

New methods for collecting forensic DNA to combat sexual violence in conflict

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Dr. Lisa Smith, University of Leicester. Credit: University of Leicester

Researchers from the University of Leicester have launched a new project to investigate alternative ways of collecting DNA evidence from victims of sexual violence in conflict zones and displaced communities, including refugee camps.

The project, which is led by Dr Lisa Smith from the University of Leicester's Department of Criminology, will explore new methods for collecting forensic DNA evidence in cases of sexual violence for use in regions where victims do not have access to [medical facilities](#) in order to provide victims with access to justice that may otherwise be unavailable.

The research is being launched before representatives from the UN and Education Secretary Nicky Morgan at the UN's HeForShe's First-Ever #GetFree Tour at the University of Leicester on Tuesday 29 September.

Dr Smith explained: "In regions experiencing [armed conflict](#), it is well documented that sexual violence is used strategically by armed groups against communities, families, and individuals. Although the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war is prohibited by international criminal law, these cases are notoriously difficult to prosecute, often because of a lack of available evidence. Forensic examinations of victims are often not carried out due to a lack of access to medical facilities, lack of trained medical and police professionals, and safety and security concerns.

"I hope that this sort of research will help to raise awareness of the issue of sexual violence against vulnerable people in circumstances such as armed conflict and displaced communities, and encourage international organisations to seek innovative ways to use forensic science to give victims of sexual violence access to justice around the world."

The first phase of the project, which is supported by the University Prospects Fund, involves researchers from the University of Leicester's

Departments of Criminology and Genetics collaborating with Thermo Fisher Scientific to test a variety of alternative DNA recovery techniques in order to determine their suitability for use on the ground in challenging circumstances, in order to overcome technical and cultural barriers which currently exist in remote regions.

The team will also be bidding for a large research grant in early 2016 which will enable them to conduct research 'on the ground' in various affected regions worldwide.

The project will be highlighted amongst other Leicester research at the UN HeForShe event. Leicester has been chosen by the United Nations as an IMPACT champion to identify and test gender equality initiatives for the UN Women's HeForShe 10x10x10 international campaign to get a billion boys and men involved in championing the rights of women. Ten university leaders worldwide - including Professor Paul Boyle, President & Vice-Chancellor of the University of Leicester - will join 10 world leaders and 10 company chief executives to spearhead the campaign with game-changing action for gender equality.

Dr Smith said: "The HeForShe campaign aims to achieve gender equality, and sexual violence is just one of the ways that women, men, and children are victimised around the world. The HeForShe campaign is led by UN Women, and part of their remit is the aim to end sexual violence against women and work towards peace and security for women and girls worldwide. This research project hopes to use forensic science to offer justice to victims of sexual violence and support the prosecutions of perpetrators around the world."

The project will also examine wider areas in parallel to the DNA-related research, including aspects related to the interviewing of victims and witnesses. The interviewing of victims and witnesses is a crucial part of the investigation of [sexual violence](#) in these regions, but there is

currently a lack of research on issues relating to interview practices in these regions, for example, how the use of language interpreters influences the interview setting.

Professor Mark Jobling from the University of Leicester's Department of Genetics added: "The technology for DNA testing is powerful and robust, and in the UK, where we have a functional criminal justice system, we're accustomed to its routine use supporting convictions for rape. We aim to be smart about how we apply it, so we can also make a real difference in the more dangerous and chaotic situations that exist in conflict zones."

Provided by University of Leicester

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