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**CREATIVE COMMUNITY-LED APPROACHES TO PREVENTING AND RESPONDING TO CHILD ABUSE: A CASE STUDY HIGHLIGHTING THE ROLE OF PARA-SOCIAL WORKERS IN BWESEMBU, UGANDA**



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*“Whether through work on micro, mezzo, or macro levels of intervention, social workers advocate for dignity and worth that some individuals and communities do not even know they have...perhaps, that’s the greatest manifestation of where core social work values really begin.”<sup>1</sup>*

There is growing recognition that the social welfare workforce, especially at community level, is a critical component of a social service system. A social service system<sup>1</sup> addresses both the social welfare and protection of vulnerable populations and includes elements that are preventative, responsive and promotive. The community-based cadre of the social service workforce (i.e., micro level) are typically referred to as para-social workers<sup>2</sup> meaning that they are frequently volunteer in nature, but are recognized as serving a critical link between the community based, often informal system, and the more formal or statutory system. The community-based cadre of the social service workforce (i.e., the cadre that work at the micro or individual and family level) is often comprised primarily of para-professionals, but can include professional social service workers. Frequently para-professionals that provide social services are referred to as para-social workers.<sup>3</sup> They may have informal credentials and are often unpaid but are recognized as serving as a critical link between the community based, often informal system, and the more formal or statutory system.

For the past several years, Uganda has been strengthening the social service system with particular emphasis placed on addressing the many child protection risks and adversities faced by children and their caregivers. Children under the age of 18 years constitute 57.4% of Uganda’s 30.7 million people.<sup>4</sup> Continuing economic challenges, internal migration, family break down and HIV and other illnesses have resulted in a significant number of vulnerable children. A staggering 96 percent of Ugandan children are considered to have some degree of vulnerability, with 43% (7.3 million) considered moderately vulnerable and 8 percent (1.3 million) considered critically vulnerable.<sup>5</sup> A recent situation analysis on Child Poverty and Deprivation reveals that 3.7 million children below five years of age (half the under-five population) live in poverty, and around 1.6 million live in extreme poverty. Furthermore, 38% of children aged 6-17 in Uganda live in poverty, and around 18% live in extreme poverty.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.socialserviceworkforce.org/resources/blog>

<sup>2</sup> A para professional social worker can be understood for this paper as: a supervised para professional staff person or volunteer – often community based – who serves the needs of children and families, particularly where social welfare systems are underdeveloped or severely stretched. *Source: Adapted from Linsk, et al., Children & Youth Services Review, 2010, used by PEPFAR in defining Para Social Work as an indicator.*

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<sup>4</sup> Uganda Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development (MGLSD). *Staff Performance Appraisal in the Public Service: Guidelines for Managers and Staff* (July 2007)

<sup>5</sup> Uganda MGLSD. *Strategic Programme Plan of Interventions for Orphans and Other Vulnerable Children 2011/12—2015/16* (May 2011)

<sup>6</sup> Uganda MGLSD, UNICEF and EPRC *Situation Analysis of Child Poverty and Deprivation in Uganda*. (2015). Kampala: Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, Uganda; UNICEF, Uganda, Economic Policy Research Centre, Uganda.

Of particular concern are the high rates of child abuse, including neglect, forced early marriage and defilement, defined under Ugandan law as sexual relations with a minor under the age of 18. Police records from 2013, the most recent year on file, include 9,588 registered cases of defilement, and these are only the reported cases.<sup>7</sup> The police are mandated to investigate complaints of defilement (and other forms of sexual violence) and to arrest the perpetrators but cultural taboos, fear of retaliation and even limited knowledge about the illegality of defilement are barriers to reporting. Due to high levels of stigma and discrimination, actual incidence of defilement and child abuse is estimated at twice reported rates. In some instances, parents don't report cases of defilement to police as they opt to settle out-of-court. In other cases, "even if they report, most of them withdraw the cases."<sup>8</sup>

The following case study outlines the process undertaken by officials, para-social workers (PSWs) and community leaders in several sub-counties<sup>9</sup> in Kasese District in Western Uganda to a) identify and address instances of child abuse in their community, b) track cases of abuse and encourage reporting by victims, and c) support a para-social workforce in the communities to act as a deterrent and reduce the incidence of abuse. With guidance and training in child protection provided by SUNRISE-OVC, a USAID-funded social welfare systems strengthening project, district officials and community leaders worked together to map vulnerable households and issues in communities, organize and fortify OVC response committees at the District and Sub-County level and train para-social workers to identify, report and respond to issues of child abuse, neglect and vulnerability. Preliminary results indicate that the combination of community involvement in issue identification combined with the training and roll-out of a team of local PSW to act as child rights advocates in their community has the potential to not only increase reporting, but actually make a notable impact in the reduction of instances of child abuse.

### **Consulting the community**

At the start of the SUNRISE-OVC Project, each sub-county was tasked with leading a participatory community mapping process. District officials worked closely with local leaders, caregivers and children to identify different categories of vulnerable children and major child protection concerns within local communities in Kasese district. In Kasese, child abuse, in particular defilement and early marriage, were identified as major child protection concerns across the sub-counties. Several sub-county officials and community leaders included addressing defilement and child marriage within their sub-county action plan.

### **Selecting high-risk sub-counties to train para-social workers**

While the SUNRISE-OVC project targeted all sub-counties in Kasese District, they provided targeted support to eight sub-counties out of 23, identifying and training local para-social workers to support the Community Development Officer (CDO) at the parish and community

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<sup>7</sup>2013 report by the Ugandan Gender, Labor and Social Development Ministry.

<sup>8</sup>Malinga, J. (October, 2010). [Defilement Crime on the Rise in Uganda](#). The Guardian.

<sup>9</sup>Sub-county is the administrative unit below District, often the most local administrative unit with government offices and officials, such as community development officers.

level. Rates of child abuse were a key consideration in selecting the sub-counties to benefit from the PSW initiative in addition to prioritizing those counties that were 'hard to reach' and underserved by child protection services. Responsiveness of the community towards child protection concerns was also a factor in the selection process.

Para-social workers were identified by the community and local leaders as already having an active role in the community, either through linkages with the health sector, a community leadership role or a known interest in working with children and promoting child's rights. The roll out of the para-social workers was done in phases, with the first cohort of PSWs trained in Hima Town Council in October 2012 and Bwesembu sub-county in June 2013. By February 2015, PSWs had been trained in six additional sub-counties in the district: Maliba (March 2014), Kitholhu, Karambi and Muhokya (October 2014) and Kisinga and Mahango (February 2015). Karambi and Muhokya were added based on the observed rates of child abuse cases.

### **Tracking and Reporting**

When child abuse was identified as a pressing concern for the district, the Probation and Social Welfare Officer (PWO) and District Community Development Officer (DCDO) decided to focus on monitoring and reducing instances of child abuse in police records, working closely with the Sub-County Community Development Officers and training community and parish-level PSWs on child protection issues and response. The Kasese District government also developed a local Child Protection Ordinance, reinforcing the Ugandan Children's Act, but addressing local child protection concerns, with support from Save the Children. The ordinance includes the following elements: a) details the responsibilities of the guardians or parents in the promotion of child protection, b) limits the sale of alcoholic drinks to specific locations, prohibiting the selling of alcoholic drinks to children and keeping children out of bars, and c) addressing child labor and access to education by making it unlawful for children to be present in market places during school hours. The law states that it is a criminal offence not to report incidences of child abuse, making it the explicit responsibility of all community members to protect children against abuse.

Under the SUNRISE-OVC project, district officials began monitoring reports of child abuse. At the community level, PSWs collaborated to raise awareness about the criminal nature of child abuse and defilement, and encouraged children, caregivers and community leaders to report instances of abuse and speak out against perpetrators. In the initial months after introducing a PSW to a sub-county, the sub-county case management records showed an increase in reported child abuse. The social welfare officials attribute the increase in reported abuse to an improved understanding of child protection issues and responsibilities across the community, familiarity with reporting procedures, and increased resolution by PSWs at the community level. The numbers of reported cases underscore the widespread severity of child abuse in the district. According to the DCDO, those sub-counties where reported cases are highest are generally (i) hard to reach; (ii) PSWs were only recently trained; (iii) there are few child protection service providers; and (iv) statutory structures are weak and not quick at preventing and responding to child abuse. In a few sub-counties, Bwesembu, Hima Town Council and

Maliba, where PSWs were trained before the second set of reports was reviewed and counted, the number of reported abuse cases began to decrease.

According to district officials, the increased attention to child protection issues changed how child abuse cases were handled by local authorities and community members. The community began to recognize its shared responsibility towards children, and community members were more likely to report and follow up on suspected abuse after awareness raising activities provided by PSWs and other community leaders. Likewise, children were also made more aware of their rights and familiar with how to report abuse directly to the police or other authority.

*The project has also reawakened community vigilance and sensitivity towards child issues. There is therefore an increase in the reporting of child abuse cases. (KII Community leader, Kasese District)*

Reported incidents of child abuse cases at sub-county level (CDO and Police)				
Sub-county	Cases Oct 2012-Sept 2013	Cases Oct 2013-Sept 2014	% change in reported defilement	Para-social workers
Bulembia	156	211	+35%	No
Kilembi	167	244	+46%	No
Rukoki	135	198	+47%	No
Kyarumba	144	149	+3%	No
Ihandiro	78	89	+14%	No
Hima Town Council	159	92	-42%	Trained Oct. 2012
Bwesumbu	147	39	-73%	Trained June 2013
Maliba	189	72	-62%	Trained Mar. 2014
Kitholhu	154	70	-54%	Trained Oct. 2014
Karambi	167	175	+4%	Trained Oct. 2014
Muhokya	176	376	+113%	Trained Oct. 2014
District HQ (Probation Office)	563	574	+2%	Some sub-counties

Source: CDO and DCDO case registers. This chart was provided by the PWO, Kasese District

### **Spotlight on Bwesumbu Sub-county – the role of PSW in reporting and deterrence**

Although the reasons behind this decline remain anecdotal, in Bwesumbu, children, caregivers, PSWs and community leaders all felt that there had been a notable reduction in cases of abuse in the year since PSWs had been engaged in the community. When PSWs identified child abuse cases during home visits, they reported the cases to the community-development officer (CDO) or child and family protection unit (CFPU) of the Uganda police, depending on the gravity of the abuse, and provided the child and caregivers a referral to seek further assistance. This process increased reported instances of abuse in the initial months, but also raised awareness of the

criminal nature of abuse and defilement, and sent a strong message that instances of abuse would be reported and prosecuted, acting as a deterrent for would-be offenders.

*They are closer to the community than formal [statutory] structures, in terms of detecting and following-up cases. PSW visit vulnerable HH, talk to caregivers and identify any issues and bring these to the notice of relevant authorities—the LC chairperson, the probation officer or the police. They can also refer the family for service. Referral can be verbal or written— depending on the case. PSW also make follow up to ensure case is handled (KII, Bwesumbu Sub-county)*

Caregivers and community leaders also reported PSWs play a role in mobilizing communities to build a protective environment for children by creating awareness and sensitization around issues of child abuse, including making it clear that it is against the law. As a consequence, this is reported to have increased community involvement, and vigilance to speak out against abuse. This has partly contributed to the reporting of cases by community members, due in part, to their vertical connections with statutory structures for child protection at district and sub-county level.

#### **Songs of Child Protection, Bwesumbu Sub-County**

One of the methods that the PSWs of Bwesumbu utilize to tell the story of how they can help the children and families of their community is through songs. One song, sung in acapella, shares the following message:

*Bwesumbu para-social workers, we have agreed to go in the world, we will reach in every area to teach about child care.*

*Reducing risks to children's holistic well-being, making children's rights a reality, restoring hope and dignified living, creating an enabling environment.*

*Everywhere we go, we will teach the parents, protect their child by good feeding, with good sleeping. Let them go to church, telling them not to go to the videos.*

*Everywhere we go, we will teach the parents, protect their children by good clothing, with good care. Let them go to school, not to the night dances.*

*Even when they are not working, (PSWs) are spreading the word on child protection when they are at trading centers, religious functions or when they are gathering water, they are talking about child protection. –Caregivers, FGD*

Through ongoing sensitization, PSWs have encouraged parents, caregivers and community members to undertake protective measures against certain forms of child abuse. At the same time they have worked with children to raise their awareness about violence and abuse stressing that it is not only a violation of a child's right but also a crime punishable by law. Such measures include, among others, regular parental monitoring and supervision of children, and keeping children in school. As a result, fewer children are spending time in video halls (limiting exposure to pornographic movies). Besides talking to parents, PSWs also talk to children and help them to identify ways to establish their own protective mechanisms. For example, they teach children to avoid potentially dangerous situations and to recognize uncomfortable or inappropriate touching and sexual requests, etc. In addition to teaching children about their

rights, the PSWs are also a trusted person the children can report to when issues occur.

*We were equipped with skills on how to talk to children and caregivers. We have sensitized parents that they should keep their children in school, that they should avoid sending their children out at night. We have also talked to parents about the importance of taking children to school. Children no longer go to video halls or take alcohol (KII, PSW)*

*Children can now report to police. For example a child was defiled in Mukunyu primary school. The child notified one of the PSWs. The PSWs wrote to the head master and the police about the case. The headmaster requested some of the implementing partners to follow up the case. The child was taken to hospital for medical examination. The perpetrator was successfully prosecuted. (FGD, DOVCC)*

Community leaders in Bwesumbu also used community mapping data to draw a link between distance to school and defilement cases. Consequently, they were able to lobby for construction of a secondary school, as explained in the following excerpt:

*We used the mapping data to lobby for construction of a secondary school in our sub-county after realizing that travelling long distances to school - put girls at risk of defilement. The school was constructed by Promoting Equality in African Schools (PEAS). (FGD with Community Leaders)*

As a result of these actions, in Bwesumbu sub-county, reported child abuse cases have decreased and community leaders expressed confidence that conditions were improving in the village as a result of the para-social and community activities.

*There has been a reduction in the number of child abuse cases. We now have para-social workers who sensitize communities on issues of child abuse. (FGD with Community Leaders)*