

# Novel mobile app could help to reduce sexual violence in Kenya

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Working with the Wangu Kanja Foundation (WKF), researchers are piloting 'MobApp' across Kenya. Credit: University of Birmingham

Crime and memory experts at the University of Birmingham are working

with partners in Africa who are developing a mobile phone app that could help to reduce sexual violence in poorer countries and bring its perpetrators to justice.

Sexual violence is notoriously difficult to investigate and prosecute—especially in low and [middle income countries](#) (LMICs) such as Kenya, where some 11 million women have fallen victim to a range of such crimes including rape and [intimate partner violence](#).

Working with the Wangu Kanja Foundation (WKF), researchers are piloting 'MobApp' across Kenya. The WKF had developed MobApp to help fellow survivors support people through reporting, documenting and tracking new cases of sexual violence.

Supported by the University's Institute of Global Innovation (IGI), Dr. Heather Flowe, an IGI Fellow and researcher who studies how people remember and criminal events at the University of Birmingham, is working with partners at WKF to gather testimony from over 1,000 survivors.

Using the app will provide [policy makers](#) with country-wide data about sexual violence and police with information to help focus resources on areas requiring more attention.

Dr. Heather Flowe commented: "Survivors of sexual violence in countries such as Kenya face overly bureaucratic, poorly-resourced systems, laced with corruption, leading to myriad problems with the stories of survivors usually going unheard.

"As a result, survivors rarely report rape to the police, fearful of reprisal by the perpetrators; discouraged by improper practices and unsympathetic police officers; and the culture of stigma where victims seem more likely to be punished than perpetrators.

"In providing a wider picture of sexual violence characteristics, such as who's perpetrating and who's most at risk, MobApp can help reduce incidents; whether by improving security at high-risk locations or helping police prioritise cases by identifying serial perpetrators."

The WKF has provided survivors with comprehensive support and encourages decision-makers to change the way in which sexual violence is reported and managed on a country-wide level.

The IGI and the Global Challenges Research Fund supported a number of visits to Kenya, where Dr. Flowe and her team spent time with the WKF, who have been at the forefront of positive change since 2005.

The Foundation supports survivors throughout the process, helping them to navigate bureaucracy at the police station, the medical examiner's office and the courtroom. Yet, few survivors find justice—in 2017 and 2018, the WKF handled 1,012 cases with only five cases resulting in convictions.

WKF founder Wangu Kanja commented: "Existing programs intervene and respond to incidents of sexual violence in Kenya, but this project tells of a better way of thinking about the relationship between sexual violence and what can be done about it.

"Assault is not only a rape, it is also the re-traumatisation of survivors by a family that blames the survivor, by the relentless bureaucracy necessary to bring a case to the police, by intimidation to drop charges if they are pressed, and by the reality of having to see your rapist in court every few months for as many as ten years."

The Birmingham team is working with WKF to develop innovative and low-cost approaches for police interviews drawing upon best practice for obtaining memory evidence from [rape victims](#) in the UK. This, along

with crime linkage tools, will better enable police to prioritise cases and solve crimes committed by serial perpetrators.

Professor Jessica Woodhams, Director of the Centre for Applied Psychology at the University of Birmingham, commented: "MobApp's potential to achieve justice for more victims via crime linkage should not be underestimated. Some rape series contain more than 50 offences, and apprehended rapists have reported committing an average of 7–11 rapes for every rape they were convicted for."

There is also a need to better equip medical service providers and law enforcement officers who investigate sexual [violence](#) in countries with limited resources like Kenya. Addressing this second set of challenges has underpinned much of Dr. Flowe's previous work in Kenya.

Dr. Flowe is working with an IGI supported interdisciplinary team from across the University, focusing on translating the Protocol for the Documentation and Investigation of Sexual Violence in Conflict for use by people on the ground, like smaller NGOs, in carrying out interviews to document [sexual violence](#) cases using best practice.

"MobApp data will help WKF and other organisations campaign for meaningful policy change, as the intimate and painful information collected from survivors requires a different approach to conventional surveys," says Dr. Flowe.

"Rape victim blaming is prevalent in Kenya and perpetrators are not held to account. Serious misconceptions include the idea that women provoke men to rape, that [rape](#) is only perpetrated by strangers, and that men are entitled to sex through marriage or gift giving."

Once the pilot project is completed, the team plan to roll it out further afield. The data and methodology already established through the project

could equally inform similar pilot schemes in other resource-poor countries.

Provided by University of Birmingham

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