

# SIXTEEN DAYS OF ACTIVISM

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By Owen Wagabaza

## Gender-based violence remains threat to women

For several years, Jessica Namale was battered by her husband Yusuf Ngobi whenever the couple had a disagreement. According to the neighbours, Ngobi would beat his wife whenever he came back home after a drinking spree. Because of their three children, Namale opted to fight for her marriage and thus withstood the beatings, hoping that one day, her husband would change. Unfortunately, such a day never came. Instead, the usual beatings turned tragic when the neighbours woke up on January 2, this year to find Namale lying in a pool of blood. She had been battered to death by the man she called her husband.

Millions of women in Uganda today are living the exact life of Namale, enduring violence on a daily basis, which sometimes results in death.

According to the Uganda Demographic Health Survey of 2011, 56% of women in Uganda have experienced physical violence at some point since the age of 15. Twenty eight percent of women aged 15 and 49 have experienced sexual violence and 16% have experienced violence during pregnancy.

While attending a function to launch a gender-based violence shelter in Kamuli district in 2014, the Inspector General of Police, Gen. Kale Kayihura, declared that after terrorism, gender-based violence (GBV) is the next biggest threat to the wellbeing of Ugandans.

The 2011 Uganda Police Force report put gender-based violence statistics at 58% in northern Uganda, 60% in Karamoja, 56% in western Uganda, 24% in central Uganda, 54% of internally displaced people, 41% in Kampala and 74% in eastern Uganda.

Police records also show high numbers of defilement and rape, which make girls vulnerable to physical and sexual violence as well as sexually transmitted infections, including HIV. Harmful cultural practices like early marriage and female genital mutilation are also serious GBV issues in Uganda.

### Causes

According to Rita Achiro, the executive director of Uganda Women's Network, oftentimes, women and girls are at the receiving end and the violence is rooted in the unequal power relations between men and women. She cites the key drivers of this violent streak as culture, subordination of women, as well as the economic and political factors that increase the vulnerability



Gender-based violence affects women both physically and psychologically

of women and girls.

According to a survey conducted by the Inter-religious Council, the major causes of GBV include increased cases of drug abuse and poverty that lead to economic violence which ends up in homes

### We need to fight GBV

David Kabonero, a human rights lawyer and activist, says violence against women and girls is a violation of their fundamental human rights, an affront to human dignity. He says it is a serious threat to women's health and well-being, which impedes their civic engagement and role in development. Kabonero says gender-based violence generates instability, making peace harder to achieve.

Gender-based violence is also costly. According to the recent study by the Economic Commission for Africa and UN Women, domestic violence imposes significant costs to the victims, communities and to countries in Africa.

"This includes cost to survivors for medical fees, transport and fees for legal

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### About the 16 Days of Activism

The 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence begin on the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women on November 25 and end on International Human Rights Day on December 10.

The International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women was designated in 1999 by the United Nations General Assembly. The date was chosen to commemorate the lives of the Mirabal sisters from the Dominican Republic who were violently assassinated in 1960. The day pays tribute to them, as well as urging global recognition of gender-based violence. Each year on this day, governments, international organisations and NGOs are invited to organise activities designed to raise public awareness of the problem.

The theme of the 2016 16 Days Campaign is "From Peace in the Home to Peace in the World: Make Education Safe for All". The theme recognises that structural discrimination and inequality is perpetuated in a cycle of violence that does not end, even when girls and young women are in the act of gaining an education.

and other support services provided by the Government and non-government organisations. There are also costs related to high absentee rates of girls and women in education, absence in the labour market and productive economic activities as a result of gender-based violence," the report reads.

The study estimates that violence against women in Uganda costs victims (out of pocket expenses) a whopping sh23b annually.

James Mugisha, the commissioner in the health ministry, says GBV remains a public health problem and 59% of GBV is physical violence and has had physical consequences on the victims. "Some have lost arms and legs; others are burnt with acid and this also causes psychological trauma while the economy loses manpower," Mugisha says.

### Government efforts

Although the Government has tried to respond to the high incidences of GBV by integrating prevention and response strategies in the National Development Plan, the results are still minimal.

Achiro says Uganda has some of the harshest laws against gender-based violence, but that putting them into practice remains a challenge.

"We have a number of interesting legal and policy reforms against gender violence and discrimination such as the Domestic Violence Act, 2010, the Anti-Trafficking

in Persons Act as well as the recent amendments to Police form 3 and 3A, but many of these remain on paper," she says.

"But even with such interventions, there are several women and girls who continue to suffer in silence because they cannot afford court fees and transport to courts to testify, while others have lost hope in the justice system because of the lengthy court procedures," Achiro says.

However, Christine Alalo, a commissioner in the Uganda Police Force, says the Police is doing all in its powers to fight gender-based violence.

"In 2008, the Children and Women's Protection Unit was elevated to full department with structures up to district level. The department handles all cases related to gender-based violence. Despite having little resources, we are trying our best to handle GBV cases. In a day, a police station addresses about 10 cases of GBV," Alalo says.

As Uganda joins other countries to celebrate the 16 Days of Activism that start on November today, Achiro says we should work more towards addressing a complex problem rooted in inequality and harmful traditional practices.

"More needs to be done beyond the adoption of legal and policy frameworks. Also, the Government needs to allocate more funds and step up efforts to protect women and girls against the evils of Gender-Based Violence," Achiro says.