

WOMEN IN THE FACE OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AND COVID 19

Stories of struggle of the grassroots women from Hoima, Kikuube and Bulisa in Uganda



STORY BOOK



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Introduction

Globally, nearly one-in-three women have experienced violence in their life time, with crises like COVID 19 driving the numbers even higher.

As majority of the population stayed at home to stay safe from COVID- 19, homes turned out to be hell for majority of the women country wide as domestic violence was on the rise.

Minister of Gender reported that between March 30th and April 28th, a total of 328 cases of GBV were reported to police in addition to 283 cases of Violence Against Children.

Additionally, a survey carried out by Action Aid revealed that Pallisa district registered 150 cases of gender-based

violence during the period of March and May. The Buliisa Health Centre IV In-charge reported that there were 180 young girls below 24 years attending antenatal care at the facility since the lockdown in March 2020.

These are only the known cases that have were reported. One wonders how many women suffered from GBV and were not able to report due to the ban on transport to access the police, fear of reporting someone you are still locked up with for more months.

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Therefore, this story book is comprised of stories of suffering and vulnerabilities that grass root women went through during Covid 19 and cases of gender-based violence that they still go through some of which are as a result of development projects in Uganda like oil.

1. Kemigisa Sylvia Group chairperson for Kaiso Women's group, Buseruka subcounty-Hoima District.



Gender based violence is real and the prevalence is high especially for us living at the lake shore with congested households.

The coming of oil in our region came with many challenges including dwindling of fish In Lake Albert which was our main source of income.

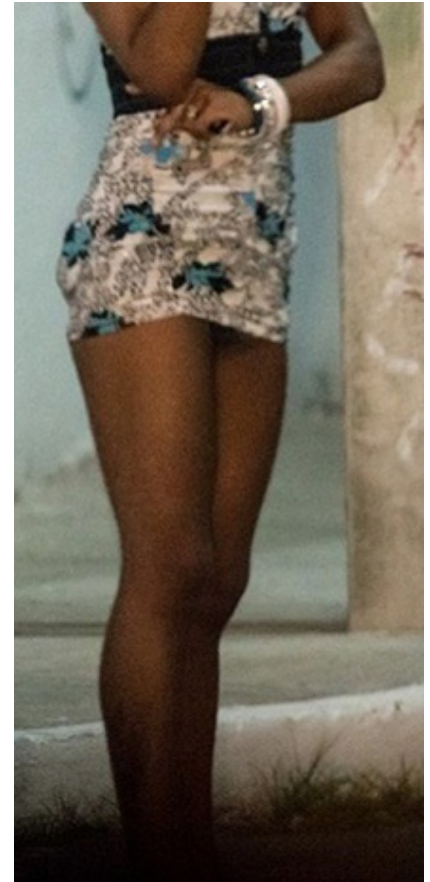
Before we thought of other livelihood alternatives, COVID 19 came in. If there have been bad times for the kaiso community, is the coming of COVID 19, It increased poverty and violence in homes. As part of its health response the authorities took action in the fishing communities, suspending all fishing activities on Lake Albert, a directive supported by the Uganda People's Defence Forces, among other security agencies.

It was argued these closures were to prevent the arrival of illegal migrants who could be carrying the virus, it was a such a night mare for the community

here whose livelihood entirely was on fishing.

There are about 8 teenagers that became pregnant, domestic violence was at its peak because men could not fulfill their responsibilities in homes anymore, the level of alcohol consumption shot high.

The other big problem now is CNOOC workers sleeping with married women at kaiso because they have money, I can tell you, prostitution is too high at the landing site and if there is no intervention, marriages are breaking down, HIV cases may increase and many other STDS, I fear some husbands may kill CNOOC workers because of sleeping with their wives.



Many girl school dropouts in Buseruka have resorted to prostitution for survival.



UPDF (in uniform standing) hold captive fishmen, their fishing boats and nets at Lake Albert

2. Alice Kazimura, Executive Director of Kakindo Women Integrated Agency (KAWIDA) based in Bulisa town council, Bulisa District



I want more women in Bulisa to be supported and able to stand up and speak about women's rights. I have been a community educator and councilor for many years and have contributed much to the struggle of ending violence against women and girls in Bulisa.

With my experience, I can tell you that gender-based violence heavily hits women, this does not mean that men are not affected, but the ratio of women is higher.

Oil related activities like the central processing Fa-

cility in Kasenyi, road constructions and now oil pipeline are a greater contributor of GBV.

For instance there has been land grabbing, evictions of people, little compensation and at the end of the day, women who do not mainly own land, find themselves at the suffering end, men are running away with compensation money and marrying other wives.

COVID 19 worsened the situation. Due to lock down and restriction on movements of motorists, most families suffered hunger because our farm lands are in gweudo which is very far from where we stay in Kakindo, Bulisa town council and surrounding areas. It was very hard for us to access food from our gardens, do farming and even buy from the markets since they were closed. Police brutality, beating women coming from their gardens was too much to bear.

I know of women who lost their small businesses of selling fish and other staff on the road side, police harassed them, spoilt their food staff.

Teenage pregnancy and early child marriage became order of the day, I remember 7 young girls dropout of school and got married while 5 became pregnant and I think the number was even higher but only witnessed that.

3. Judith Bero-Irwoth from Ngwedo

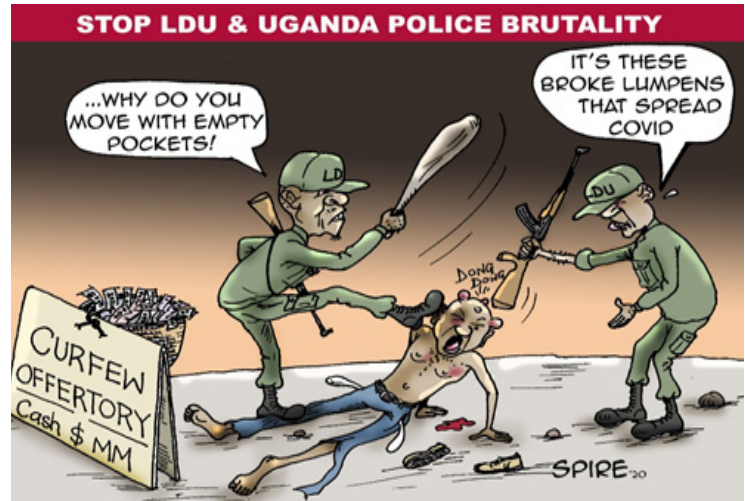
The Covid 19 pandemic presented unique challenges, for most couples it was the first time they stayed together at home from morning to evening without engaging in serious work and sometimes without food. Children were also at home so the burden of not working and not providing for the family induced a lot of domestic



violence. Many girls dropped out of school and got married and pregnant. My sister's daughter became pregnant at the age of 13 years and she was operated. After the father couldn't pay fees for her again, she is just in the village living a hard life. I had a small business of selling fresh fish that was far from where I stay but I suffered everyday with security people harassing us to close at 6pm, stealing our money, beating us like animals and decided to close the business.



The above photos depict the harassment women went through during Covid 19 by people in uniform.



Covid 19 pandemic added salt to the already existing wounds and headache from oil related activities. Compensation money has birthed an imaginable domestic violence in homes.

You know at first companies could only compensate men leaving out women meaning men could withdraw money alone without the knowledge of women but we ably protested that and now both couples have to sign to withdraw money from the bank.

Unfortunately, men have now learnt new tricks and they take advantage of their wives not being able to read and deceive them. My neighbors husband who was staying in Kampala before COVID 19, he came back home and sold their land at 19 million and agreed with the wife to withdraw only 7 so that they start some small business but because the wife doesn't know how to read, he instead wrote 17 million, it was withdrawn but he deposited 10 million on his account and went home with 7 million as earlier agreed with the wife.

Days after, the wife realized that the husband was building a house for another wife using the 10 million, there was a lot of fighting every day until police and us intervened and took the case to court. This is just one of the many cases, men are running away with compensation money for the Central Processing Facility and UNRA.

4. Katusime Jane (not her real name) from Butimba village, Kiziranfumbi Kikuube District.

If God listens to prayers, Covid 19 should never come back to Uganda. My family went through the worst and very challenging times. During the first lockdown in March, 2020, I was 6 months pregnant, I was doing causal labor farming in peoples gardens for money and my husband was a boda boda rider. I got some complications and I couldn't dig any more only depended on my husband.

Time came when boda bodas were only allowed to move up to 6pm and subsequently total lockdown. My time for giving birth was nearing but we had no money at all even feeding was a problem, I remem-

ber my husband sometimes let me eat the little food and he stayed hungry for a day, the food that was supplied by government didn't reach us. Many thoughts of committing suicide came to me because even my people at home didn't know my husband so imagined if it came to the worst what would happen.

But I thank God that some women around helped us, prayed with me and supported even through delivery.

I was lucky because I had some women gave birth on roads, at home while trying to access hospitals with difficulty because of no transport.



In the photo aside, shows the UPDF/LDU was supplying food to people mostly staying in town, leaving out those staying in the villages who were assumed to have enough food but unfortunately some did not have due to biting climate change and some had no where to grow enough food since their land was grabbed to pave way for development project like oil related activities.

5. Lucy Mbuubi from Butimba Sustainability Conservation Association (BUSUCA), Kikuube district.

I am a mother of four and a teacher at Wambabya Primary School in Kikuube District. Am also a member of many community-based groups especially those women empowerment and environmental conservation.

The lockdown and ban on public transport was specifically hard for many expectant mothers and mothers of young babies. One had to first get permission from the Resident District Commissioner (RDC) to be able to use any kind of private vehicle to hospital, with out connections as the saying goes these days, it was hard to get letters in time but we tried our best.

The other challenge was teenage pregnancy and young people engaging in sexual relationships since they were idle due to closure of school.

“ When the schools were opened again, the rate of school dropout especially for girls was very high.

There is a specific case of a 15-year-old girl who was pregnant by sugar cane workers and they disappeared. The girl was in primary seven at the time, she came back to school while pregnant and we decided to let her study with the pregnancy and do final exams. Many girls especially in primary 6 & 7 didn't come back to school.



A teenager carrying her baby, she conceived during covid 19 pandemic.

6. Daizy Kwikiriza from Bulisa women living with disability.

Covid 19 pandemic is still fresh in my mind even after more than a year has passed. I have a shop and have a sewing machine for tailoring and teaching fellow colleagues living with disability in Bulisa town council which is about 4km from my home.

During that time where businesses were still operating but boda boda cyclists stopped from carrying people was a serious night mare for me, am disabled with only one leg but can still do my work in a conducive environment.

During the lockdown, I could leave home early at 6am and be at work at around 8am on foot, work for few hours and start going home at 2pm so that I catch up with time of the presidential directive of closing at 5pm. For any delays, security people had no mercy whether you're disabled or normal, they could beat, harass us and spoil some of the merchandise. There is also a lady from my group who stays in

Gweudo, she almost got starved in the house, she had money but could not buy food from the markets since they were far and closed.



Daizy Kwikiriza from Bulisa women Group living with disability.



7. Penina Ruhindi, from Kigaaga: Kigaaga Oil Refinery Community Women Development Association (KORECWODA)

Because of Oil and gas development and Covid 19, Gender Based Violence escalated in our area. Men changed because of compensation money. For some couples in Kigaaga when they got compensation money, they bought land somewhere else but unfortunately when Covid 19 came, most men sold land secretly without the knowledge of women.

The construction of the airport brought in many military men into the community and a barracks was later established in Kyapaloni, but I can tell you, the men in uniform (military) disorganized many families, many wives were lured into sleeping with them for money since many were struggling financially. Young girls were neither spared, they were easily persuaded by small monies from workers on road construction (road from Kiziranfumbi to Kabaale) as well as military soldiers.

There was a lot of confusion that time. As a counselor then, I received so many cases of prostitution, adultery and marriage break down, teenage pregnancy and many others related to gender-based violence



Because of oil related developments, some families were evicted from their land and forced to stay in camps of internally displaced persons

8. ASP Nampijja Grace, head unit of child and family protection of Uganda police-Hoima District.

As police, our job is to make both men and women feel safe and empowered, and to treat them with the utmost respect and empathy.

But sometimes we are overwhelmed, for instance, we receive many cases of gender-based violence especially domestic violence, rape, defilement resulting into teenage pregnancies on daily basis.

But we are aware that most of the cases go unreported because of the long distance from their places and transport to police.

I also know that most victims of gender-based violence find it challenging to access police due to lack of confidentiality since most police posts lack enough space to have an isolated child and family protection unit.

“ During Covid 19 pandemic, GBV cases sky rocked, I received many phone calls to help but was at times constrained by lack fuel to reach out to most communities that needed help, sometimes the cases were minor but ofcourse they needed our help.



Problem redress tips/key Interventions and policy recommendations to address Gender Based and Sexual Violence and pandemics.

- Because of the complaints of distance and transport of victims to police posts, there is need for community safe spaces/ shelters where victims can easily run to for help in terms of counselling, mediation and referral information.
- There is need for women/communities to have more than one livelihood alternatives, not to put all eggs in one basket.
- There is need to invest more in food sovereignty and most importantly indigenous varieties rather than food security so that when such pandemics hit, people can continue to have food for instance from kitchen gardens and some stored in seed banks.
- Strengthen women movements because in such pandemic's women need each other the more, in terms of doing work together like saving money, advocating for their rights among others.
- Use of media especially radio for the rural communities is very powerful and instrumental in raising awareness and giving platform and a voice to the victims of GBV. Media did a great job during COVID 19 times and is a voice and space for engagement on GBV.
- There is need for government to invest more and improve quality of health care systems and services, so that when pandemics hit, no lives are lost as a result failure to access services.
- Put money in the hands of women and other vulnerable groups: Legislate to put money in the hands of women and other vulnerable groups through existing and new government programs for instance parish development model.
- Social protection and recovery programs: Ensure social protection programs and other recovery projects adapt community-led and inclusive methodologies to cater to the interests of women and other vulnerable groups in a sustainable way.

SAY NO TO GENDER BASED VIOLENCE AND HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES



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100 million girls are forced to marry
before they turn 18 years



#EMBRACE EQUITY