Social and cultural influences on intimate partner violence among Somali refugees: findings from a qualitative study in Dollo Ado, Ethiopia

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INTRODUCTION

Gender-based violence (GBV) is prevalent in humanitarian crises; however there are fewer data on intimate partner violence (IPV) among displaced populations [1-3]. IPV has been reported in Dollo Ado refugee camps, where an estimated 216,000 Somali refugees are registered, but most GBV programs in this setting target non-partner sexual violence [4]. There are limited data on how social and cultural norms as well as displacement influence IPV in this context. Data are needed to develop effective interventions to prevent IPV among displaced populations.

AIM

This study aimed to understand women's risks of IPV during displacement and to explore underlying socioeconomic, religious and cultural factors that contribute to IPV in this context.

Figure 1. Arial View of Dollo Ado Refugee Camp

METHODS

A qualitative study was conducted in Bokolmyo refugee camp in Dollo Ado, Ethiopia in 2016 to inform the development of an intervention. Somali women and men residing in the camps were recruited for participation by purposive sampling. In-depth interviews (IDIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted with individual or groups of women and men aged 15 and older, as well as elders/clan leaders, religious leaders, health workers, NGO workers and policymakers. Trained male and female Somali interviewers conducted the interviews and discussions in Somali, Amharic or local dialects and these were transcribed and translated into English. Two independent investigators analyzed transcripts using content thematic analysis.

Figure 2. Map of Dollo Ado

RESULTS

In total, 30 IDIs and 10 FGDs were conducted. The age of respondents ranged from 16 to 82 years (mean=36.8), and length of time residing in the camp ranged from 11 months to 9 years (mean=7.3 years).

Target Group	In Depth interviews		Focus Group Discussions	
	# of interviews	# of respondents	# of groups	# of respondents
Clans/Elders	2	2	1	8
Religious leaders / Elder	2	2		
Male / Age (15-18)	2	2	1	8
Male / Age (18-25)	2	2		
Male/ Age (25-45)	2	2	1	8
Male / Age (45 and above)	2	2	1	8
Female / Age (15-18)	2	2	1	8
Female / Age (18-25)	2	2		
Female/ Age (25-45)	2	2	1	8
Female / Age (45 and above)	2	2	1	8
Health workers	2	2	1	8
Organizational workers / UN	2	2	1	8
Community-based organisations/women's groups	2	2	1	8
Policymakers (Dollo Ado camps / Dollo Ado town)	2	2	0	0
Somali (from non-refugee setting)	2	2	0	0
Total	**30**	**30**	**10**	**80**

Table 1. Sample Size

Preliminary analysis suggests that intimate partner violence and non-partner sexual violence are common within the camp. Acts of IPV that were described included insulting, hitting, slapping, assault with weapons including sticks and knives and pouring boiling water on the spouse. Many respondents, including both women and men, described IPV as being directed towards a wife who is at fault through her own actions.

Religion, frequently cited as a guiding framework for cultural and social norms, was also mentioned as a factor contributing to IPV. Some respondents described the Islamic religious texts as supporting some forms of IPV.

Harmful practices that were identified as contributing to IPV include men chewing Khat, a local plant with stimulant properties. In addition, early and/or forced marriage, polygamy and female genital cutting were also mentioned as contributing factors. Many respondents were not aware of any programs to prevent or reduce IPV and stated that these matters are typically dealt within the family unit or in more serious cases mediated via elders in the community.

CONCLUSIONS

Qualitative data reveal that violence is occurring within intimate partnerships among Somali refugees in Dollo Ado, Ethiopia, and highlight the social, cultural and religious influences on IPV. The data also highlight the lack of programs and services for IPV survivors. Programs and policies targeting IPV should consider and address the social, cultural and religious influences on IPV and its association with practices such as early marriage and polygamy.

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