



Refugee Law Project

Faculty of Law, Makerere University



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NOBODY IS IMMUNE: Gender Against Men

“Gender Against Men”, a new Refugee Law Project documentary premiering this Thursday June 4, 2008 at the **Theatre La Bonita** (Plot 8 Colville Street, near Christ the King Church, Kampala) at **3:00PM**, explores the hidden world of sexual and gender based violence against men in the conflicts of the Great Lakes region; it is a movie about men, violence, and the inability of society to recognize or address male vulnerability in times of conflict. The movie raises as many questions as it gives answers in its quest for an honest examination of the gender stereotypes underlying mainstream approaches to sexual and gender based violence (SGBV). Why is it that in the eyes of the international community as well as many domestic policy makers, SGBV remains a women’s issue - despite mounting evidence of sexual and gender based violence against men? What makes us portray women as perpetual victims and men only as perpetrators? Who, if anybody, benefits from rendering male victims invisible?

Ask most people and they will tell you gender based violence has something to do with domestic violence, rape, and women’s rights. Certainly, violence against women is one critically important form of gender based violence. The Democratic Republic of Congo, for example, is widely believed to be one of the worst places in the world to be a woman. It is indeed one of the key instances in which gender based violence has been developed into a form of political violence that exploits ordinary peoples’ beliefs about what it means to be a man or a woman: culturally sanctioned ideas of masculinity and femininity are mobilized to target the enemy’s sense of self and to establish who has supremacy.

So when are men the victims? The film considers sex-selective massacres which target all the men in a particular town for extermination. It looks at policies which, intentionally or otherwise, undermine men’s traditional role as protectors and providers without allowing them alternative ways of expressing their masculinity. It considers one of the biggest taboos of all; the rape of men and boys.

Although sexual violence is only one form of gender based violence, it is perhaps the one where men are most clearly overlooked. A recent study conducted in Liberia showed that as many as 30% of male combatants in that country were the victims of sexual abuse. A significant number of cases coming forward before various international tribunals over the past two decades involve the sexual abuse of men. The Refugee Law Project, which provides counseling to victims of sexual and political violence, can offer numerous cases where men have been targeted.



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In the Great Lakes Region, as in most parts of the world, men are expected to protect their families and provide for them. The damage done when these men are forced to watch as their wives, sisters, mothers and daughters are repeatedly brutalized by militants, is enormous. What happens when the men themselves are raped by other armed men and forced into IDP and refugee camps where they are unable to support their families financially? What are the long-term social implications of boys learning that the only real power comes from the barrel of a gun, that the only way to be a man is to join the military or the rebels? What, in short, is the relationship between personal vulnerability, militarisation, and the descent into violence? One speaker suggests that “You become violent when you’re at your most vulnerable, it’s the last thing you’ve got left.” Could it be that unaddressed legacies of sexual and gender based violence against men are one of the primary catalysts of future conflicts?

In considering all these questions, “Gender Against Men” aims to broaden the focus from “gender” as a women’s issue, to an inclusive paradigm which considers how gender is used to harm both women and men. It recognises the inter-dependence of women and men, and makes the case that you cannot help women if you do not work with men also. The movie shows how a one-sided approach to gender works to the detriment of all, including individuals seeking health-care, their families, and their communities. It gives content to the Inter-Agency Standing Committee’s definition of Gender Based Violence as an umbrella term for any harmful act that is perpetrated against a man or a woman’s will, and that is based on socially ascribed (gender) differences between males and females.

To find out more, and to engage in the discussion about “Gender Against Men”, join us at Theatre La Bonita tomorrow, Thursday 4 June, at 3.00pm. Entrance is free.

Dr Chris Dolan

Director