

**COVID-19 AND THE RISING LEVELS  
OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN UGANDA**



*Unleashing Potential*



**Policy Brief 005**

*By*

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**COVID-19- A DOMESTIC VIOLENCE TRIGGER IN UGANDA**

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## **Executive Statement**

Domestic violence which may also be referred to as domestic abuse or family violence is a very disastrous habit in families. Globally, domestic violence is a very big challenge among the married partners more so in developing countries Uganda inclusive. It became a very challenging turmoil during the period of Covid-19 lockdown. Global lockdowns have resulted in a horrifying surge in gender-based

violence (GBV). This surge in domestic violence also has a direct impact on women victims as noted by the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ESCR) the pandemic deepened gender inequalities because “the burden of caring for children at home and sick or elderly family members falls disproportionately on women”. The brief presents the emerging evidence from secondary data about Covid-19 pandemic aiming at benefitting all stake holders to the fight against domestic violence and ensure safety of families in long term recovery plans. Some of the recommendations include but not limited to: government allocating sufficient human and financial resources, the government undertaking strong social awareness campaigns on the criminal nature of domestic violence and services available to victims, a need for the state to engage research organizations and think tanks to periodically

develop databases and give updates about the different abuses faced by families, the government through the Ministry of Labor and Gender and Social Development gazetted centers where the victims are collected for counseling services as a way of rehabilitating the victims from the trauma, the Ministry of Gender putting in place convenient and prompt-response toll free lines to be used by the victims in case of any violence in homes. Initiation of a fully domestic violence legal section to permit easy access to justice, provision of economic support to the victims to promote their economic independence and other policy recommendations as stipulated in this brief.

## **Introduction and Background**

Countries across the globe have made various efforts to suppress transmission of COVID-19 and to mitigate its socio-economic impacts. This

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unprecedented crisis unfolds in the context of many pre-existing challenges, one of which is the domestic violence rooted from gendered dimensions of access to basic necessities in a world rife with gender inequality. These challenges are now exacerbated by the pandemic and have a disproportionate impact on women's and children's

enjoyment of human rights including economic, social and cultural rights. Lockdowns have been one of the globally supported measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and mitigate its impact on public health. What this means for many women and girls, however, is that they are trapped at home with abusive spouses, partners and family members with limited access to support services, if any.

During times of crisis, families normally face increased risk of exposure to domestic violence (Stark, L and Landis D, 2016). Although violence is known to be pervasive in all settings, emergencies can disrupt existing protective structures and create multiple circumstances that can lead to various forms of violence, abuses and exploitation in homes. In spite of the global awareness of the need to address domestic violence in crisis affected settings, it's prevalence seems difficult to

determine in light of large numbers of cases that go unreported as well as the limited resources often in places for gathering this type of evidence in emergency context.

Globally, the victims of domestic violence are overwhelmingly women and they tend to experience more severe forms of violence. Domestic violence is among the most underreported crimes worldwide for both men and women (NIJ,2009). Due to social stigmas regarding male victimization, men who are victims of domestic violence face an increased likelihood of being overlooked by healthcare providers, social workers and leaders.

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environment (UNICEF, 2015). Today, the forced isolation of families in their

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homes due to the Covid-19 pandemic has created a dangerous situation and triggered domestic conflicts and episodes of abuse within the family which risk going unpunished, given the increased opportunities for an abuser with his captive cohabitants and reduced contact outside the home. Uganda as a nation has been hit by increased numbers of domestic violence the primary victims being women and children. However, some districts were affected badly compared to others for example Wakiso had the highest number of child abuse (Ministry of Gender,2020). It indicated that out of 1967 cases reported between January and April 2020, 934 were in Wakiso followed by Kampala with 578 cases. While Wakiso makes a record in child abuse as a section of domestic violence, Kitgum and Kasese recorded the highest number of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) (UBOS 2020). UBOS reported Kitgum with 60% of

IPV followed by Kasese with 58%.

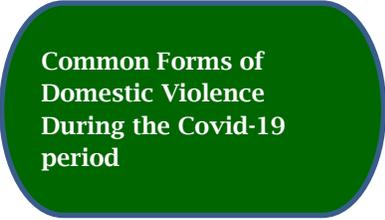
The Covid-19 pandemic has been the fastest moving global public health crisis in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century causing significant mortality and morbidity and giving rise to health and social economic challenges to families which are the primary triggers of domestic violence (UNFPA, 2020).

Governments have relentlessly adopted almost universally similar measures to limit the spread of the virus, while health and social systems are struggling to cope with rising caseloads, supply chain bottlenecks, movements restrictions and economic setbacks

The findings from a study conducted by UN in 49 countries Uganda inclusive in 5 regions, there is an increase of vulnerability and risk factors of violence for women and girls during the Covid-19 pandemic (UN Women, 2020). However, the pandemic has made it hard for

them to seek help yet government and non-government organizations have limited resources and capacity to meet the needs of all survivors.

By the end of June 2020, Uganda had registered over 21,260 cases of child neglect, sexual and physical abuse (Ejang, 2020). Due to the isolation regulations being enforced, women are forced to stay in homes with abusive partners and are at risk of being severely harmed or even murdered though even men have been brutalized by women during the Covid recess.



**Common Forms of Domestic Violence During the Covid-19 period**

While most reports seem to indicate physical assaults towards both men and women, a few cases of men being abused have been reported. Lockdown measures have severely limited both men and women from

continuing their work and earning their living though the impact has skewed to men greatly. For women experiencing domestic violence, increased inability to maintain a level of financial independence exposes them to extreme abuses including physical, emotional and economic. The Covid-19 lockdown has subjected men, women and children to various forms of domestic violence that the policy intends to address (AFHR, 2013). These include;

**Physical abuse.** This has been tremendously reported by almost all media platforms during the Covid-19 lockdown. It involves the use of force against the victim, causing injury (a punch or a kick, stabbing, shooting, choking, slapping, forced use of drugs, etc.). Almost every day a case could be reported of a man being battered by the wife or the reverse; or even children beating their parents.

**Emotional abuse.** Since the lock down, most families have

suffered destruction of their self-worth especially among men the primary bread winners in homes. This has led to persistent insults, humiliation and criticism. Emotional abuse can be a difficult form of violence to notice since it is common in unhealthy relationships but the general public cannot easily identify victims unless they speak out.

**Sexual abuse.** This includes not only sexual assaults and rape, but also harassment such as unwelcome touches and other demeaning behaviors. Many victims don't realize how broadly sexual abuse is interpreted. For example, if you have ever been coerced into not using contraception (the pill, a condom, an Intra Uterine Device, etc.) or having an abortion a habit that has been so common during the lock down, then you may have actually been sexually abused. This form of abuse is known as reproductive coercion.

**Financial abuse.** That is denial of access to finance. It may take many forms such as a husband preventing his wife from obtaining education or a job outside the home. Financial abuse is extremely common, particularly when families have pooled their money into joint accounts (with the husband being the principal signatory) and where there's little or no family support system to help. Many families in the working class have been victims of this. It is another form of control, even though usually less obvious than physical or sexual abuse and widely manifested itself during the Covid-19 lockdown period. Often, the victim is completely dependent on their partner for money. With no access to money except through the abusive partner, this has been a very big outcry by a number of women during the lock down period. Women as victims are always completely at the abusive partner's mercy. The abusive partner may withhold money

for food, clothing, and other basic needs. If children are involved, this can overlap with neglect.

### What has worsened domestic Violence during Covid-19 recess?

Due to the physical distancing and movement restrictions that have been put in place across the world to curb the pandemic, women and children have faced increased risks of experiencing violence at the hands of other family members. In most emergency affected settings the majority of cases of domestic violence are perpetrated by men. The risks of experiencing household violence during times of crisis are often engineered by factors such as emotional stress, economic stress and shifting roles and responsibilities among family members (Rubenstein et al, 2017) which have been on the rise during the Covid-19 period.

The widespread job loss, economic strain, disruption of normal routines and on-going stress associated with actual or potential illness that have resulted in affected regions across the world combined with movement restrictions during the lockdown, homes within the context of Covid-19 have become potential pressure cookers of domestic violence as the drive of violence increase.

### Key Policy Recommendations



Domestic violence during the Covid-19 period and other unprecedented pandemics can be curbed down by embracing the following recommendations;

- The government should allocate sufficient human and financial resources necessary to put in place a national action plan to combat

domestic violence in the context of Covid-19 and post Covid-19 and in case of any other pandemics. Thus, domestic violence should be given maximum attention with a full legal section to fight it.

- A need to increase efforts to raise massive social awareness of the criminal nature of domestic violence and services available to victims. This should be done in form of seminars, workshops and massive sensitization over both traditional and social media platforms such as radios, televisions, facebook, YouTube and other media platforms. Similarly, the state could go ahead to provide physical and mental health care services,

housing services including shelters to give relief to the victims.

- A need to engage research organizations and think tanks to collect data and give updates about the different abuses faced by families. Research firms and think tanks will ably and effectively investigate all cases of domestic violence and strictly try the perpetrators in courts of law.
- The government through the Ministry of Gender and Labor should gazette centres where the victims converge for counseling services as a way of rehabilitating them from the trauma.
- The Ministry of Gender needs to put in place toll free lines to be used by the

victims in case of any violence in homes and must make sure that these lines are available all the time.

- A body of free pleaders should be in place to handle cases of victims of domestic violence especially those from poor families so as to enable them access justice and fair hearing.
- There should be a reserve fund to assist women who are victims of domestic violence to start up their own small businesses for self-reliance.
- There should be specialized health care wings on all government health facilities to cater for pregnant mothers who are abandoned by their husbands.
- Donors and humanitarian agencies should

allocate direct funding to Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) whose services are geared towards curbing domestic violence. A follow up monitoring and evaluation exercise should be done to promote accountability and transparency in domestic violence funds management.

- The Ministry of Ethics and Integrity should roll out compulsory monthly counseling sessions at all places of worship. These should be funded by the government in a bid to support religious

leaders to address domestic violence.

- All local leaders especially at village level and probation officers should be trained in guidance and counselling so as to be able to disseminate the needed guidance to the victims of domestic violence before their situations worsen.

### Conclusion

It should be emphatically put that domestic violence is a reality. However, with the emergence of Covid-19 lockdown with all its attached restrictions, domestic violence was exacerbated and maximum government attention

is needed. Whether it is Covid-19 or any other unprecedented pandemic or emergency, there is need for all stakeholders to be sensitive to all forms of domestic violence. Both men and women are duty bound to avoid it since it can lead to family breakages and continued suffering of innocent family members.

Every family can be free from domestic violence and this is what can promote family growth and ultimately the country's growth.

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