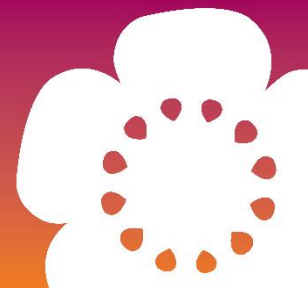


Public Attacks on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights and How Feminist Organizations Can Quickly Respond

Lessons Learned from Côte d'Ivoire



Background

The Ivorian Constitution of 2016 recognizes the equality of all citizens before the law as well as their right to equal opportunities. The constitution explicitly prohibits discrimination (article 4) and violence against women, including genital cutting and mutilation (article 5). Yet, gender-based violence (GBV) is common and socially accepted, as a result of systemic power imbalances between women and men in the country.

Official statistics on GBV in Côte d'Ivoire are scarce, but provisional data published by the Ministry of Women, Family, and Children covering the period from January to September 2021, report 2,202 cases of domestic violence, including 134 cases of intimate partner violence and 454 cases of rape (MFFE 2021). In addition, another study published by the nongovernmental organization Citizens for the Promotion and Defense of the Rights of Children, Women, and Minorities, surveyed 5,556 people and recorded that 416 femicides and 2,000 cases of violence against women, including 1,290 cases of marriage of girls under 18 years of age and 1,121 rapes, occurred over a two-year period in Abidjan alone (CPDEFM 2019).

It is in this context that a private television channel (La Nouvelle Chaîne Ivoirienne, NCI) with a large viewership featured a guest who identified himself as a “former rapist” to talk about his crimes on a show airing in August 2021. With the help of a mannequin, this guest meticulously detailed his modus operandi, which included strangling his victims, touching their genitals, making them fall, immobilizing them, and then raping them. During this segment of the show, the host repeatedly prompted the guest to continue and audience members present on set laughed. Social and mass media further shared and discussed excerpts from the show on other various channels.

Working in West Africa since 1977, EngenderHealth currently implements activities in Benin, Burkina Faso, and Côte d'Ivoire through a project supported by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, which aims to build equitable partnerships with youth-led and feminist organizations in the region to advance sexual and reproductive health and rights and eliminate GBV. One network that discussed the show was a WhatsApp group of local young activists and feminist organizations, which EngenderHealth helped establish in 2020, as part of its predecessor project, the Advance Comprehensive Abortion Advocacy in West Africa project.

Partnership in Action

Members of the WhatsApp group that EngenderHealth’s predecessor project helped establish discussed multiple ideas on how to respond to the situation. Members vehemently agreed there was an urgent need to coordinate their response efforts, and to seek more allies outside the group to mobilize to amplify a response.

On behalf of the Collectif des Activistes de Côte d'Ivoire (CACi), EngenderHealth shared with all national and international organizations and agencies of the United Nations system in Cote d'Ivoire a draft letter collectively denouncing the trivialization of rape that occurred on the television show, and inviting recipients to co-sign the letter and add their logos to support the movement. The response

was impressive—more than 40 organizations (including EngenderHealth) co-signed the letter with their logos (see Figure 1). CACi sent the letter to the television channel that aired the program (NCI); to the High Authority for Audiovisual Communication; to the Ministry of Women, Family, and Children; the Ministry of Health; and to the Office of the Prime Minister.

Figure 1. Select Co-Signed Organizations



At the same time, the member organizations of the CACi developed visuals and hashtags of denunciation to share on social networks, such as Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter. The Ivorian League for Women's Rights, a member of CACi, also launched an online petition that collected 50,166 signatures calling for exemplary sanctions.

Feminist activists and organizations continued to pressure decision-makers and the television channel in the days that followed. Activists held a peaceful demonstration in front of NCI headquarters, with members of CACi wearing branded shirts from their respective organizations and holding signs with sayings such as “No to the Trivialization of Rape on Television,” “NCI: Do Not Trivialize Rape,” and “TV Also Educates.” At the protest, a CACi representative read a statement, which was also transmitted to the managers of the television channel. The statement recommended that NCI sensitize all of its staff on women’s rights and provide information around GBV, including how to refer GBV survivors to care. It also recommended that the station dedicate airtime to denouncing GBV in collaboration with feminist organizations and conduct a communication campaign to raise awareness among viewers about GBV.

On the same day of the protest, CACi also organized a press conference in collaboration with the National Council for Human Rights, which availed its conference room free of charge to the members of the collective. In front of national and international media, these feminist organizations:

- Shared a declaration of condemnation of the glorification of rape
- Reminded the media overall of their professional obligation to condemn GBV and advocated for media managers to adopt internal policies of zero tolerance for GBV
- Called on authorities to facilitate access to medical certificates for rape cases (by making the procedure free) and to accelerate the adoption of the Santé Sexuelle et Reproductive (Sexual and Reproductive Health) law in Côte d'Ivoire.

Responsive Action and Results

Within 48 hours of the television program broadcast, the efforts of CACi members from across Côte d'Ivoire began demonstrating concrete results. The television station issued a formal, public apology and acknowledged the situation as “serious and regrettable misconduct.” The Minister of Women, Family, and Children, Nassénéba Touré, also expressed her condemnation of the actions and words of the host and his guest through a press release. The police brought in the host of the show and his rapist guest and the two were required to appear before the criminal court of Abidjan. The host received a 12-month suspended sentence for “apology of rape” and “indecentry” and his guest was sentenced to 24 months in prison. The High Authority for Audiovisual Communication also suspended the host for 30 days from all television broadcasts in Côte d'Ivoire.

Furthermore, the television host, who had hosted the Miss Côte d'Ivoire contest for several years previously and who was scheduled to host the event later the same week as the incident, was stripped of those duties. After the broadcast, telephone operator MTN, the official sponsor of the Miss Côte d'Ivoire contest, issued a statement pledging to “take firm and appropriate measures, in line with its values,” which included disassociating with the host. MTN’s action prompted the contest organization’s committee to change its presenter. Additionally, during the broadcast of the Miss Côte d'Ivoire contest on the national channel RTI (Radiodiffusion Télévision Ivoirienne), MTN extended its pledge to support GBV survivors by broadcasting an advertising campaign, including an awareness video, focused on GBV.

Lessons Learned and Recommendations

One of the lessons learned from this experience is that a prompt, concerted, and coordinated mobilization of local feminist advocacy organizations can help pressure decision-makers to quickly take action in response to gross, public violations of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). The success of the feminist organizations in Côte d'Ivoire in this particular case also highlights a few recommendations for similar campaigns on related issues.

Partnership and Leadership

A single organization cannot lead a coordinated campaign of this magnitude in such a short amount of time on its own. EngenderHealth’s leadership, combined with the established partnership, was essential to mobilizing additional national and international organizations and coordinating this concerted campaign.

Discussion Platform

Without an established, engaged, and participatory platform, such as the CACi WhatsApp group, where open discussion are encouraged and responsibilities shared, this rapid mobilization would not have been possible. The CACi’s WhatsApp group circulated information and decisions in real time. This group was critical to successfully mobilizing activists and ensuring quick decision-making around actions to support this rapid response.

Agile Programming and Flexible Funding

Adaptability and agility are essential for innovative and successful projects. This initiative was not envisaged in the project's established work plan. However, we were able to quickly adapt to meet this urgent need, thanks to the flexible funding from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, which allowed us to shift resources to support the mobilization of the press conference with the national and international media.

Concluding Call to Action

The agenda of the feminist movement and those working toward gender equality must be championed by all segments of society; it cannot only be a priority for women-led organizations if it is to be successful. This experience demonstrated the value of feminist organizations in creating and strengthening effective partnerships with the media and the need for continuously sensitizing and strengthening the media in understanding and disseminating GBV-related information. However, there is also a clear need for better coordination among the media and relevant stakeholders, to create space for dialogues and collaboration on critical SRHR issues, including prevention of GBV and care for survivors as well as access to comprehensive abortion care. This also requires the media and stakeholders to be a catalyst for gender-transformative change, rather than simply recipients of information and guidance. Sustainable gender-transformative change requires social norms to evolve, and this requires continued interventions over a long period of time. Therefore, this also demonstrates a need for donors to provide flexible, long-term funding to organizations promoting gender equality—for instance, those advancing SRHR and preventing GBV. Such funding is critical for enabling these organizations to be agile and to act effectively and promptly to address needs as they arise.

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