood remain?”

Vickie Remoe in the Concord Times, July 2022

In the session on ‘Promoting Girls’ Leadership in Ending Child Marriage. Lessons from Niger’, participants reflected on the challenges that girl leaders face in working to end child marriage. Below are the responses from the discussion:

- Lack of mentors to learn from: girls are new to organising and need some guidance on how to navigate their local socio-political and regulatory context. They need information on how to mobilise resources and even how to manage their resources collectively. They call for accompaniment that does not impede on their autonomy.
- **Lack of belief in girls:** in most contexts, girls are not seen as capable of catalysing transformative change. This narrative leads to the lack of support for their initiatives and participation in initiatives or decisions relevant to their lives.
- **Fear and a lack of confidence:** girls have not been raised to lead. In fact, they have been told for years that they cannot and should not lead. Unlearning this is difficult. Some girls have limited self-confidence, and the idea of going against expectations and risking community repercussions by speaking up and standing up for themselves is scary.

- **Established organisations are reluctant to collaborate with girls:**
organisations who have for so long engaged with girls only as beneficiaries are reluctant to engage with girls as partners and advisors. When they do, it is often tokenistic. Organisations that already collaborate with girls must help their peers change practices and share knowledge on meaningfully engaging and supporting girls' leadership.
- **Lack of autonomy:** girls are not perceived to be experts of their own realities, and so girls' groups are often not given the freedom to decide how to use the funds that they do receive. Girls' groups face this issue in their work with funders, fiscal sponsors that some collectives partner with and formalised girl-centred organisations.
- **Competition instead of collaboration:** The limited funding available for girls' organising creates competition instead of collaboration. This stifles the movement as a whole. Funders must consider how to support connections and collaboration and fund in ways that do not fuel competition between girls' collectives/organisations.

“We know that our time is now. Knowing that we should also understand that we have to be there for one another. Support every girl in every way because it is our duty to be by each other in every process. Only sisterhood can help us out. Only sisterhood can get us to the top. Let us be by each other.”

– Session Participant

Ending Violence in Our Lifetimes

After hearing from leaders across the Continent, we are more certain than ever that we can all enjoy the freedom and liberation of a world without sexual and gender based violence. With survivors and girls and young feminists at the centre, we will build cultures of safety and respect. Our movements can uproot patriarchy and end sexual and gender based violence in this lifetime.

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