

Covid reveals flaws in the protection of girls in Uganda

Recommendations on how to tackle
sexual and gender-based violence



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What's new?

Through 2020 and 2021, the Covid-19 pandemic led to prolonged school closures in Uganda. These closures exacerbated sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) against girls. Lockdowns isolated some girls in close proximity to perpetrators within homes and neighbourhoods, and left them unable to access help.

Moreover, financial burdens have increased the pressure on girls to work in locations where the risk of SGBV is high. Cultural and social norms play their part, including through child marriage. Victim blaming and stigmatisation are ubiquitous, and perpetrators rarely face justice.

Why is it important?

The increase in SGBV exposes the weaknesses of protective laws and institutions in Uganda. Apart from the suffering and the health risks, both mental and physical, this type of violence has long-term negative consequences for the victims and is socially detrimental. SGBV undermines the ability of girls to return to school and complete their education. Lack of education reduces the capacity of women to earn a living, to act as community leaders, or to participate in political life, all of which have a negative impact on society and the economy.

What should be done and by whom?

In the short term, while the pandemic and its economic aftermath continue, safeguarding is key. We recommend that policymakers enhance reporting and follow-up services, and engage with community structures when implementing safeguarding programmes. In the longer term, girls need to be both protected and to be empowered to take control of their own sexual and reproductive health. For community leaders and for policymakers in the government, and for donor organisations and businesses, we recommend a suite of measures to safeguard girls and to start addressing social norms and cultural values that perpetuate SGBV, ranging from smartphone apps to the potential of corporate social responsibility.

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Cover photo:

Kampala, 16 August 2021. Open air remote learning by radio during pandemic school closure.

Photo: Nicholas Kajoba / Xinhua.

Covid reveals flaws in the protection of girls in Uganda

Recommendations on how to tackle sexual and gender-based violence

Rates of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) are high in Uganda, by both global and African comparison, and the Covid-19 pandemic has made things even worse. Breaking the cultural, religious and social norms that perpetuate and trivialise SGBV is key to improve the situation. However, there are also other measures, such as communication channels for reporting and following up on SGBV, safe shelters and support for girls threatened by perpetrators, and improved sexual education in schools.



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The World Health Organization (WHO) has stated that disruption to social and protective networks – including disruption to schooling – can exacerbate the risk of violence against girls and young women. In 2020 and 2021, prolonged school closures in response to the Covid-19 pandemic compromised the safety of girls by exposing them to SGBV. This is especially true for the many girls who live under threat of violence in their homes and neighbourhoods. Although the pandemic has interrupted reporting systems, thus contributing to data limitations, there are many indications that SGBV against girls has risen significantly. As UN Women Executive Director Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka puts it: “We know that the multiple impacts of COVID-19 have triggered a ‘shadow pandemic’ of increased reported violence of all kinds against women and girls.”

For Ugandan girls, SGBV was a serious problem even before the pandemic. In 2018, the Violence Against Children survey reported that one girl in four and one boy in ten had experienced sexual violence in the preceding year. SGBV takes many forms, including sexual grooming, exploitation, assault and abuse, underage sex and subsequent pregnancies, female genital mutilation and child marriage. Perpetrators can be neighbours, friends, relatives or strangers. SGBV also contributes to rising HIV and sexually transmitted infections, and to

other physical and emotional abuse. School closures have exposed the lack of protection afforded to girls in their home environments and neighbourhoods.

Addressing SGBV highlights a dual need for safeguarding and empowerment. With appropriate protection, and where leaders are willing to take action against perpetrators of SGBV, families, communities, government and business actors could work together to build a secure environment for girls. With appropriate teaching and learning on sexual and reproductive health, coupled with effective safeguards, girls can grow up, gain an education and develop to their full potential. All this contributes to a prosperous and thriving society.

Lack of safeguarding strategies

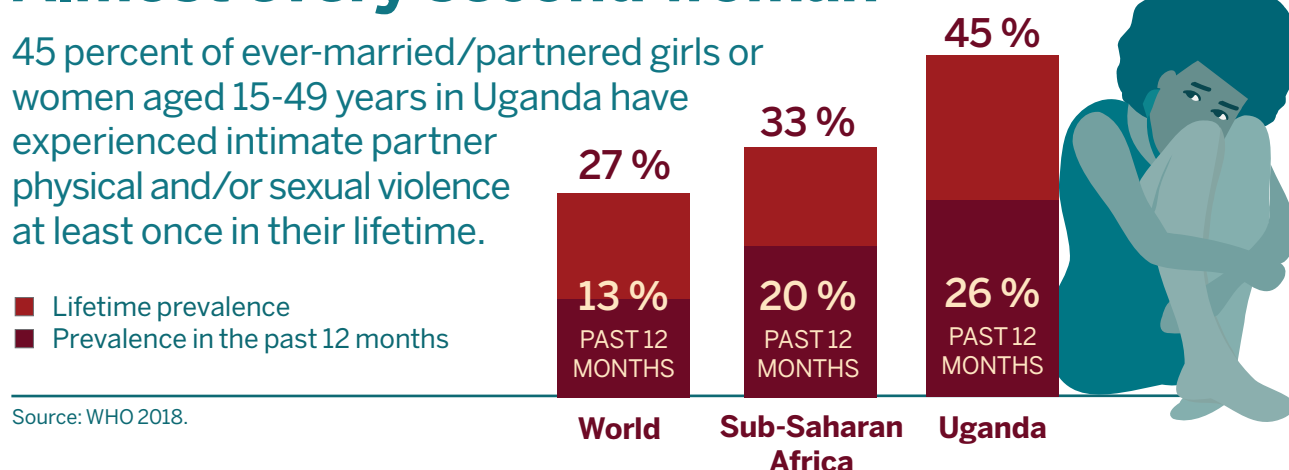
The Covid-19 pandemic has caused the largest global educational closures in history, affecting 1.5 billion students worldwide. In 2020, UNESCO estimated that 767 million of these students were girls; and of those, over 11 million were at risk of not returning to school. This applies especially to girls living in poverty, with disabilities, in rural isolation, as refugees or displaced persons, or in urban informal settlements.

The negative economic and health impacts of Covid-19 have been acute in Uganda. The measures to contain the virus, and the consequences of those measures for fami-

High prevalence of intimate partner violence: Almost every second woman

45 percent of ever-married/partnered girls or women aged 15-49 years in Uganda have experienced intimate partner physical and/or sexual violence at least once in their lifetime.

- Lifetime prevalence
- Prevalence in the past 12 months



Source: WHO 2018.

lies, have contributed to increased rates of SGBV. Uganda first closed its schools in March 2020, affecting an estimated 10 million learners. To date, in late 2021, some cohorts of learners have returned to their classrooms, but major disruption to education has continued.

With school closures, the safeguarding role played by a girl's enrolment in education and her regular attendance at school has become all too apparent. The rise in SGBV against girls in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic shows how susceptible girls are in their communities and highlights the lack of effective safeguarding strategies.

Lockdown and financial pressure

Lockdowns exposed girls to perpetrators, and typically they had no access to medical care, help or refuge. Sexual violence perpetrated in families and neighbourhoods by men known to the girls is obviously a problem. However, the rising levels of SGBV also reflect the economic pressures on households and wider socio-cultural practices surrounding girls' sexuality, pregnancy and marriage. For instance, when parents continued to work during school closures, the lack of parental supervision placed children at risk and raised the likelihood of contact with perpetrators of SGBV. Parents under financial pressure also resorted to letting girls do petty business in unsafe trading places, exposing them to predation. Girls themselves are not passive; they may instigate transactional sex to obtain money for everyday expenses, including to pay for mobile phone credit and for feminine hygiene products.

Uganda hosts large numbers of refugees. The 2020 Interagency Rapid Gender Analysis – COVID-19, Uganda, found a strong correlation between the closure of schools and an increase in teenage pregnancies and child mar-

riage in refugee communities, leading to school dropout and severe social and health repercussions. Away from refugee communities, in Lowero District, a 2020 study by Parkes et al. – Young people, inequality and violence during the COVID-19 lockdown in Uganda (CoVAC Working Paper). UCL Institute of Education: London, UK – highlights how the pandemic amplified existing inequalities and conditions for violence, with impacts varying according to gender, location, mobility and socio-economic background. Some interviewees describe how young women engaged in sex due to hardship, but others felt that reductions in men's income and movement limited the possibilities for transactional sex.

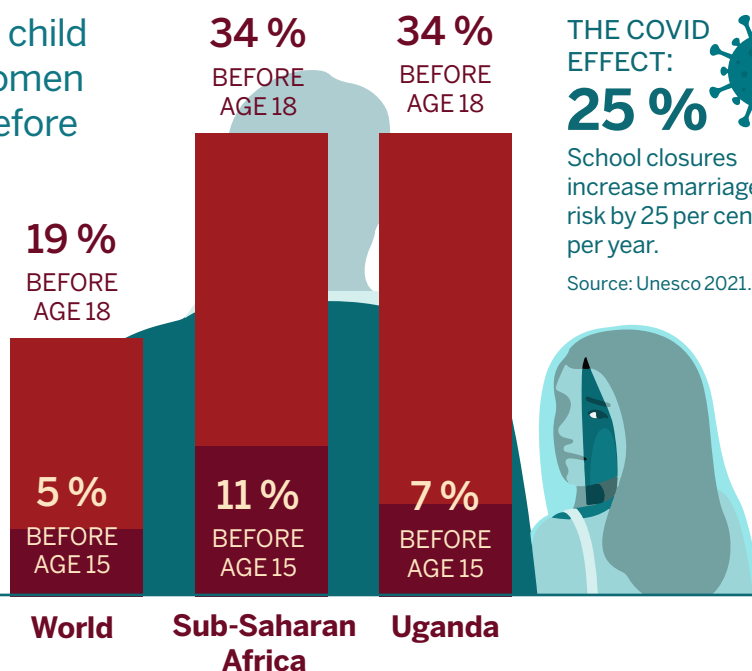
Sexual violence occurs across all socio-economic categories, but rates are generally higher in impoverished households. Findings from the 2020 Impacts of COVID-19 in the HIVOS Child-Labor Project in the sub-counties of Sikuda and Buteba, Busia District, conducted by Environmental Women in Action for Development (EWAD), show that child labour relates to household size and composition, with the most vulnerable children being raised by single mothers or the poorest families. While older boys dominate the harshest forms of labour, including mining, girls are not exempt. Accounts of SGBV due to school closures emerged, including female youth enticed into early marriage and even abandoned as teenage mothers. In local bars, girls below the age of consent (18) are said to be involved in the sex trade; but local people perceive the issue as hard to address because police officers drink in these bars. According to local schoolteacher and mining leader Josephine Aguttu, girls and women remain silent about SGBV to avoid embarrassment and stigmatisation, and perpetrators are rarely brought to account.

More than one in three girls in Uganda gets married before age 18

Uganda is home to five million child brides. More than a third of women aged 20 to 24 were married before age 18. Uganda is one of 193 countries who have agreed to end child marriage by 2030 under the SDGs.

Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in a union before age 15 and between age 15 and 18.

- Between age 15 and 18
- Before age 15



Source: UNICEF 2021, based on Demographic and Health Surveys, Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys and other national surveys, 2014-2020.

Social norms and cultural practices

“Girls are like ground nuts, which are a delicacy in Uganda. Everyone wants to pick and eat them. Parents of girl children must take extra effort to control and discipline them.”

(Male parent, rural Uganda - Ninsiima et al. 2018).

Existing social norms and cultural practices can blind communities and policymakers to the vulnerability of girls. Widespread practices include early onset sex, forced and arranged marriages, female genital mutilation (in eastern and northern Uganda), and the treasuring of a girl’s virginity before marriage linked to male dominance in sexual decisions. Bride wealth, paid in money or livestock, can result in a girl being married off for economic reasons even if she is underage. Indeed, a daughter can be married off quickly if the parents’ suspect she is in a sexual relationship, otherwise pregnancy reduces their bargaining power for higher bride price.

Adults expect girls not only to safeguard their own sexuality, but also to take responsibility for men’s sexu-

al predation. Quotes from a study on adolescent girls in Western Uganda in 2018, capture these issues:

“Sometimes girls dress inappropriately and cause men to rape them. Others cause it to happen because they eat men’s money and accept to meet somewhere not knowing that they may be raped” (girl rural).

“When you get used, spoilt and get pregnant, you stop going to school and start suffering. Your friends start talking about you, you lose respect and you are labelled with ugly names. And, if your parents chase you away you become homeless and may become a housemaid...Nothing happens to the boy. They continue studying, unless they refuse to continue on their own. But getting a girl pregnant does not make them drop out of school” (girl rural).

“It is better to impregnate someone’s daughter than to steal. Moreover, our parents find a boy who impregnates a girl more socially acceptable than a girl who gets pregnant” (boy rural).

These forms of SGBV are rooted in patriarchal social structures that assign roles to men and women in a way that perpetuates male dominance and female subordination, unequal power relations and gender inequalities. Prevalent social norms and cultural practices lead adults to blame girls who are victims of SGBV, instead of taking responsibility for protecting and rehabilitating them. In effect, community tolerance of SGBV makes it difficult to take community-based action to safeguard and empower girls.

Empowering girls through education

For religious and cultural reasons, Ugandan society is socially conservative with respect to sexual knowledge. Poor understanding of issues of sex and reproduction by girls (and boys) can enhance vulnerability and increase exposure to health risks and SGBV. Hence, teaching sexual and reproductive health has the potential to empower young people to make informed decisions about relationships and sexuality, and to navigate a world where SGBV, early and unintended pregnancy, and sexually transmitted infections pose serious threats to health and well-being.

The government has attempted to improve education in schools through national guidelines, such as the Sexuality Education Framework (2018) and the National School Health Policy (2008). However, there is a common misperception that sex education will lead to increased sexual activity. Research disproves this view, even among young adolescents; nevertheless, such teaching is politicised under the guise of religious, cultural and social norms that seek to maintain control over female reproduction and sexuality, with promotion of access to contraception for youth and the unmarried being particularly controversial. The influence of conservative cultural and religious institutions has left the national guidelines unimplemented; it also contributes to the lack of political will to address SGBV.

Weak governance increases risk for SGBV

Uganda’s weak protection of girls during the Covid-19 pandemic exposes its poor international reputation for fulfilling rights and obligations with respect to girls’ well-being. According to the African Report on Child Wellbeing 2020, which incorporates the “Girl-Friendliness Index” that compares government performance with respect

to girls’ rights to protection, provision and participation across Africa, Uganda is ranked as “less friendly” (34 out of 52). This is on the basis of a range of indicators, including nutrition, health, budgetary commitment, birth registration, child marriage, and the legal framework.

These weaknesses may come as a surprise, since Uganda has a legal and policy framework to protect the rights of girls to lead safe lives in homes and communities. However, there are significant barriers that are related to weak implementation of existing laws, policies and guidelines, reinforced by limited political will. The reasons for poor implementation are wide-ranging, and include lack of financial allocations within ministry budgets, constrained health and education services, a dependence on donor support, poor skills within the police and judiciary, and weak institutional capacity in national ministries and local government. These areas, already constrained, came under increased pressure during the pandemic. Lack of political will to address SGBV was also manifest in the government’s failure to provide guidelines for the safety of adolescents (from SGBV) during the lockdowns.

NGOs, UN agencies, donors, and researchers working with the government on SGBV prevention and response have developed actions appropriate to the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. To highlight three examples:

- The Kampala-based Centre for Domestic Violence Prevention has initiated a community-mobilisation approach; *SASA! A Unifying Tool amidst Social Challenges and Covid-19 Threat*.
- *Improving Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health through a Participatory Parent-Child Intervention* is a four-year project in southwestern Uganda.
- *Work: No Child’s Business* is an alliance of NGOs and international cooperation organisations, aiming to end all forms of child labor.

Conclusions

Covid-19 has led to an escalation of SGBV against girls. Gender inequalities and violence are rooted in social norms and cultural practices, as well as the economic realities that families face, with hardship precipitated by the pandemic. This situation exposes failures to protect girls from SGBV. Communities and families must bear responsibility for these failures to safeguard their girl children, and local government and religious leaders, among others, have also failed to provide leadership. The pandemic has revealed profound weaknesses in the enforcement of national laws and local by-laws that should protect children and young women from SGBV. It has also revealed judicial gender gaps and an inadequate and misogynist system

of law enforcement that trivialises and dismisses SGBV crimes, commonly allowing perpetrators of sexual violence to walk away without trial, judgment or penalty.

Recommendations

Short-to-medium-term safeguarding:

- **Seek to build change from within.** National government and development cooperation partners should strengthen existing community structures – local councils; religious and cultural institutions; women, men and youth groups; and village health teams – to sensitise and mobilise for change, building community-level coordination systems to safeguard girls and boys from SGBV. They should aim to link community initiatives to relevant agencies for reporting, responding, monitoring and evaluation.
- **Safe shelters and financial support.** Girls may give in to demands for sex and early marriage because of economic pressures, and they lack a strategy for breaking away from their perpetrators. These girls may be threatened by, yet be economically dependent on, their own family. There is a need for an institutional framework that can provide them with safe shelters and financial support.

For longer-term empowerment:

- **Challenge existing norms and build new ones.** Parents, teachers, schools and community leaders need to develop protective social norms that do not tolerate SGBV, for instance through community-driven advocacy and coordination systems that encompass religious and cultural institutions. Improved parent-child communication is also likely to be a key factor in any success.
- **Promote male role models.** Use male role models to champion changes in norms and to sensitise boys and men to gender equality: for instance, through support for men's organisations that mobilise communities on these issues. The National Male Involvement Strategy for the Prevention and Response to Gender-Based Violence (Ministry of Gender, Labour & Social Development, 2017) can help guide action.
- **Advocacy platforms (digital and non-digital) by girls.** Women's rights organisations and development organisations should, with support from local and national government officers, establish and promote communication channels for girls' voices to be heard. This would

366 %

Between March and September 2020, a period during which schools in Uganda were partly closed due to Covid lockdown, there was a 366 per cent increase in **pregnancies among girls aged 10-14 years**, from 290 to 1,353.

Source: Unicef, August 2021.



empower girls to challenge social norms, and would encourage peer support, the dissemination of reproductive-health information, the exchange of security-related advice, and the reporting of sexual violence. An example is the mobile app SafePal, launched in 2020 by the Ministry of Gender, Labour & Social Development and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA).

- **Awareness-raising and corporate social responsibility.** Policymakers could engage more in creative awareness-raising, for example to promote debates, music and drama competitions, or to mount a campaign to build awareness around the issues of girls' rights and SGBV. For this purpose, they could also make use of the potential of corporate social responsibility, by working with companies, as well as radio and TV stations, to support and fund campaigns against SGBV.
- **Rollout implementation of the Sexuality Education Framework.** For the national government to succeed in rolling out the 2018 Sexuality Education Framework to local communities, it has to involve them through on-going sensitisation programmes to facilitate ownership of the process. A necessary step is to translate its core messages into the main local languages and to communicate these messages.
- **Implement the National School Health Policy.** The National School Health Policy (2008) has been updated to accommodate the need to roll out sexuality education in schools. We add our voice to others on the urgency of approving the National School Health Policy (2018) as an important pre-condition for implementing the 2018 National Sexuality Education Framework. ■



About this policy note

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About the institute

The Nordic Africa Institute conducts independent, policyrelevant research, provides analysis and informs decisionmaking, with the aim of advancing research-based knowledge about contemporary Africa. The institute is jointly financed by the governments of Finland, Iceland and Sweden.

**5 GENDER
EQUALITY**



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