

COVID-19 and Domestic Violence in Uganda

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On 30th January 2020, the World Health Organisation declared the Corona Virus a Public Emergency of International concern. Uganda's President reacted fast by declaring a two weeks national lockdown on 30th March with several measures that restricted movements and promoted social distancing. Uganda confirmed its first case of the virus on March 22, and since then, 89 people have been infected, fifty-two of these recovered and the rest active but no deaths. On 14th April, a three weeks lockdown was again imposed, followed by the most recent- an extension on 5th May for another two weeks. However, the lockdown and the ensuing restrictions have had unprecedented impact on the livelihoods of Ugandans. This is a case of domestic violence in Uganda as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Generally, all national newspapers have reported an upsurge of domestic violence as reported to Police stations across the country, and most of the victims are women. Before the lockdown, 46 percent of women experienced some form of physical violence from their partners, but this increased to 56 percent by the first week of the first phase of the lockdown¹. This rate is estimated to be much higher as the lockdown continues to bite. The rise of domestic violence has been attributed to the economic pressures exerted on families as a result of the lockdown. In addition, many people who were previously living under abusive relationships now have no escape from their abusers, because of the nationwide lockdown. People are underdoing stress, fatigue and depression due to insecurity and income worries which have fueled the domestic violence². From March 31st to April 14th, 328 cases of domestic violence were reported to the Police nationwide. In one week from Monday 20th April -27th April the Police in Kampala, the capital city received 297 cases of domestic violence including 35 cases of home desertion by husbands who have run away after failing to provide food to their families³. Similar cases of desertions and violence have been reported across the country, but the unreported cases could be much higher especially in rural areas where most people are either un aware of their rights or are far away from protective services. On Wednesday 22 April, *Daily Monitor*⁴ reported how a 53-year-old man in Sironko district was allegedly beaten to death by his 27-year-old son over Shs 6,000 (0.5 US dollars) which he had borrowed from the son but had failed to pay back. A local TV, *Bukedde* in the week starting 22nd April aired a story of a women from a suburb of Kampala whose head was hit by her husband, when she asked for money to buy food. In one township in Western Uganda, a woman reportedly poured hot porridge on her 35-year-old husband, accusing him for failing to

¹ Citizens' Coalition for Electoral Democracy in Uganda (CCEDU) <https://www.watchdoguganda.com>. Accessed on 06/05/2020

² New Vision Friday, 24th April Volume 35, No 085, p.12

³ New Vision, Monday 27th April, Volume 35, No 086, p.6

⁴ Daily Monitor, Friday April 24th 2020, No. 115 p.12

provide food for the family. The couple had just stayed in marriage for only two months⁵. The domestic violence situation in northern Uganda, could be more alarming. This is a region emerging from the more than two decades of civil war (1986-2006) and before the lockdown, it had the highest cases of domestic violence in the country because the psychosocial and economic effects of the war are still lingering in many communities, households and individuals. A case in point from this region is the recently widely shared online video during the lockdown of a youth (20+ years) captured torturing a grandmother (65+ years) for allegedly refusing to show him his father's clan⁶. The boy is now under Police arrest.

The rising level of domestic violence during this COVID-19 lockdown has attracted the attention of many actors. During his address to the nation on COVID-19 on 4th May, His Excellency the President, Yoweri Museveni acknowledged the rising level of domestic



One of the victims of domestic violence (facing camera), who has been repeatedly beaten by her drunk husband, attending a community meeting organized by an NGO called barefootlaw in northern Uganda on how to access justice by women during this curfew and Uganda on how to access justice by women during this curfew and lockdown imposed during this COVID-19 pandemic (Source: [//barefootlaw.org/digital/](https://barefootlaw.org/digital/))

violence and counselled people to desist from this. He advised that the family is the basis of life and that if there is disagreement, it should be resolved through a dialogue. Poverty and hunger in homes, are primarily causing marital instabilities during this lockdown but in response, the government started a program of food (Maize mill and Beans) distribution to vulnerable households.

However, the definition of what a vulnerable household is remains contentious, and the distribution is inadequate as the food items scarcely lasts for a week. And besides, the distribution is only restricted to Wakiso and Kampala districts, considered the most hard-hit districts due to the lockdown, yet there are more than 120 districts in the country. The UN- Women and Embassy of Sweden in Uganda have called on all parties involved in the COVID-19 response to apply a gender and equity perspective in the overall response planning and implementation, to ensure that the required social and economic assistance reach the most vulnerable and marginalised, especially women and girls⁷. All in all, the case of domestic violence is undeniably on the increase. An empirical nationwide research needs to be undertaken, to determine the gendered impact of the COVID-19. In the meantime, counseling and psychosocial support should be channeled to support families and victims. Local authorities and probation officers should be empowered to become more vigilant and ready to intervene where necessary.

⁵ Daily Monitor, Tuesday May 5th, N. 126, p.22

⁶ The boy is allegedly born out of wedlock during the insurgency and the mother died when he was still young but had neither disclosed the name of the father nor his clan to her family. Now the boy is staying with the grandmother.

⁷ New Vision Friday, 24th April Volume 35, No 085, p.12