

"We can make it better you and I":

How girls in Uganda raised awareness about sexual and gender related violence

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ABSTRACT

Sexual and gender related violence (SGRV) against girls is a dark stain on the fabric of life and the most pervasive breach of human rights worldwide. In spite of laws to combat violence, weak enforcement and discriminatory social norms remain significant problems globally, and urgent action employing 'novel and innovative' solutions is called for by the World Health organization and United Nations International Children's Fund. Using knowledge of African society gleaned from work in school-based health promotion programs in Uganda we engaged girls, gave them a voice, and raised national awareness about the impact of SGRV through a celebrity recorded music video that highlighted the SGRV priorities the girls identified. While the unique power of the combination of images, illustrative scenarios, lyrics and music in the video engaged and informed, still photographs were also integral to the success of this call from girls 'to make things better'. Our photographic record of this project captured many ethnographic elements of this initiative during its creation; selected images were central to the success of the promotional campaign to disseminate the messaging of the video nationwide; sharing photographs helped to maintain the engagement of team members, especially those unable to be in Uganda; and, our image archive provides a uniquely valuable element for knowledge transfer of 'what worked and why' in this initiative.

Keywords: *Education-entertainment media, Health promotion, Social empowerment.*

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“Photography is the story I fail to put into words.”

Destin Sparks

Introduction

Recognition of the impact of photographic images is longstanding. Images combined with song lyrics in music videos are known to be able to convey health messages that are understood by youth, and in Africa it has been shown that they also retain and repeat them (Macnab and Mukisa, 2019). In health promotion terms this is relevant to driving change on a continent that has the world’s youngest population; the mean age in sub-Saharan Africa is 18.8 years.

This photo essay illustrates the part a photographic record played in an initiative that enabled girls at risk of sexual and gender related violence (SGRV) to raise awareness across society and provide support for their peers. The medium employed was a professionally recorded music video (Macnab et al., 2024). Sadly, violence against women and girls is prevalent in every country in the world despite global goals for gender equality (Peacock and Barker 2014); the World Health Organisation (WHO) and United Nations International Children’s Fund (UNICEF) have called for ‘new and innovative measures’ to raise awareness of SGRV able to impact culture and society (Kuupiel et al., 2024); this music video model is a new measure that is potentially applicable globally.

Addressing the social challenge of sexual and gender related violence

Societal silence with tacit acquiescence over SGRV and the inequity of girls’ ‘voices’ are common, and seen as fundamental traits in African society (Nguyen et al., 2019); although all too often cast as victims, in this story girls were given a voice and became central characters calling for change.

Images as everyday as children playing in a school yard can obscure the fact that 1 in 3 girls experience SGRV during their childhood in sub-Saharan Africa, with school-related violence perpetrated by teachers one of the worst forms of gender-based discrimination (Wandera et al., 2017).



Image 1: Girls are at risk every day in Uganda. As UNICEF states sexual and gender related violence “requires coordinated cross-sectoral approaches at a national level” (Parkes et al., 2015). Stand Tall school Kampala, Uganda.

In the music video girls call for societal change with their refrain “We can make it better you and I”.

The video highlights the issues and solutions girls in high school identified when they were given the chance to explore issues around SGRV in guided discussions and prioritize their concerns; none had had a similar opportunity previously.



Image 2. High school pupils photographed with posters displaying their priority issues for the video. This youth driven approach was in contrast to most government strategies which promote adult perceptions around sexual and gender related violence. Kampala, Uganda, 2022.

The music video was professionally recorded, with the girls’ central characters alongside actors and the celebrity recording artists who wrote and performed the song. Production followed the guidelines for ‘Education-Entertainment’ media; a validated form of health promotion (Shen and Han 2018). The video can be viewed at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=re8QxfZ80Q>



Image 3: This continuity photo shows filming of one of the priority issues voiced by girls for the video - a scenario that illustrates where a teacher propositions a girl for sexual favors in return for good marks at the end of a class. Stand Tall school Kampala, Uganda, 2022.

The contribution of our photographic record

Still photo images are a key component for ensuring continuity in film and video production, and the impact of individual images is also central to the media used to promote film. We used photos to advertise live concerts featuring performances of the song, promote streaming of the girls’ music video online, and encourage dialogue on social media through the sharing of posted comments.



Image 4: This promotional image garnered much positive social media comment because it shows the girls’ role as protagonists alongside a celebrity artist, Shine Omukiga. Stand Tall school Kampala, Uganda, 2022.

The use of images was integral to several other elements of the successful promotional campaign which ensured that the girls’ messaging in the video achieved nationwide reach. Individual participants and schools who contributed also valued having access to photos taken during filming, and these images proved to be a resource that schools reported helped to facilitate discussions around the topic of SGRV.



Image 5: Elements from multiple photographs taken during production were incorporated in the design of the promotional poster for the premiere of the music video. The title ‘Tekawo Enjawulo’ is Lugandan for ‘Let’s make a change.’ Talent Africa, Kampala, Uganda, 2022.

The creative use of images enhanced the website used to promote the video online, announce promotional events and provide a discussion forum.

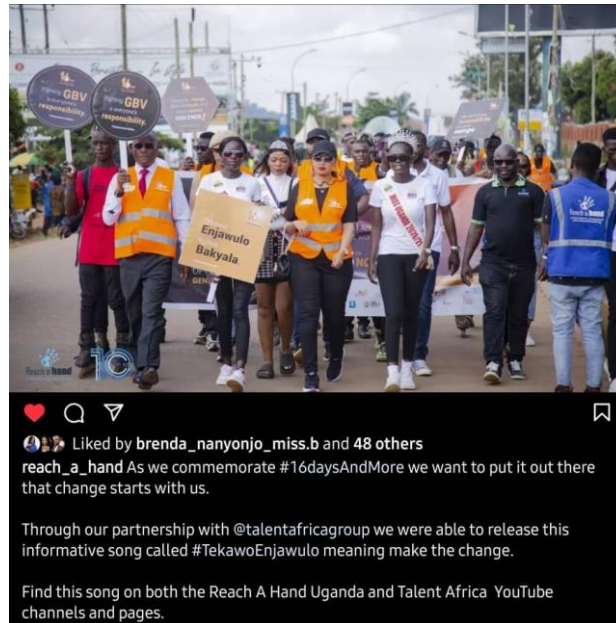


Image 6: This composite image from the video’s promotional website combines a photograph from our archive showing a street pageant held to promote the video with comments posted on social media. Talent Africa. Kampala, Uganda, 2023.

Images of celebrity artists leading public dialogue about the challenge of SGRV at events featuring the video were also a valuable source of promotional photographs.



Image 7. A publicity photo of Jackie Chandiru; one of the 5 celebrity artists who helped make the video, leading a promotional event that featured the song, shared the messaging and included public dialogue. Kampala Uganda, 2023.

Inclusion of celebrity artists in the girls’ video added to the credibility of their messaging and ensured the video attracted a broad cross section of the community. Publicity photographs that include celebrities have a high impact worldwide, and African youth in particular are fascinated by celebrity, recognize their favorite artists and passionately follow their songs and videos.



Image 8: A young man points to a photo of a favorite celebrity musician emphasizing that the recognition, popularity, and influence of celebrities is high among youth in African countries. Talent Africa Kampala, Uganda, 2016

Many of the more than 20,000 comments posted on social media spoke to the positive impact of images, scenarios and messaging in the video. Free downloads of the song to cell phones and open access to the video for viewing on YouTube and related social media sites ensured nationwide reach, and the combined audience for TV and radio broadcasts of the video and song was estimated to be more than 9.5 million.

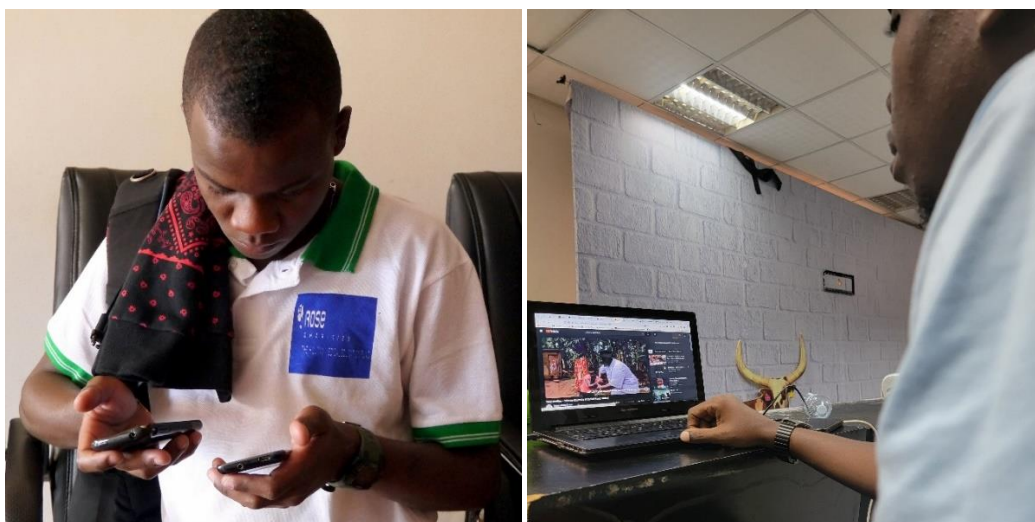


Image 9. Comments posted on social media indicated high levels of youth engagement; many included photos of the respondent downloading the song to their phone or viewing the video online. Mbarara and Kampala, Uganda, 2023.

Conclusion

Taking photos is a valuable part of any project. Each image captures unique elements of what is being done, and provides insights of the interaction with the community you are working with. In addition, good photos have documentary and promotional potential, and sharing photos with members of your team not able to participate in the project directly can be a source of encouragement. We also view a photographic record as essential for effective ‘knowledge transfer’; a picture certainly is “worth a thousand words” when reporting ‘what works and why’, which is one of the core responsibilities of any initiative conducted with the intention of promoting improved social, physical or emotional health.

Violence against girls and young women remains a lived reality in every country in the world despite global goals for gender equality (Peacock and Barker, 2014), and the engagement of at risk populations in other countries is called for and urgently needed (Kuupiel et al., 2024). The making of this youth-focussed music video offers a new model for raising awareness around sexual and gender related violence based on a validated form of health promotion (Macnab et al., 2024). We suggest that the production of similar videos is a strategy with the ability to influence change in society that has relevance globally.



Image 10: Sexual and gender related violence against girls SGRV is a dark subject – in this initiative, photography has helped to illuminate the shadows. Talent Africa at Stand Tall School, Kampala, 2022

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest. Nothing to disclosure.

Consent

The (identifiable) people photographed have given their written consent for their pictures to be used in the dissemination and publication of this research.

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This paper is dedicated to the memory of Ronald Mukisa. Ronny helped identify the impact of music videos on youth in Uganda, the premise on which this initiative to address sexual violence against girls was based. Ronny was also an accomplished photographer, a talented traditional musician and charismatic young man who during his short life contributed to the success of many projects that significantly improved the lives of disadvantaged children in Africa.

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