

Increased Funding for Local Structures Needed to Address Sexual Abuse in Uganda

Introduction

Violence in childhood has serious consequences on children's mental and physical health and has long been declared a world health emergency.ⁱ As far back as a decade ago, violence against children was already costing world economies USD \$7 trillion annually.ⁱⁱ The Government of Uganda years ago, also declared Sexual Violence Against Children (SVAC) a public health problem and has a National Plan of Action that runs up to 2031.ⁱⁱⁱ

Over the last five years, some of the Joining Forces members, for instance Child Fund,^{iv} Save the Children^v and World Vision,^{vi} have supported studies analysing the levels and types of national funding allocated to child protection.^{vii}

This paper reflects on some of these coalition studies and other evidence and argues that severe chronic underfunding towards implementation of government-planned interventions against sexual abuse of millions of children, has serious consequences. It undermines both prevention and response efforts and the realisation of ambitious human capital development, security, and government program outcomes — all of which are under the newly launched National Development Plan (NDP) IV as well as the national 10-fold growth strategy objectives.

The Magnitude and Impact of the SVAC Crisis

SVAC Prevalence

The number of children defiled annually in Uganda remains unknown but estimates state that millions are affected. According to the Uganda Police Annual Crime Report 2024, 12,771 defilement cases were registered in 2024. This however is a “drop in the ocean” as the District Health Information Management System (DHMIS) of the Ministry of Health (MOH) registered 381,969 children (10-19 years) that attended their first antenatal care visit at health facilities countrywide the same year.

The DHMIS figure considers the total sum of defilements that resulted in pregnancy and involved a visit to a health facility. In addition to that figure, 24.8% and 71.5% of in-school and out-of-school adolescents respectively, were sexually abused in 2024 (PMA, 2024). It is also important to note that the total of 15 to 19-year-olds in Uganda numbered 5,328,696 in 2024^{viii}. All these figures are an indicator that the total number of children sexually abused annually, runs in the millions.

SVAC impact

The impact of SVAC in the communities is severe. In the health sector, United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) estimated that health costs associated with teenage motherhood alone amounted to \$360 million, equivalent to 43% of the Ministry of Health (MOH) budget that year.^{ix} It should also be noted that teenage pregnancy contributes to 20% of infant deaths and 30% of maternal deaths in Uganda. Records from the

DHMIS also show that teenagers are adversely affected by SVAC. The 2024 statistics indicate that 251,262 adolescents consumed child delivery services, 5,690 received post abortion services and 19.5% were treated for sexually transmitted diseases. 31.8% and 49.6% of in-school and out-of-school adolescents respectively consumed contraception products in 2024 (PMA, 2024).

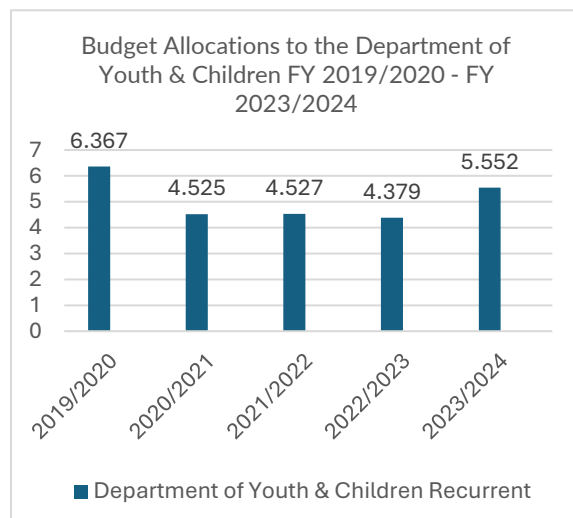
The adolescents' education is also negatively affected. Teenage pregnancy accounts for 22.3% of school dropouts among girls aged between 14 and 18 years, yet only 8% of the girls that drop out of school are given a second chance to re-enroll.^x Studies show that girls who remain in school and attain secondary education may expect to double adult earning compared to if they stay out of school. Secondary education is also associated with higher labour force participation and higher ability to make decisions within households (Wodon et al., 2018).^{xi} However, when communities face SVAC, the productivity of millions of young people is negatively affected.

The State of Funding in Key Offices

Department of Youth and Children Affairs under Ministry of Gender, Labor and Social Development (MGLSD)

A trends analysis^{xii} of Uganda's national budgets over a period of five years reveals very low resource allocations to child protection. The proportional allocation of the budget to child protection as a percentage of the MGLSD budget shows a declining trend, while its share in the national budget has been oscillating at between 0.010% and 0.043%. Budget allocations to the social development sector, over the years, have been less than 1% of the overall government resource envelope.

The Department of Youth and Children Affairs under the MGLSD contributes to prevention and response to SVAC by mobilizing and empowering communities to harness their potential while protecting the rights of vulnerable population groups.



However, funding allocations to the Department of Youth and Children have declined from UGX 6.367 billion in Financial Year 2019/2020 to UGX 5.552 billion in FY 2023/2024. Aside from the low allocation, the department has not received funding towards the development of budget codes since FY 2019/2020, which has constrained fulfillment of its mandate.

Community-Based Services Department under the Ministry of Local Government

The Community-Based Services (CBS) Department is a vital organ within the local government setting in Uganda. It leads the implementation and coordination of SVAC interventions in the community at the local government

level. However, chronic underfunding has hampered its ability to effectively deliver on its mandate.

A recent 2024 Save the Children/Uganda Debt Network study^{xiii} in five districts of Amuru, Nakapiripirit, Omoro, Kotido and Nabilatuk, found that CBS Departments do not have financial allocations for implementation of development activities. It also found that any non-wage initiatives are wholly funded by donors. This implies that there are hardly any government-supported SVAC prevention activities taking place



in the districts aside from payment of staff salaries. Additionally, overall national budget allocations to the sampled districts' CBS departments, for wages, sharply decreased between 2023/24 and 2024/25 financial years as one of the cases in the study highlights below.

The CBS Department budget for Nabilatuk District is projected to decrease by 69% from UGX 1.005 billion in FY 2023/24 to UGX 306.879 million in FY 2024/25. The huge decline is largely attributed to a decrease in external financing by 82% in the same period. Furthermore, in Financial Years 2023/24 and 2024/25, no domestic development funds have been allocated to the district. The CBS development budget for the district only relies on external financing to implement its planned activities since there is no allocation from local revenues.

Similarly, the CBS departments face staffing challenges. According to the last functional review of the Government Social Service Workforce,^{xiv} in 2020, district CBS departments were understaffed with only 49% of district community development officer (DCDO) positions filled. Most of the senior probation officers, (51%), doubled as acting DCDOs, diminishing their functionality as senior probation and social welfare officers (PSWOs) due to the heavy workload.

The probation and social welfare staff also have very little facilitation to undertake any meaningful activities in local communities as another 2020 World Vision study^{xv} done in eight districts of Buikwe, Busia, Hoima, Kyankwanzi, Nakasongola, Rakai, Soroti and Yumbe highlights.

On average, district probation and social welfare offices are allocated UGX 2,000,000 per quarter. Of this, 70% (UGX 1,400,000 per quarter) is deducted and shared with all sub-county community development offices in each of the districts – with the district probation office retaining 30% (average UGX 600,000 per quarter). This is severely inadequate to fulfill the minimum mandate of these offices and often leaves them at the mercy of NGOs and individual citizens facilitating operations.

It should also be noted that the amount of funding for district CBS departments has remained unchanged over the last five financial years at UGX 7.64 billion despite the ever-increasing number of local governments in Uganda.^{xvi} The actions undertaken by civil society and community leaders to elevate sexual violence issues in the local government planning systems have not achieved much due to several reasons, some of which are highlighted in the 2023 Child Fund study^{xvii}.

Whereas child protection issues are identified among the community needs, their inclusion in the higher local governments (HLGs) and lower local governments (LLGs) costed plans is constrained by limited appreciation of the importance of child protection by both political and technical staff on the budget desk, and the small resource envelope. Consequently, the momentum/demand for child protection is not sustained through to the highest decision-makers.

GBV/Child and Family Protection Units (CFPU) of Uganda Police

Police deters defilement by ensuring that every defilement complaint reported to them is investigated, and every perpetrator is punished in accordance with the law. This sends a message to the community that defilement is a serious crime with serious consequences. However, a recent survey^{xviii} in 14 districts found that only 16% of people in the public believed that SVAC victims can get a fair hearing in the justice system. It also found that only 27% of SVAC survivors reported willingness to use services offered by the justice system.

Consequently, the survey found that 72% of SVAC incidences were unreported to the country's justice system.

The Criminal Investigations Directorate (CID) GBV and the Child and Family Protection Unit (CFPU) of the Uganda Police bear the main responsibility of handling child and family-related sexual violence matters in all settings. But trends from recent annual police crime reports indicate very poor prosecution and conviction rates for cases of defilement. This can partially be attributed to the lack of financing for the CFPU for arrests and conducting thorough case investigations in support of prosecution. For instance, in 2023, while 43% of the 12,771 reported defilement cases were taken to court, only 940 (7.4%) cases secured convictions.^{xxix}

In addition to the above, the absence of short-term holding shelters for sexual abuse survivors at most major police stations has resulted in a crisis of stranded SVAC survivors at the stations.^{xxx} GBV and CFP units lack a differentiated budget to support their work and their discretionary funding underestimates the magnitude of the response they must mount against the SVAC crisis.

For the few cases that make it to the Ugandan court system, challenges of delayed justice await. As of January 2024, Uganda's judiciary was dealing with a reported 43,560 cases classified as backlog.^{xxxi} Sexual assault cases constitute a significant percentage of this backlog.

Courts are expected and obliged to dispose of cases in a reasonable amount of time, and to conduct a fair trial in those cases that proceed to hearing. But failure to do so has affected public perception of the judicial system, leading to the belief that it is too slow, unpredictable, and denies SVAC survivors justice. This loss of trust has led many to settle cases out of the court system and other instances of sabotage of cases by perpetrators and law enforcement.^{xxxii}

The special sessions and daily hearings devised to alleviate the dire situation have slightly reduced the backlog, but this strategy requires dedicated and persistent government-led funding to significantly scale up and face the challenge.^{xxxiii} Unfortunately, allocations to the Sexual Offences Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions, experienced a sharp decline in FY 2024/25 from UGX 2.0 billion in FY 2023/24 to UGX 768 million^{xxxiv}. Underfunding for the Probation and Social Welfare officer has also affected the delivery of justice as they are required to transport or move with survivors to court as well as conduct social inquiries that can aid court in making judgements.

The Call to Action

The 2026-2027 National Budget call circular para 98 (ii) requires all Accounting Officers to prepare budgets that mainstream gender and equity considerations as guided by the Equal Opportunities Commission Framework. It further states under para 98(ii) that institutions must allocate resources for child focused interventions including education, immunization, nutrition and child protection. Scaled up complementary investments to reduce sexual abuse of children should target specific structures at local level that directly address sexual abuse of millions of Ugandan children. It should be deliberately increased and ring fenced in yearly national budgets. The following may offer the highest returns on investment.

- **Allocation of ring-fenced funds to the Development Budget of the National Department of Children and Youth for the review and implementation of selected priority interventions in the National Strategy to End Child Pregnancy and Marriage:** The Department of Youth & Children under the MGLSD mobilizes and empowers communities and protects the rights of vulnerable population groups. Funding allocations to the Department declined from UGX 6.367 billion in FY 2019/2020 to UGX 5.552 billion in FY 2023/2024.



- **Allocation of ring-fenced funds to the Development and Implementation of Child Sexual Abuse Prevention activities by the Probation and Social Welfare offices under the CBS departments in local governments.** There are hardly any government supported SVAC prevention activities that are taking place in Probation and Social Welfare Offices in districts apart from payment of staff salaries. Recent surveys have found that any non-wage initiatives are almost wholly funded by dwindling donor funding.
- **Allocation of ring-fenced funds to the CID (GBV and Sexual Offences) and the CFP Units of the Uganda Police** to deter defilement by ensuring that every defilement complaint reported to them is fully and professionally investigated and child survivors and their families are enabled to navigate the initial stages of the justice system – where justice is currently most severed.
- **Increased government-led, ring-fenced funding to special court sessions to eliminate all defilement case backlog and prevent the future backlog of the cases in the Judiciary. And exempt defilement cases from the session system.** Defilement cases should be heard as soon as possible, without waiting for scheduled court sessions. This will send a message to the wider Ugandan society that defilement is a serious crime with serious consequences. Recent surveys (IJM, 2024; EPRC, 2025) have found that only 16% of people in the public believed that abused children can get a fair hearing in the justice system. And only 27% of abused children reported willingness to use services offered by the justice system. Consequently, the two surveys found that between 72% to 95% of SVAC incidences go unreported to the country's justice system.
- **Allocate new funding to develop child-friendly interview spaces and short term holding safe spaces for abused children at all Police stations country wide.** The absence of sexual survivors' short-term, resourced holding safe shelters at Police stations has resulted into a crisis of stranded sexual abuse survivors at stations who risk traumatic repeated sexual assaults under the cover of the night. Police lacks differentiated budgets to support such constructions and maintenance as well as safe spaces to confidentially attend to sexual offences.

The Government of Uganda has developed a good policy and legal framework to reduce and eliminate sexual abuse of children. However, its non-wage budget allocations to local structures that support implementation remain negligible to non-existent. The current burden and high cost of SVAC involving millions of young people, will dim hopes of realising human capital development as well as the security and governance program outcomes and overall NDP IV objectives. The government therefore needs to increase investment to local structures to substantially reduce SVAC impacts, which will in turn free up resources for other national development and economic growth priorities.



End Notes

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