

Act, End Violence Against Women

[New Vision](#) (Kampala)

OPINION

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Kampala

(Adapted from a speech to the ISIS-WICCE Gender and Development Forum) Taken from allAfrica.com.

One in three. Of the three young girls sitting in a classroom, learning to read and write, one will suffer violence directed at her simply because she is female. Of the three women sitting in a market, one will be attacked - most likely by her intimate partner and hurt so severely that she may no longer be able to provide for her family.

This is not an African phenomenon. Globally, one in three women will be raped, beaten, coerced into sex or otherwise abused in her lifetime. Their lives will be filled with pain and terror from which some never recover.

Uganda has earned respect for its recognition of broad gender issues and the affirmative action that has increased women's representation in the Parliament and Cabinet. But how deep does this go? A study of domestic violence in Rakai was startling.

About 70% of men and 90% of women believed beating was justifiable for specific reasons, which varied from suspected infidelity on the woman's part to simply neglecting household chores.

Women's status makes it difficult to resist domestic violence. A recent World Bank study says that bride price payments lead to "the perception among both men and women that men 'own' women. Unequal property rights and women's inability to take their children from their fathers' homes are problems too.

Forced sex leaves women vulnerable to HIV/AIDS. Studies show that men are twice as likely as women to bring HIV infection into a marriage, through extra-marital sexual behaviour.

Women often cannot resist unprotected sex, exposing them to infection. As Dr Brundtland, Director General of WHO has said, "We will not achieve progress against



HIV until women gain control of their sexuality." ABC has been used to great effect in Uganda. However, women need the power to use all the three parts of the ABC message, individually or in combination, as they best suit their own circumstances.

There have been positive developments in Uganda. The Uganda Police Force has worked effectively with some rural communities, setting up special units where women can go for support when they are subjected to domestic violence.

The Mifumi Project, supported by DFID, is making strides on this approach in Tororo district. In Kirewa sub-county, Mifumi is strengthening traditional justice for women through a local community safety forum. Mifumi's work also contributed to an international conference on bride price at Makerere University last year.

The UPDF and Save the Children Fund UK (SCF) have set up child protection units in Gulu, Kitgum and Pader districts. These are counselling centres for orphans and returned abductees.

Over 15,000 children have passed through the units of which 5,000 are girls. Ninety per cent of these girls have been sexually and mentally abused. However, there has been a difference in the attitude of children, who have gone through these units.

Between 40% and 60% of women in Uganda have suffered domestic violence at some stage in their lives.

Education is important. The Rakai study showed that women with secondary school education face significantly lower risks of domestic violence than their uneducated counterparts.

Women whose partners often drink before sex face five times the risk of violence compared to women with non-drinking partners. Those who become sexually active younger than 15 double the risk.

So is legislation. Marital rape does not exist as a legal concept in Uganda. The failure to criminalise forced sex in marriage increases the belief that women must submit to their partner on his terms only.

In Uganda there are no specific laws to protect women from domestic violence, rape (within or outside marriage), harassment or female genital mutilation. In Kenya and Tanzania there is legislation against domestic violence, female genital mutilation, rape, sexual assault and sexual harassment.

However, there is hope. Globally women's right to live free of violence is being recognised. Let's build on action here in Uganda by the Police and the civil society organisations. Let's agree targets that by 2007 could change the prospects for Ugandan women and reduce the pain and fear they will otherwise experience.

Prevention Strategies. Improve women's access to secondary education. By 2007, let's turn into reality the PEAP objective of a 50% increase in female enrolment at secondary school.

Establish men's anti-violence networks where men talk to men to understand women's human rights.

Let's call on the Government and Parliament to legislate, by Women's Day 2007, to offer specific protection to women in the following areas: domestic violence, rape and sexual assault, sexual harassment, female genital mutilation and marital rape.

Kofi Annan says: "Violence against women is perhaps the most shameful human rights violation. It knows no boundaries of geography, culture or wealth. As long as it continues, we cannot claim to be making real progress towards equality, development and

Whatever your view over the banning of the Vagina Monologues is, there was much hypocrisy in that debate. Surely no one can defend inaction over violence against women? We need a public debate, which exceeds the column inches devoted to the play, on gender violence domestic violence, rape, defilement and how to address it. As a husband and a father, I call on all men and women to support this call for action.

The writer is the British High Commissioner

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