WOMEN OF UGANDA NETWORK

WOMEN AND ICTS
WOUGNET

Women of Uganda Network (WOUGNET)
Submission on domestic violence in the context of COVID-19 to UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women (VAW)

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INTRODUCTION

Women of Uganda Network (WOUGNET) is a non-governmental organization initiated in May 2000 by several women's organizations in Uganda to develop the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) among women as tools to share information and address issues collectively. WOUGNET's mission is to promote and support the use of ICTs by women and women organizations in Uganda, so that they can take advantage of the opportunities presented by ICTs in order to effectively address national and local problems of sustainable development.

WOUGNET has done extensive research studies and advocacy in the area of Women's Rights Online for example on; Technology Related Violence against Women study[1], Examining Women's Access to Digital platforms[2], Bridging the Gender Digital Divide in Uganda[3] based on the principles of the African Declaration on Internet Rights and Freedoms, Take back the tech, Digital Security among others. The organization has reviewed several Uganda's ICT policies from a gender perspective and produced policy briefs to this effect. We have over the years, carried out campaigns to promote public create awareness about technology Assisted Violence Against Women and Girls and to advocate for gender inclusive policies that protect women's digital rights and internet freedom.

This report focuses on highlighting Violence Against Women especially on Domestic Violence in Uganda during the COVID 19 pandemic including efforts made by civil society organizations (CSOs) especially women rights organizations (WROs), the Government and other non-state actors in addressing this vice as well as the setbacks. However, the report will have specific focus on Technology Assisted Violence Against women and girls and how it is an impediment in achieving SDG 5 which is Gender Equality[4].

BACKGROUND

The Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women (DEVAW) defines Violence Against Women as (VAW) as "any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life."[5] (DEVAW 1993)

Violence Against Women is linked to political development as its used to exercise power over women through creating fear; intimidating, punishing, oppressing, silencing and depriving women and girls of their fundamental human Rights. In Uganda, 56% of women in intimate partner relationships have experienced physical, sexual and emotional violence from their partner (2016 UDHS)[6]. The 2016 Uganda Demographic and Health Survey revealed that up to 22% of women aged 15 to 49 in the country had experienced some form of sexual violence. The report also revealed that annually, 13% of women aged 15 to 49 report experiencing sexual violence. This translates to more than 1 million women exposed to sexual violence every year in Uganda

Although the Uganda government has enacted some laws and put in place policies to address discrimination and violence against women including; the Domestic violence Act 2010, The Prohibition of Trafficking in persons Act, the Prevention of Female Genital Mutilation Act, the National Gender Policy and the National Action Plan on Gender Based Violence, the National Development Plan II(NDP 2015/16-2019/20) among others[7]. The Women and Girls in this country remain unsafe and continue to face Violence.

Extent of Violence Against women during COVID 19

Violence against women and girls has increased in Uganda due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. On 18th March 2020, Uganda's President Yoweri Museveni in an address to the nation announced a national lock down as a containment measure to minimize the spread of COVID-19. The lock down included a curfew at 7:00pm, closure of non-food businesses, closure of schools and non-essential workplaces. In Uganda about 80% of women work in the informal sector that has been affected by the restrictive measures of the pandemic such as contact and movement. This has caused economic and social stress which has led to the rise of violence against women including domestic violence in homes and communities during the lock down. Also, Victims who are majorly women are now locked up under one roof with the perpetrators as a result of containment measures of COVID-19 therefore increasing the risk of abuse. During the lock down most of the women in the urban areas depended on the internet to access information, work remotely, transact, socialize and to join meaningful conversations around the globe. Hence women exposure to Technology Assisted Violence.

In Uganda, 46% of women have, before these measures were introduced - experienced physical violence and live in fear of their current or most recent partner[8].

Social media has also been awash with stories of women complaining of excessive sex demands from their husbands during the lock down. The Archbishop of Church of Uganda in his Easter message tipped couples to adopt more family planning measures to prevent unwanted pregnancies during lock down-probably coming from unwanted sex in marriage or relationship (otherwise called marital rape[9].

Kampala Metropolitan police on May 8 received information that one only identified as Yasin aged 46 years, a resident of Banda B 3, Banda Parish, Nakawa Division, Kampala had murdered his wife and two biological sons. "The deceased were identified as Carol Namboozo aged 25, and the children were only identified by one name, Musa, 4 years old, and Shaban, 7 years old," Owoyesigyire said in a statement. "The findings indicate that the likely cause of murder is suspected to be domestic violence," he said. According to eye witnesses, the suspect on several occasions has assaulted the wife and at one time, he tied her with ropes and caned her badly said Kampala Metropolitan Police Spokesperson Luke Owoyesigyire. He appealed to members of the public to solve domestic issues amicably[10]. The disheartening case of Carol Namboozo is just one among many murders that have taken place as a result of domestic violence during the COVID 19 pandemic.

Uganda Police Criminal Investigations Directorate reported a total of 10,280 cases of Gender based violence from January to April, 2020. However, 46.8% of the cases were domestic violence cases that rose due to failure to provide for the family, infidelity and drug and alcohol abuse. 43.2% were cases of Defilement, and 5.6% were cases of Rape. 86% of the victims were women and girls. Uganda has also registered 161 cases of murders resulting from domestic violence according to the chimp reports[11].

Another case is; On 6 June, NBS television reported that over 60 school girls who have been impregnated during the lockdown in Luuka and Kaliro districts are likely to miss school next term when schools reopen. The majority of the pupils are aged between 13 and 15 years. 40 of the pupils are in Luuka district while 20 are from Kaliro district[12]. A case like this is reported without proper light of what happened and who defiled or even raped these girls.

A similar case; On 15 May, Relief web Uganda reported that there has been a rumour that parents in some villages in Gulu district are giving their girls to men for marriage so that they can get money for food[13].

Many reports attribute the rise of domestic violence to economic pressures exerted on families as a result of the lockdown. People are undergoing stress, fatigue and depression due to insecurity and income worries which have fueled the domestic violence. [14]Because of the lock down, many victims may have faced difficulty in physically reporting cases of abuse to the police. There is a fear that the unreported cases could be much higher especially in rural areas where most people are either unaware of their rights or are far away from protective services or even lack technology tools and devices with digital skills to report their cases.[15]

President Museveni spoke out against increased violence against women on May 5, putting the issue of domestic violence during the lock down on the national agenda[16].

Measures by civil society and Government

Currently, the Government and a number of civil society organizations have come up with help lines for all help ranging from psycho-social support, physical support and legal aid. Some of these are;

- The Uganda Police Force due to the increasing number of Gender Based Violence cases reported, they have established a toll-free line 0800199195 at the Police National Command Centre to handle these cases during the pandemic[17].
- Lt Col Edith Nakalema - Uganda Police, on the toll-free number: 0800202500 and 0778202500 for WhatsApp.
- Uganda Network on Law Ethics and HIV/AIDS (UGANET) has the Rising Woman GBV Shelter and wellness centre Toll Free help line 0800333123 and WhatsApp +256774199374 for emergency response and counseling.
- Ni-Yetu toll free telephone number (0800200600) which is available 24 hours a day by Girl Up Uganda. Also continuing the discussion online through providing key information on our social media accounts and engaging youth in Tweet Chats[18].
- 116 Helpline for violations against children by Ministry of Gender Labor and Social Development (MoGLSD)[19]
- Uganda Communications Commission (UCC) has a toll-free reporting number for cyber harassment which is 0800133911
- FEMNET developed a Pan-African Online Hub by African women and girls is a one-

stop platform containing critical information resources about COVID-19 in Africa from a gender and feminist perspective.[20]

- The Safe Pal platform is connecting survivors virtually to service providers for support including psychosocial, legal, and medical services. Service providers include Action Aid, Naguru Teenage Centre, and Centre for Domestic Violence Prevention (CEDOVIP) as well as the Uganda Police Child and Family Protection Unit.[21]

Shelters

Many civil society organizations have opened temporary shelters to support victims. However, some victims have been sent back to the same home they shared with the perpetrators to avoid overcrowding and to follow social distancing measures of COVID-19 pandemic. For example, Rising Woman GBV Shelter and wellness centre opened by UGANET.

Action Aid Uganda, a non-governmental organisation is using the GBV referral pathway partners located and are scattered in the very community where the survivors live. These include; local councils, Cultural and religious leaders, the child and family protection unit at the police and the Health centers which are open as essential services. They are also operating their shelters all over Uganda.[22]

TERREWODE, a non-governmental organisation located in Eastern Uganda is conducting educational sessions for women around maternal health and childbirth. Part of their facilities have been converted to a shelter for women escaping abuse during this look-down. They also arrange transportation for women, which has been a challenge due to the ban on all private and public transport. They are also running a toll-free hotline for women to seek advice and support in emergency situations.[23]

Other alternatives include; online counseling, radio, television, social media and the newsprint to share information on what to do for those affected and those in position to help.[24] Protection orders can also be accessed through online counseling, telephones and mediation at the shelters although the mediation are limited to only four people at the shelters.

Effects of the pandemic on;

1. Women's Access to Health Services

According to the UNFPA, access to sexual and reproductive health and rights is a significant public health issue that requires high attention during pandemics. However, Emergency response to the COVID-19 outbreak also means that resources for sexual and reproductive health services may be diverted to deal with the outbreak, contributing to a rise in maternal and new born mortality, increased unmet need for contraception, and increased number of sexually transmitted infections.[25]

WOUGNET had a phone interview with Florence Apio, a Local Council committee

member in Apac district to find out how access to health services has been during the lockdown. Apio explained that they can only access Health Centre II which unfortunately doesn't offer most of the services they need. They cannot access the Health Centre III, IV, or referral hospitals because of the restrictions in movements and the long distance to those health centers. Hence it is impossible for them to access the best reproductive health service.

Access to services that address Gender-Based Violence and Sexual and Reproductive Health has been greatly hampered. This has affected marginalized groups like Sex workers in need of antiretroviral therapy (ART) and Pre-exposure prophylaxis (PREP) refills or SRH services are unable to get them under lockdown. While the government has put in place measures to reach out to people living with HIV, they are unable to serve everyone who needs the drugs. All attention has shifted to COVID-19 neglecting other health needs especially for women and girls.[26]

2. Victims benefiting from Psychosocial support

There is high rate of psychological and emotional torture caused by domestic violence and COVID-19 in homes and among communities however not many are tackling this, yet it is a reality which affects people especially women's wellbeing who are the major victims of this. This has caused projection of emotions onto others at home or also to a few working at their workplaces. In Uganda, security personnel were reported beating up women in their homes and on their way to health facilities, which have led to grievous bodily and psychological harm[27]

Many people especially women and girls feel unsafe, alone or abandoned and uncomfortable, this affects their ability to be able to prioritize their basic daily needs such as sleep, hydration, our abilities, healthy eating and etcetera. This has also led to a few committing suicide. Uganda has registered 161 cases of murders resulting from domestic violence according to the chimp reports.[28]

Despite the increased cases of domestic violence during the lockdown, there is lack of counselling services for victims especially in the rural areas. On June 10th 2020, NTV Uganda reported a story on the outcry by organizations that work on Violence Against Women as well as the police on the need for counselling services and psychosocial support in Gulu District.

3. Women's access to Justice

According to Fund for Global Human Rights, women are isolated from support networks and barriers to relocation or legal action are heightened.[29]

In a phone interview on 4th June, WOUGNET spoke to a female farmer Grace Aceng who lives in Kole district on how they have been accessing Justice during this pandemic. Aceng revealed that, they have not accessed justice system at all because all the courts in the district are closed and even though the courts were open, the long distance from their villages to the courts makes it impossible for them to travel to the district courts to seek

justice. She mentioned that some women in her community who opted for the clan elder's help say there has been no impact in resolving their cases. And other women have feared to report to avoid more beatings by their husbands.

The extent of Technology assisted Violence

Although, physical or offline violence against women has been condemned and actions taken to curb it down, online violence against women on the other hand has not been given much attention. During the COVID-19 lock-down there has been increase in access and use of internet which has led to increased cases of Technology Related/ Assisted Violence Against Women(Tech-related VAW). During this pandemic, women in the urban areas depended on the internet to access information, work remotely, transact, socialize and to join meaningful conversations around the globe. Hence women exposure to Technology Assisted Violence.

Online Gender based Violence are acts of gender-based violence that are committed, abetted or aggravated, in part or fully, by the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs), such as phones, the internet, social media platforms, and email.[30] There is an increasing habit of using especially new technologies to stalk, intimidate, threaten and harass people.

The UN estimates that 95% of aggressive behavior, harassment, abusive language and denigrating images in online spaces are aimed at women and come from current or former male partners. ICT facilitated violence has spread under the shadow pandemic of violence against women. Women and girls are subject to online violence in the form of physical threats, sexual harassment, stalking, zoombombing and sex trolling. Specific cases have been documented by media and women's rights organizations of unsolicited pornographic videos displayed while women were participating in online social events, threats of violence and harmful sexist content15,and "zoombombing" during video calls showing racially charged and sexually explicit material to the unexpecting participants.[31]

For certain groups of women like the sex workers in Uganda, as the client based dwindled on the streets, due to the protective measures of social distancing to combat COVID 19, a few have switched to online operations but it is difficult to navigate because of the threat of being exposed. The criminalization of sex work means that anyone could report you and detention follows. Sex work being illegal in Uganda based on the Penal Code CAP 120 (Art 139).[32] This type of fear has led to women totally getting offline for their safety therefore leaving some marginalized women groups behind.

The internet empowers women with many skills and exposes them to more opportunities to compete in businesses, jobs and learning to improve their livelihoods. To do this we must eliminate abuse of women's online safety and privacy, ensuring that women feel empowered and entitled to use Internet and benefit from it on equal terms with their male

counterparts."

Uganda Women's Network (@uwonet) on May 25 wrote on their twitter page that, "Women & girls are using internet with greater frequency during the COVID 19 pandemic, but increasing online violence & harassment is threatening to censure their voices, active participation & agency. We're calling for higher & clearer commitments to upholding women's safety online."[33]

With many women who are still not online due to high cost of internet data and gadgets, recently imposed 2018 Uganda social media tax, lack of relevant content and limited digital skills, they are struggling to make calls or to seek help online or even use the few technologies in place to file their domestic violence cases.
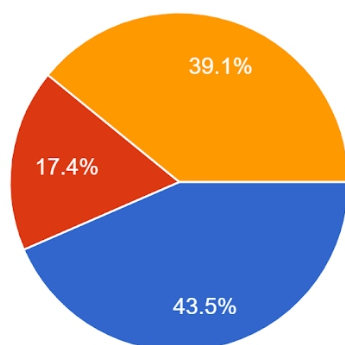
Patriarchal norms and attitudes in society paired with increasing Internet access as over 42% of Uganda's population is now online. [34]This has spurred the new form of gender-based violence commonly referred to as "technology-assisted violence against women and girls". More violations and threats are now happening towards women in cyberspace. However, most cases go unreported on the extent to violence against women online and they are quite often overlooked or excluded from discussions about violence against women and girls (VAWG).[35]

WOUGNET conducted a survey from 30th May to 4th June, 2020 on the extent of Tech Assisted Violence against Women and girls during the COVID19 outbreak. The survey targeted 50 young women tech users from urban, peri-urban and rural areas of Uganda.

The data collected clearly indicates that in the past three months (March, April, May) 2020, 50% of women had either faced Tech Assisted Violence, heard from a friend or social media including Radio and TV while others were not even sure.
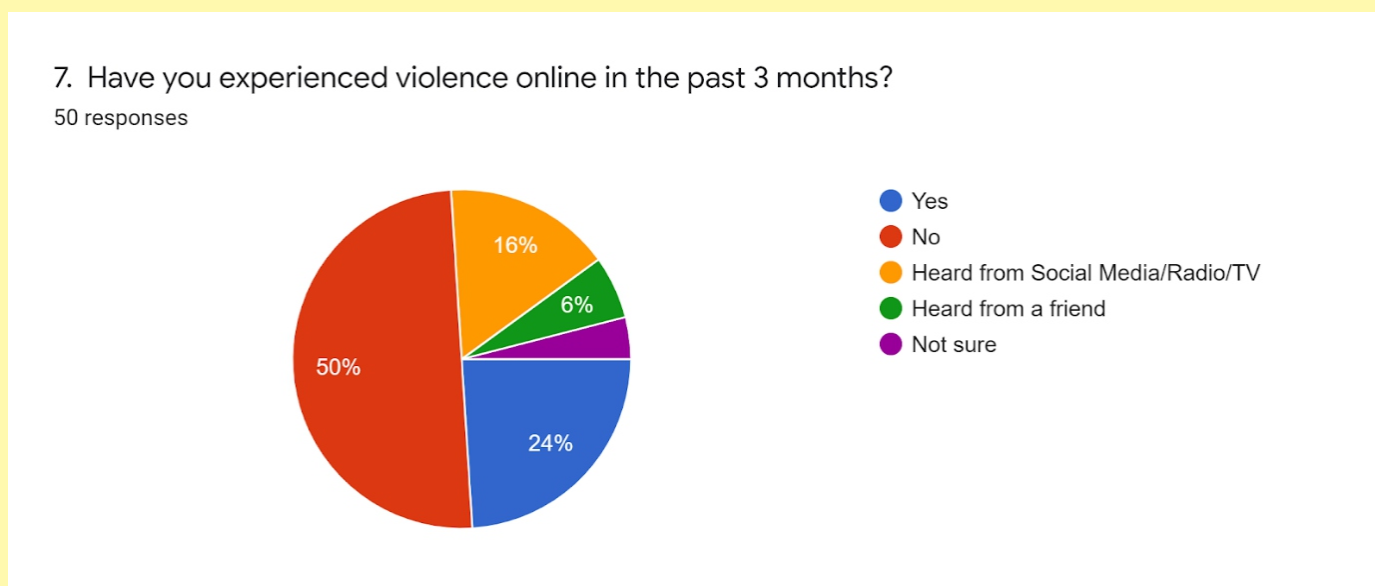
8. If yes above
23 responses

- A. Sexual Harassment (when a harasser sends unwanted, abusive, threatening, or obscene messages to a victim via e-mail/instant messaging.)
- B. Non-consensual intimate images/ revenge pornography (Distribution of sexually explicit images or videos of a person on the internet without the con…
- C. Cyber stalking (using the Internet or other electronic means to stalk or harass an individual,/group. It may include fal…

43.5%
17.4%
39.1%

Although 50% of the respondents affirm to never having faced any form of violence online, the 24% should not be left out. According to an EVAWG COVID-19 publication, it sights that Online violence is committed in a continuum between online and offline; it is often difficult to distinguish the consequences of actions that are initiated in digital environments from offline realities, and vice versa.[36]

According to the survey 43.5% of the victims have faced sexual harassment while 39.1% have been Cyber stalked in various forms while 17.4% have faced Non- Consensual intimate images (NCII) commonly known by the misnomer as "revenge Pornography."
"Yes someone did once when we had a fight with him he published my images on a WhatsApp group," one of the survey participants shared

During this unprecedented time of the COVID-19 pandemic, technology has been embraced to enable people continue work and while some users are using it constructively. Many are manipulating the internet especially social media to practice dubious acts online which are harming many young women and girls.
One of the survey participants said'
"This guy frequently called knowing about my whereabouts and threatened to cause me harm if I didn't accept to date him. He had no sort of fear that even when my mum and siblings tried to confront him, he threatened them. For this very reason I was forced to report this to the police who helped deal with him accordingly. It was a nightmare."

Recently they have been an ongoing hashtag trend on Twitter platform #stopsocialmediabullyinguganda with 5,357 tweets as of June 25. This came as a result of Sheilah Gashumba talking about little pay for journalists or TV personality. She has experienced a lot of backlash on Twitter.

Some of the quotes from the #stopsocialmediabullyinguganda hashtag include:
"So, after knowing that we have evidence against them!! He is trying to threaten me!!! I have evidence against your chief Editor EMMA, Solomon Mulei (the writer who wrote
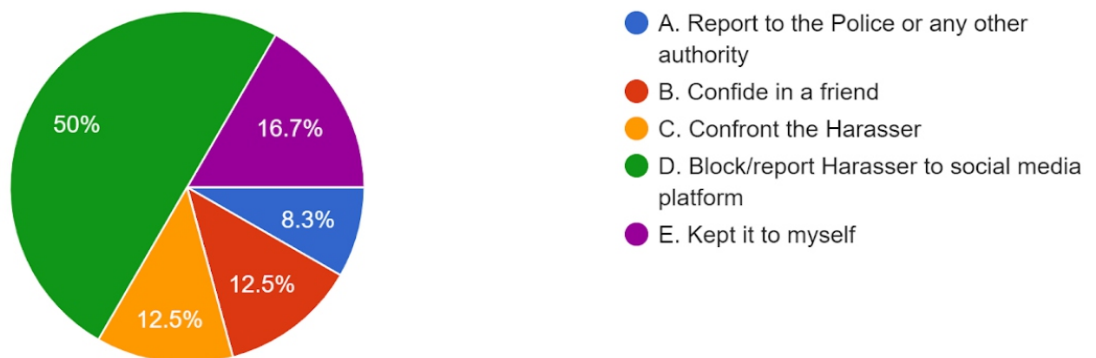
the story and whose number appears here) and Tina Fierce of Sqoop and Sqoop #stopsocialmediabullyinguganda,"—Sheilah C Gashumba (@SheilahGashumba) on June 19.[37]

Douglas Lwanga (@DouglasLwangaUg) wrote on his twitter page --"If you have never been bullied online, I'll say ur very lucky. Sadly, pple don't know what kind of effect this can have on the victims. Many public figures have gone into depression coz of this. #stopsocialmediabullyinguganda #NBSKatchup #NBSSNL."[38]

Many Ugandans including law enforcers are not aware of technology assisted Violence or do not consider it a form of gender-based violence. How it manifests, measures to be taken to address this act and awareness to reporting cases to duty bearers are very limited. According to the survey, the majority of victims have blocked or reported harassers for the case of social media platforms like Facebook and twitter

10. How did you manage this?
24 responses

- A. Report to the Police or any other authority
- B. Confide in a friend
- C. Confront the Harasser
- D. Block/report Harasser to social media platform
- E. Kept it to myself

.
While some women have confronted the harasser, may have continued to keep this to themselves which is a great risk as it may lead to self censorship, physiological or emotional effects and women getting offline completely. This poses risks to women contributing to development as well as achieving the United Nations SDG 5 on Gender Equality.

When asked whether COVID-19 pandemic has increased the occurrence of Tech Assisted violence, some of the participants agreed and alluded this to the fact that many people are not working and therefore spending more time online.

"Yes of course. Reason being many people right now are very idle so they are on the internet 24/7.and once they come across such videos and posts they want to share immediately and some also have created fake accounts only for that purpose," a respondent said.

"I wouldn't say it's Lockdown, but rather the pandemic has somehow increased on Cyber threats. As people are taking advantage of the situation to release malicious softwares," Said another respondent.

Recommendations from the survey

1. Create public awareness on Tech Assisted Violence Against Women and Girls
"The Government needs to Empower more Girls to be assertive and confront these men or sexual assaults who threaten /promise to marry these girls if they accept such behaviour which in the long run turns out to be a hoax. Assertion should not be mislead as Feminism assertiveness is the ability to say NO. Older Girls who are desperate to settle down entertain so much bullshit from sexual predators...but once empowered this becomes a no go area, hence Respect...men respect women who say No and mean that," a respondent suggested.

2. Come up with a specific law to tackle Tech Assisted Violence Against Women and Girls
"Gov't can put up a strong law against technology assisted violence against women and girls in Uganda and implement it so that the culprits are actually dealt with; not simply putting up a law for formality with no action," Said a respondent.

3. Provision of psychosocial support to victims
"The government needs to support the Psychology field as these are trained officials that can help different persons (be male or female) pull through any sort of violence. The more people are aware that counselling services are readily available for them, the more chances that people will speak up about the violence without the fear of any sort of label or stereotype being attached unto them. Hence, they need to teach Ugandans that it is ok to seek for counselling from certified therapists and need not to fear being judged," said a respondent.

4. Building capacity of key stakeholders especially Uganda Police Force, Judiciary and Directorate of public prosecution.
"The police should be encouraged to help victims not criticise them when they come for help," a respondent said

5. Provision of facilitation and empowerment of civil society organizations especially Women Rights Organizations and community leaders to develop action plans, policy briefs and commitments to prevent and respond to Tech Assisted Violence Against Women and Girls.

General Recommendations to tackling VAW during COVID-19

The government should ensure and develop legal frameworks that are gender responsive to protect women's rights. There is need to monitor the proper implementation of the existing laws in Uganda.

Women should be empowered economically to prevent dependence on their husbands. More capacity building on financial management, entrepreneurship and digital skills is required.

Government should increase budget allocation to Ministry of ICT and Ministry of Gender to facilitate initiatives that can help to set up virtual gender-based violence services to prepare Uganda for future pandemics or outbreaks.

Government and all stakeholders need to Invest in VAWG prevention by addressing the social and cultural norms that perpetuate VAWG and hold perpetrators accountable through enforcement of ACTS against GBV like the Domestic Violence Act, pass the sexual offenses Bill and proper use of the computer misuse act among others.

The government, civil society organizations, development partners and all stakeholders, need to increase male involvement in the fight against Violence Against women by enriching positive masculinity among men and boys.

Government of Uganda has an obligation to the Women and Girls in this country as stated in the 1995 Constitution of Uganda. An obligation to exercise due diligence, to prevent, investigate and, in accordance with national legislation, punish acts of violence against women, whether those acts are perpetrated by the State or by private persons.

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