

## Analysis

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## FOCUS

## Sierra Leone's husband schools take on violence

Jobless and jealous of his working wife, Brimah Kanu's short, fiery temper flared every time she paid their bills or put food on the table for their five children in northern Sierra Leone. The beatings he dished out made him a familiar face to the police in his hometown in the lush and leafy region of Bombali. One particularly vicious assault - delivered with his fists and belt - left Kanu's wife of 18 years with bloodied eyes.

"I was totally wicked", Kanu, 52, told the Thomson Reuters Foundation, sitting in a chair in a small meeting room, while his wife Aminata crouched nearby. "If any of our five children misbehaved and I beat them, she would come to question me about it, and I beat her too," Kanu said. "She was provoking me because she pays the bills by selling the potatoes and groundnuts she grows. I had no job."

Persuaded by a social worker to stop beating his wife, and determined to be a better husband, Kanu took an unusual step. He decided to go to school. Kanu is one of more than 10,000 men in Sierra Leone to have enrolled at 'husband schools' - where they attend monthly classes to learn about gender equality, domestic violence, sexual and reproductive health and female genital mutilation.

### From War to Ebola

While domestic violence is a global scourge, women in Africa put up with being beaten - for arguing, refusing to have sex, going out without permission - far more than those in the rest of the developing world, said a 2016 report from the World Bank. One in two African women say they accept domestic violence, while about a third have suffered such abuse, the report found.

Domestic violence is widespread across the continent because men tend to see women as their property, while enduring a bad marriage is seen by society as a sign of a woman's strength, said Ayodeji Owosobi, executive director of Stand to End Rape. "That belief does something to a man's psyche," said Owosobi, head of the Nigeria-based civil society group. "It tells him that regardless of what he does, the woman will stay so violence has become normalised," Owosobi added. "So, children see abuse in the family as a standard of masculinity, and a necessary correctional measure in the home."

Struggling to get by in a country haunted by civil war and devastated by the world's worst Ebola outbreak, which infected 14,000 people and killed about 4,000 in Sierra Leone between 2014 and 2016, many men are lashing out against their wives. "Some men are still traumatized by the way they lost their families to Ebola", said Lois Roberts Simche, psychosocial lead officer of the ministry for social welfare, women and children. "There is an increase in gender-based violence because most men can't afford to take care of themselves and their families."

### 'No More Beatings'

At the three husband schools in Sierra Leone - which opened in 2012 after starting out in Niger - men not only learn about women's health, but are also actively encouraged to accompany their wives and families for services such as family planning. The schools collect data on the men and their families to track their visits to health centers relating to antenatal care, sexually transmitted infections, and gender-based violence.

"All we do with the husband schools is all about improving health of the family as a unit," said Betty Alpha, program coordinator at the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), which runs the schools with support from a local civil society group. Community chiefs ensure that the husbands do not shirk their responsibilities, by enforcing the schools' resolutions as law. "If a woman goes for antenatal care without her husband, she will not be seen until the husband goes, and that brings shame to him," said 66-year-old Moiwa Bailey, a village chief in the southern district of Bo, who is also a member of the school.

The husband schools are paired with another initiative, the 'pamama program', which sees men put into practice the lessons they have learned alongside their wives, and discuss issues such as the sharing of household tasks and the use of birth control. At one of the sessions, 35-year old Saidu Lamine, who used to regularly beat his wife, Fati, and deny her money for food, said the school had changed his life, and made him a 'good man'. Listening to her husband, Fati could not contain her joy. "He has changed - no more beatings," she said as Lamine held their baby boy. "He is now a good father and a good husband."

### Old Habits Die Hard

While the husband schools strive to change the attitudes and behaviors of their students towards women, victims of domestic violence in Sierra Leone often lack support, and knowledge of their rights and how to seek justice, women's rights groups say. The West African nation passed a domestic violence law in 2007, punishing abuse by up to two years in jail and putting in place entitlements for survivors such as free medical care.

Yet the law is rarely enforced, as victims pursuing justice must pay a doctor to produce a medical report to present to the police, and sometimes cover the cost of a lawyer, Simche said. —Reuters



## Venezuelan govt, foes battle for votes

Tirelessly traversing the lethargic plains of Venezuela, a brother of former leader Hugo Chavez and an ally of a famous opposition detainee vie for votes. The governorship race in Barinas state - the Chavez family's stronghold - is the most emblematic of state elections taking place nationwide on Sunday just weeks after opposition-led protests that shook Venezuela and claimed at least 125 lives.

"At every rally, Hugo Chavez is out front, showing us the way," enthuses Argenis Chavez, 59, an electrical engineer and incumbent governor, jumping on a bike and evoking his late elder brother at every campaign stop. "In Barinas, defeating the government means defeating the Chavez family who have wielded power at whim for 18 years," counters opposition rival Freddy Superlano, 41, wearing a shirt with the image of his arrested party leader Leopoldo Lopez.

This year's prolonged protests failed to bring down the government of President Nicolas Maduro, but they hardened global opinion against the ruling socialists and led to US sanctions. Now, opposition leaders want their demoralized supporters to turn out en masse at the gubernatorial polls to overturn Maduro's majority in 20 of Venezuela's 23 states. The government, in turn, wants to minimize seemingly inevitable losses, and trumpet the election as proof against accusations of autocracy in Venezuela.

"Look at our 'dictatorship' then: an election where most candidates are from the opposition!" Chavez ironically told Reuters, as red-shirted supporters danced around him at a rally. With voters angry over a crushing economic crisis, polls show the opposition coalition would win handily in normal circumstances. One recent survey gave the coalition, which aspires to win 18 governorships, 44.7 percent of voter intentions versus 21.1 percent for the government.

### Skewed Playing Field?

Circumstances are far from normal in Venezuela, however, and the government has threatened to ban any candidates linked to violence in protests. Furthermore, as in past

elections during the ruling "Chavismo" movement's 18-year grip on Venezuela, state resources are being mobilized heavily for official candidates. Distribution of subsidized food at government rallies is commonplace, state-run companies lend transport for the events, and state media give Maduro's candidates unfettered air-time. One opposition candidate's brother has been arrested for alleged car theft in what the coalition says is an attempt to

skirts of Barinas city, Superlano told Reuters government candidates were using helicopters to campaign while he and other opposition aspirants spent hours on the road to reach remote communities. The government was also exploiting Venezuelans' hunger, during a period of unprecedented scarcity, by handing out food bags in return for promises of votes, he said. "It's a macabre plan," said Superlano, a lawmaker from Lopez's Popular Will party who won the opposition primary in Barinas. "Even with all that, they are losing!"

Having dealt a hugely symbolic blow to "Chavismo" by winning five of six congress seats for Barinas in 2015 elections, the opposition now wants to end 18 years of nearly unbroken control of the governorship by Chavez family members. While there is widespread discontent over food shortages, idle land and rising malnutrition in a fertile region that should be Venezuela's bread basket, the government is running a rigorous campaign and painting Superlano as "the candidate of the violence" in reference to this year's protests.

Maduro supporters say the opposition, backed by Venezuela's elite and the US government, is intent on taking power by force to seize control of the nation's oil riches. "They want war for Venezuela. We want peace," said 65-year-old retiree Ramon Alvarran, proudly wearing a red T-shirt depicting the eyes of Hugo Chavez at a rally for his brother.

Elsewhere though, resentment against Maduro is palpable. "My kids don't have a crumb in their stomachs yet today," said Daris Gonzalez, 36, whose three children had not eaten by lunchtime. Like many in her poor and once staunchly "Chavista" neighborhood, Gonzalez is now leaning toward the opposition. "There has to be change. We cannot go on like this."

Offsetting such sentiment, many young grassroots opposition supporters feel their leaders have sold out - and betrayed the memory of slain protesters - by entering an election on an unfair playing field. Abstentions could hurt their numbers. —AFP

“ Chavez is out front, showing us the way ”

intimidate its ranks. Perhaps the biggest disadvantage for the opposition is the electronic ballot sheet itself. Despite primaries to choose a single opposition candidate per state from the plethora of parties within the Democratic Unity coalition, the pro-Maduro election board is declining to modify the ballot list to narrow it down to one name. All initial candidates from before the primaries are listed on the ballot instead, something that could confuse opposition supporters and dilute their vote, benefiting the ruling Socialist Party's candidates. Further stoking opposition supporters' skepticism, the election board is using a new vote machine provider after long-term partner Smartmatic accused it of inflating numbers in July's controversial election of a Constituent Assembly super-body.

### 'Opposition Wants War'

On a walkabout in an unpaved shantytown on the out-

## Sex attacks leave Rohingya children fearful in camps

Adjida kicked and screamed when the rough and dirty hands of the masked soldier moved up her legs and ripped off her clothes. The 13-year-old pleaded with him to stop when he climbed on top of her, a gun in one hand, removed his pants with the other, and raped her. Just minutes before, Adjida had watched her parents being shot dead from her hiding place under a wooden table in a village in Myanmar's western state of Rakhine. She tried to run into the surrounding jungle, but was captured by a soldier.

"I felt the pain when he penetrated me and all I could think about was my lost virginity. I am no longer pure. I am an outcast now and will never find a husband," said the teenager, a Rohingya Muslim. Her home was torched in the attack in Kawarbil village six weeks ago by Myanmar army soldiers, she said, and she and her sister fled with other villagers across the border to Bangladesh.

But the threat of sexual violence for children like Adjida has not diminished since reaching the sprawling refugee camps near Bangladesh's Cox's Bazar - home to hundreds of thousands of newly arrived Rohingya who have fled violence in Myanmar. More than 800 incidents of gender-based violence have been reported by Rohingya refugees since the recent influx, said UNICEF's head of child protection Jean Lieby. Over half of these cases are sexual assaults, according to the UN agency.

Some 515,000 Rohingya have arrived in Bangladesh in an unrelenting movement of

people that began after the Myanmar army responded to Rohingya militant attacks with a brutal crackdown. The United Nations has denounced the Myanmar military offensive as ethnic cleansing but Myanmar insists its forces are fighting "terrorists" who have killed civilians.

About 60 percent of the new arrivals are children. Adjida arrived with her 15-year-old sister Minara a month ago. The sole survivors of their family, they live by themselves in a tent made of bamboo and plastic sheeting in Kutupalong camp. They don't feel safe. "Our parents and two older sisters were killed and they can't take care of us anymore. Here in the camp, we have already heard of other girls who were raped in the last days, that's why we try to stay in our tent most of the time," Minara said.

### Trauma

The girls agreed to speak to the Thomson Reuters Foundation in an empty classroom of one of the camp's school buildings, but asked for windows to be closed and that they not be identified by their full names. The girls covered their faces with their headscarves and asked for assurances no men would be allowed into the room. "I'm ashamed of what happened. I had many dreams for the future, but they are lost with my purity," said Minara, who was also raped as she tried to escape from her village. "I don't have enough clothes to fully cover, but it's what I want to do now," she said, nervously fidgeting with the embroidered black dress she had borrowed from a neighbor.



Rohingya refugees wait after crossing the Naf river from Myanmar into Bangladesh in Whaikhyang yesterday. — AFP

Aid agencies have set up safe spaces in Kutupalong camp - colorful rooms or outside areas - where women and children who are victims of sexual assault can find counselling and support. "They feel comfortable and understood here and it's often the first time they open up and talk about their trauma," said UNFPA spokeswoman Veronica Pedrosa.

But there is not enough help for the overwhelming numbers who have arrived in such a short time. "We just had a month of unprecedented refugee influx and it's nothing like Bangladesh has seen before. Almost half a million people arrived," said Lieby of UNICEF. "We are now working hard to scale-up and meet the needs of refugee children. We especially ... want to change the stigma that comes with rape."

### Stigma

Even with counselling services available, many girls still opt not to report that they have been raped, said aid workers in the camp. "In an environment like this, girls are often scared of the stigma attached to sexual violence. They also fear their family's opinion," Rebecca Duskin, a nurse focusing on sexual violence told the Thomson Reuters Foundation in Kutupalong.

Working for the health charity Medical Teams International, she has come to the camp to set up a disease prevention clinic. "This is often the first sexual encounter for the victims and they need a safe place to turn to now," she said. "They have experienced violent rape in a conflict zone and often in public, which increases trauma." —Reuters