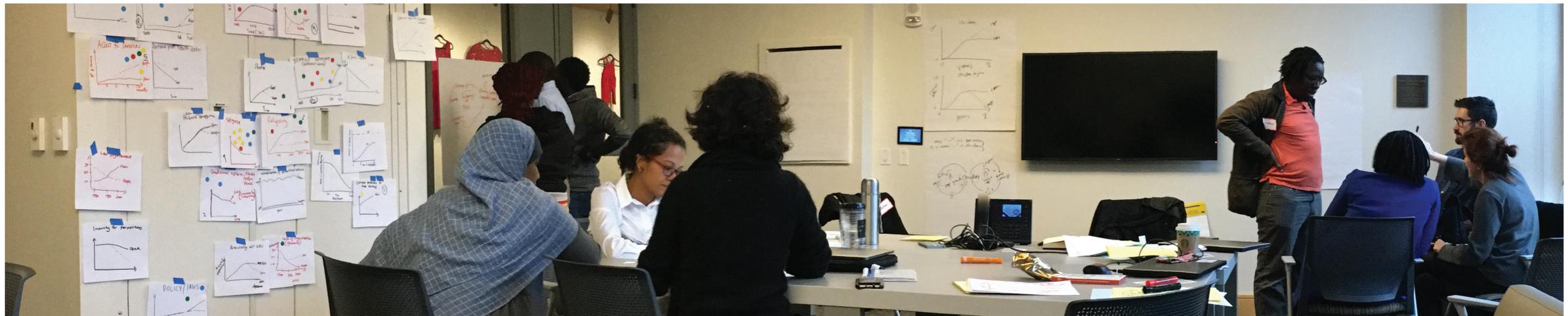


# Barriers to Service Seeking for Gender Based Violence in Low Income Countries

Rabab Ahmed, Ellis Ballard, Hayden Blair, William Byansi, Daji Dvalishvili, Peter Hovmand, Habiba Ibrahim, Joelynn Muwanga, Proscovia Nabunya, Thabani Nyoni, Ozge Sensoy Bahar, Fred Ssewamala, Lindsay Stark and Wilberforce Tumwesige (alphabetical order)



## Abstract

High numbers of women and adolescent girls experience sexual violence. While much of the attention has focused on high-income countries, gender-based violence is a global phenomenon. In low-income countries, studies of past year violence indicate that 3 out of 4 females were exposed to at least one type of physical abuse, 1 out of 4 to sexual coercion, and 1 out of 4 forced sex. The negative impacts of sexual violence can be mitigated by timely and effective interventions. However, health services for victims of sexual violence are vastly underutilized. Many factors contribute to limited access to effective interventions. To better understand how these factors might be related, this exploratory study used a 1.5-day group model building workshop to develop an initial “proof of concept” system dynamics model of barriers to service seeking for gender-based violence in low-income countries.

## Background

High numbers of women and adolescent girls experience sexual violence in Uganda, much of the time with their current sexual partner. Studies of past year violence have revealed that 3 out of 4 females were exposed to at least one type of physical abuse, 1 out of 4 were the victims of sexual coercion, and 1 out of 4 experienced forced sex. Experiencing sexual violence has harmful effects on physical and mental health including: unwanted pregnancy, physical injury, risky behaviors (e.g. drug and alcohol use), sexual risk taking behaviors exposing women to sexually-transmitted infections (STIs; including HIV), chronic stress, depression, low self-esteem and lack of control over reproductive choices. The negative impacts of sexual violence can be mitigated by health services providing timely and effective interventions that target injury management and psychological support.

However, health services for victims of sexual violence in Uganda and much of sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) are vastly underutilized to the extent that 9 in 10 females who experience sexual violence never seek care. Many factors contribute to limited uptake of health services in Uganda and elsewhere in SSA for sexual violence survivors, including psychological, cultural, economic, and other factors such as fear and stigma. Further, health services for survivors often lack sufficiently qualified staff and medical supplies, and confidentiality cannot be ensured. In the absence of timely and effective treatment, high rates of sexual violence result in serious psychological and physical consequences at a population level and compromise future social and economic development. The goal of this study was to introduce and explore the potential use of a feedback perspective for understanding barriers to service seeking for gender based violence in low-income countries.

## Methods

This exploratory study used a sequence of facilitated structured group model building (GMB) scripts to introduce conventions of system dynamics and explore the feasibility of conceptualizing barriers to service seeking in low-income countries for gender-based violence from a feedback perspective. Group model building (GMB) is a participatory systems science method focused on involving people in the process of understanding the dynamic behavior of systems from a feedback perspective. Participants (authors) worked through a series of facilitated exercises to identify and prioritize trends, define focal problems of interest (Figure 1), and describe the underlying system as a set of underlying balancing and reinforcing feedback loops (Figure 2). The results of the small group exercises were then shared and synthesized into a single causal loop diagram (Figure 3).

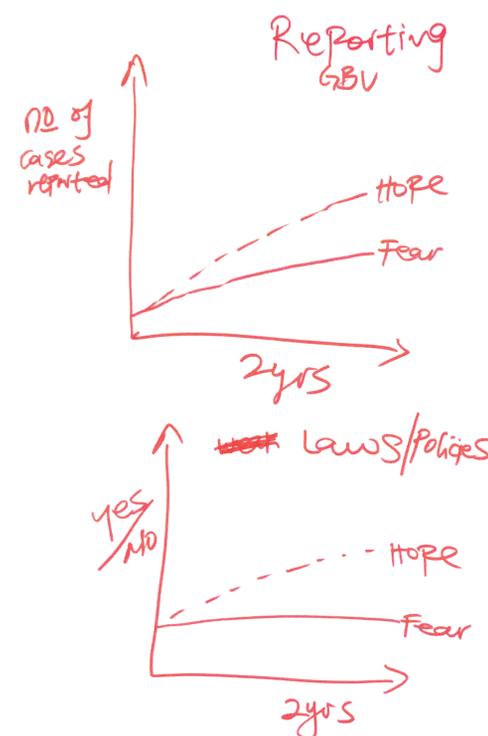


Figure 1. One set of reference modes for describing barriers to service

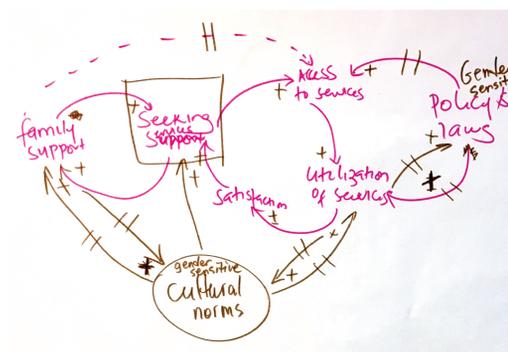


Figure 2. Example of a causal loop diagram of barriers to service

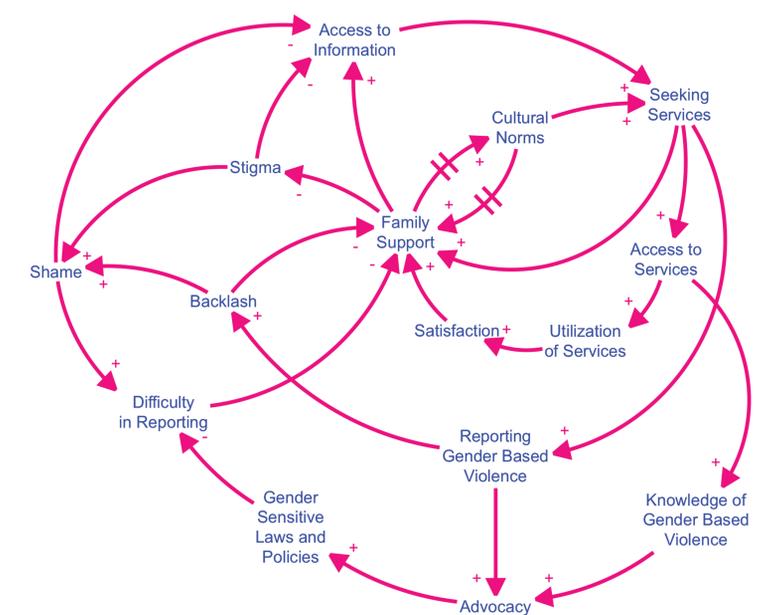


Figure 3. Synthesized causal loop diagram

## Results and Conclusions

Figure 3 shows the synthesized causal loop diagram of barriers to service seeking for gender-based violence in low-income countries. The diagram highlights how factors related to service seeking can be related within one or more feedback mechanisms. While most of the feedback loops are reinforcing, there are some balancing loops involving seeking services, reporting of gender-based violence, and backlash. Moreover, family support appears as the nexus of the most feedback loops as both a facilitator and barrier to service seeking for gender-based violence.

While service seeking for gender-based violence is a complex social phenomenon, the results highlight how the problem can be framed from a feedback or endogenous perspective using system dynamics. Noteworthy are the multiple reinforcing feedback loops involving family support that can either be operating as “virtuous” or “vicious” cycles respectively enabling or preventing service seeking. Sources of policy resistance are formally defined as dominant balancing loops that resist efforts to change the dynamics of a system and maintain the status quo. Hence, it is significant that the three balancing loops identified from the synthesized causal loop diagram in Figure 3 involve the causal pathway of service seeking, reporting, and backlash.