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All over the world, sexual violence against girls and women is one of the most devastating consequences of gender inequality. Yet in many countries, a combination of cultural factors and inadequate training for police officers and medical staff means that investigations and prosecutions are very rare.

Equally important are issues of evidence. While DNA can be collected through medical examination in developed countries, this is often far more difficult in remote or impoverished regions. To address this, the University of Leicester pioneered a kit that enables victims of sexual violence to self-examine for DNA evidence. It involves using a swab rather like a tampon, which has been optimised for the purpose of collection. A prototype successfully recovered male DNA 12 to 36 hours after unprotected sex, demonstrating that such swabs could make an effective alternative to medical examinations in low-resource environments.

A follow-up Humanitarian Innovation Fund Award enabled the team at Leicester to explore the many barriers to forensic science in poor countries, and the relationship between evidence, prosecutions and justice from the perspective of victims of sexual violence. It is hoped that their research can provide tools for introducing DNA evidence into sexual violence investigations and prosecutions in regions where this has not previously been possible.

The judges were “excited by the potential of this project to tackle a major issue and secure justice for victims of crime”. They admired both the technical innovation and the way that the researchers had considered the socio-economic and legal frameworks in which the kits would be used.