

Silent Struggle: Addressing Systemic Barriers to GBV Justice in Uganda

Executive Summary

Gender-based violence (GBV) in Uganda significantly affects women, with 23% of women experiencing physical violence and 11% enduring sexual violence. Despite this, only 32% of GBV survivors seek help. The 2024 Annual Crime Report indicates that 75% of domestic violence victims are women. Despite legal frameworks like the 2016 National Policy on GBV, barriers persist, including low reporting rates (14% for physical violence, 5% for sexual violence) and inadequate judicial support. This policy brief identifies deep-rooted societal norms, financial constraints, and judicial inefficiencies as major obstacles preventing survivors from pursuing justice. Recommendations include targeted public awareness campaigns, judicial reforms to expedite GBV cases, and enhanced support services through public-private partnerships to improve survivors' access to justice.



Introduction

Gender-based violence (GBV) remains a critical challenge in Uganda, disproportionately affecting women and girls. The 2024 Annual Crime Report revealed that over 75 percent of domestic violence victims were women and girls (Uganda Police Force - UPF, 2024). The country's persistent struggle with GBV threatens its ability to achieve Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) Target 5.2.1, which seeks to eliminate violence against women and girls. GBV takes multiple forms, including physical, sexual, and psychological

abuse, with harmful traditional practices such as female genital mutilation, early or forced marriages, dowry-related violence, and economic abuse (Bukulukiet al., 2023; Busiku, 2024).

Despite some progress, GBV remains widespread, with physical violence still a major concern. The percentage of women who experienced physical violence in the 12 months preceding each Uganda Demographic and Health Survey (UDHS) has been gradually declining from 34 percent in 2006 to 27 percent in 2011 and 22 percent in 2016 (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, UBoS, 2023). However,

the slight rise to 23 percent in 2022 signals a reversal of trends, emphasizing the urgent need for renewed efforts to fight GBV. Sexual violence also remains a significant challenge, with women (11 percent) being more than twice as likely to be affected compared to men (4 percent) (UBoS, 2023). Recent crime statistics further highlight the severity of sexual violence against women. In 2024, all 1,667 recorded rape victims were women, who also accounted for 98 percent of aggravated defilement cases and 97 percent of defilement cases (UPF, 2024). This is because of gender inequalities shaped by societal norms and roles, which create power imbalances, restrict women’s access to resources, and sustain harmful beliefs that increase violence (Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development- MoGLSD, 2017).

Beyond its devastating social and psychological impact, GBV imposes a significant economic burden. A 2011 study estimated that the country spends UGX 77.5 billion annually on GBV-related cases, which was equivalent to 0.35 percent of GDP at the time, with healthcare providers allocating over UGX 18.3 billion and police and local councils spending UGX 32.2 billion (CEDOVIP, 2013).

Although Uganda has established legal frameworks, such as the 2016 National Policy on the Elimination of Gender-Based Violence (revised in 2019) and the 2010 Domestic Violence Act, GBV remains widespread, and survivors continue to face major barriers in accessing justice and support. This brief uses the 2022 UDHS Report

and the 2024 Uganda Police Annual Crime Report to examine the key barriers preventing them from accessing justice.

Findings

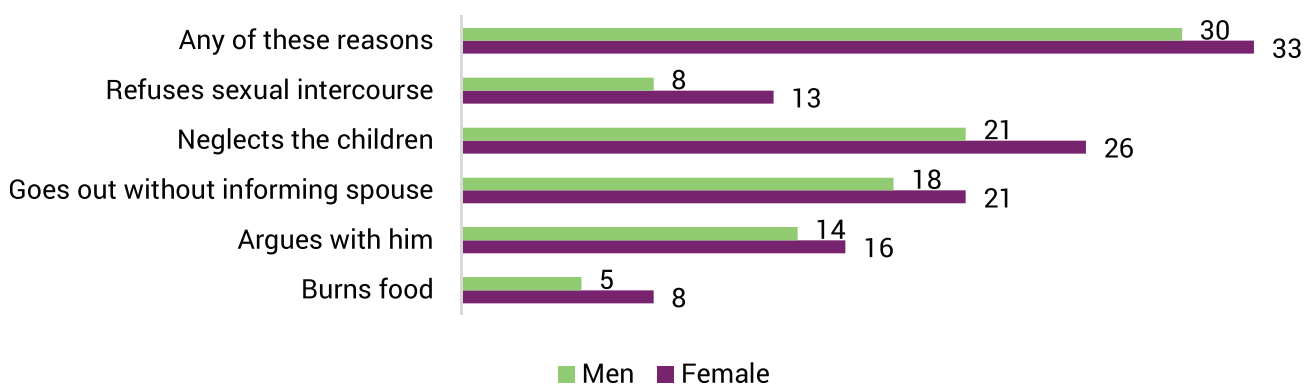
Normalization of GBV through deep-rooted social and cultural norms hinders access to justice.

An estimated 33 percent of women and 30 percent of men perceive and believe that wife-beating is justified under certain conditions, like women neglecting children or going out without informing their spouse (Figure 1). Women themselves largely hold these beliefs, unfortunately. Some cultures accept marital rape; they mistakenly view violence as a sign of love or discipline (Kadengye et al., 2023). Although the Uganda Police Force has integrated GBV prevention into its training, established a gender policy, and created specialized GBV units (Ssegiriinya et al., 2019), societal attitudes remain a major barrier to justice. Women who reject GBV as unjustifiable are more likely to seek formal support, whereas those who accept it under certain conditions are less likely to report incidents and seek justice (Odwe et al., 2018).

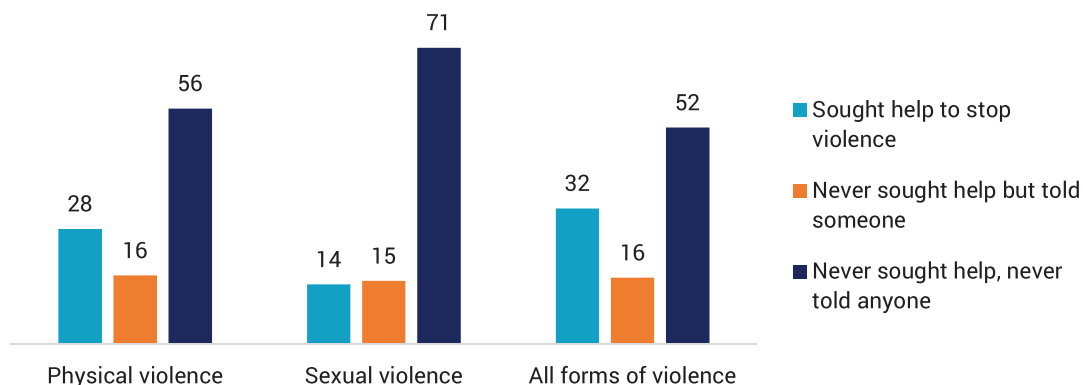
The fear of sharing stories or seeking help, especially among those who have experienced sexual violence.

Only 32 percent of the women survivors sought assistance to stop the violence, while 52 percent neither sought help nor disclosed their experience, which hinders survivors from receiving appropriate justice (Figure 2). The majority (71 percent) of these

Figure 1: Perceptions justifying GBV, 2022 (%)



Source: UBoS (2023)

Figure 2: Women survivors' help-seeking behaviour (%)

Source: UBoS (2023)

silent victims have experienced sexual violence. Survivors often struggle with low self-perception, emotional vulnerability, and fear of judgment, which, along with societal pressure to avoid stigma, discourages them from seeking help (Alcantud et al., 2020). In addition, the VAWG Report (2020) highlights that survivors often fear betrayal and inadequate support, as informal networks like family and friends may breach their trust and confidentiality. This leads to gossip and social isolation, discouraging them from seeking help (UBoS, 2020).

Low formal reporting of GBV cases significantly limits survivors' access to justice. Police intervention remains low, with only 24 percent

of victims reporting violence to law enforcement. Reporting rates are even lower for sexual violence (5 percent) compared to physical violence (14 percent). Legal and social work support is also minimal, where only 1 percent of GBV incidences receive legal assistance, and just 2.5 percent access support from social work organizations. As a result, most survivors rely on their families, with 57 percent turning to them for help (Table 1). However, families often lack the resources or capacity to ensure justice, leaving survivors without adequate protection or justice.

Judicial inefficiencies discourage GBV survivors from reporting, as many cases remain unresolved for years. In 2024, Uganda recorded 14,073 cases

Table 1: Sources of help for women victims (%)

Source	Physical violence	Sexual violence	Both physical and sexual violence
Own family	62	60	57
Husband/partner's family	32	22	34
Husband/partner	3	0	1
Boyfriend	0	0	0
Friend	9	20	14
Neighbour	8	7	8
Religious leader	3	3	3
Doctor/medical personnel	3	4	4
Police	14	5	24
Lawyer	0	0	1
Social work organization	2	0	3
Other	14	11	14

Source: UBoS (2023)

of domestic violence, a slight decrease from 14,681 in 2023. However, only 11 percent of these cases proceeded to court, reflecting significant legal barriers. Courts convicted defendants in only 35 percent of the cases that reached them; they dismissed 9 percent, and over 56 percent remained pending (UPF, 2024). These delays are partly due to a shortage of judicial officers overwhelming the judicial system (Judiciary, 2024) and limiting GBV survivors' access to justice. Moreover, the extended trial process forces survivors to relive their trauma repeatedly when their cases are finally heard, thus further discouraging them from pursuing justice (Handy, 2024). Furthermore, additional barriers to justice include the long distances survivors must travel to access courts, excessive waiting times at court registries, allegations of corruption among some Judiciary staff, a shortage of prosecutors in many courts, and the high costs of legal representation (Judiciary, 2024).

Financial constraints impact survivors' ability to seek justice. Unemployed survivors (30 percent) are less likely to seek help due to financial limitations compared to employed survivors (34 percent) who have more resources to pursue justice (Figure 2). Survivors often face difficulties in supporting themselves during legal proceedings, such as access to transportation and the high cost of legal representation, making

it hard for them to access justice (IDLO and Global Women's Institute, 2022).

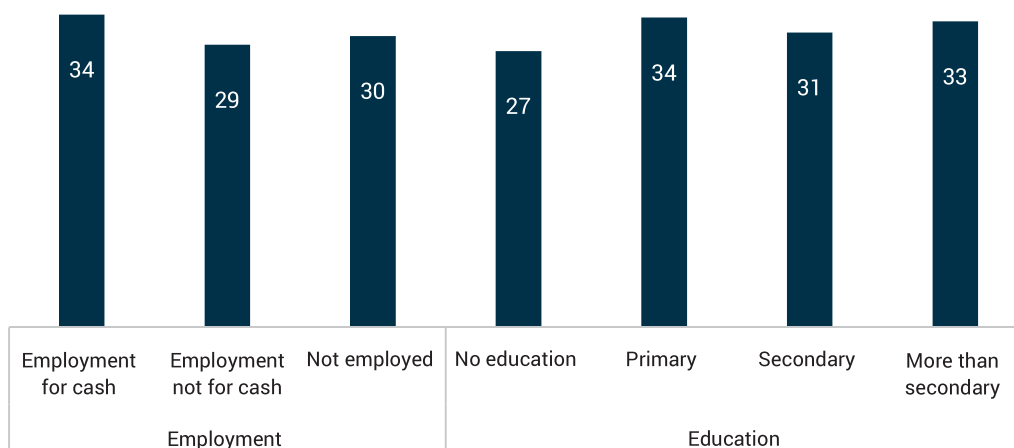
Women with no education are less likely to seek justice. Women with higher levels of education are more aware of their rights and the legal and support services available to them. This explains why only 27 percent of women with no formal education seek help, compared to 33 percent of those with education beyond secondary school (Figure 3). Education promotes awareness, autonomy, and economic empowerment, encouraging women to seek help for GBV (Odwe et al., 2018). However, some studies suggest that a husband's education level plays a more significant role in influencing help-seeking behavior. More educated husbands may have greater dominance or use advanced communication skills for conflict resolution, potentially reducing the likelihood of women seeking external support (Handebo et al., 2021).

Recommendations

Despite the widespread prevalence of GBV, many survivors do not seek help due to social, economic, and legal barriers. To enhance survivors' access to justice and support, the following measures should be prioritized:

- a) The Ministry of Gender, Labour, and Social Development (MoGLSD) and Civil Society

Figure 3: Women's help-seeking behaviour by employment and education



Source: UBoS (2023)

Organizations (CSOs) should implement targeted awareness campaigns through community, religious, and cultural leaders to challenge harmful social norms, reduce victim-blaming, and combat GBV stigma. Educators should focus on informing women with lower education levels about their rights and available support services.

- b) The Judiciary should enhance the efficiency of family and criminal court divisions to minimize delays and ensure timely prosecution of GBV cases. Expanding specialized GBV court programs¹ is important for fast-tracking GBV cases and to address survivors' unique legal challenges and improve conviction rates. There is also need to increase the deployment of judicial officers and prosecutors in underserved areas.
- c) There is an urgent need to establish and enhance GBV support services through public-private partnerships, particularly for women with limited financial resources. Expanding pro bono legal aid and shelter spaces, especially in rural areas, will improve survivors' access to justice.

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¹ In 2020, the Uganda Judiciary, in collaboration with the Justice Law and Order Sector and with support from United Nations Population Fund, conducted SGBV court sessions outside traditional court settings in 14 districts. Of the 711 cases listed, 629 were successfully resolved, while 82 were rescheduled (GBV and harmful practices, Uganda – 2021 by the United Nations Population Fund).

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