



Children wash clothes in northern Uganda on Aug. 23, 2023. Children often suffer the effects of domestic abuse, and research shows that children who witness domestic violence or are victims of abuse themselves are at serious risk for long-term physical and mental health problems. (RNS/Tonny Onyulo)

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Bupoto, Uganda â?? May 9, 2024

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Residents of this eastern town of Uganda are still in disbelief months after police arrested a 48-year-old pastor accused of hacking his 44-year-old wife to death.

"The pastor killed his pregnant wife because he suspected her of having an extramarital affair with another man in this area," said Irene Mukasa, a resident of Bupoto, about the Jan. 4 slaying. "We are still in shock because no one is safe. Even men serving God at different levels have also become perpetrators of domestic violence."

Mukasa said such crimes in the region and across the country have left the majority of women to live in fear and avoid expressing themselves freely before men and in public. "Such attacks instill fear in women so that they are not able to question anything or defend themselves against any accusations or abuse," said the 38-year-old mother of three.

Regional police spokesperson Rogers Taitika confirmed the slaying, saying the pastor was arrested two months ago and charged with murder. Taitika lamented the increase in cases of domestic violence in the region, noting that his office had recorded over 70 cases of domestic violence and four murder cases from January to June 2023 alone.

"The situation is getting worse, and something needs to be done urgently to save lives and protect our families," Taitika told Religion News Service. "I want to urge people, especially couples, to seek legal redress rather than resorting to violence."

The case of the pastor's wife has prompted religious leaders across the country to launch a campaign to fight gender-based violence, which takes many forms, including domestic violence, child marriages, sexual violence, partner violence, economic violence, and psychological and emotional abuse.

The first-ever stand-alone [National Survey on Violence Against Women and Girls](#) conducted by the Uganda Bureau of Statistics and supported by the U.N.'s Women Count program in 2020 revealed shocking findings, including that almost all Ugandan women and girls (95%) had experienced physical or sexual violence, or both, by partners or nonpartners since the age of 15. The findings also show that at least 43% of girls are married by age 18 and 33% of girls below the age of 15 report having been forced into their first sexual encounter.

Religious leaders have said that lack of awareness or knowledge prevents victims, who are primarily women, from detecting and reporting gender-based violence to the authorities and enables perpetrators, most often men.

In central Uganda, the Anglican Church of Uganda has taken its awareness campaign against domestic violence to schools, homes, markets, villages, towns and other public places to ensure people are educated on how to detect and report any form of domestic violence or GBV to the authorities.

The bishop of Mukono Diocese, Enos Kitto Kagodo, said church representatives are visiting schools to educate teachers on how to identify signs of abuse among children and how to appropriately respond. The bishop noted that children who have witnessed domestic violence are likely to experience mental health issues and have their education disrupted.

"Children suffer emotional and psychological trauma when they see their parents fight, divorce or kill each other as a result of intimate partner violence," said Kagodo, noting that the church is constructing a rehabilitation center that will be used to accommodate children and parents who are facing domestic violence and abuse. "The center will also offer counseling to victims of domestic violence and help them seek justice in an effort to end the vice."

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In northern Uganda, some Pentecostal churches are sending representatives from house to house in some of the remotest locations to talk to men and community leaders about how to respect and love women and children. The church leaders said such conversations were meaningful because "these influential community leaders can pass what they have learned to others," thereby expanding awareness that's so critical to ending domestic violence.

Bishop John Babu of Arua Pentecostal Church said there were high numbers of GBV cases in northern Uganda, and most of the victims were women. He outlined alcoholism, poverty and power imbalances between men and women as contributing factors.

"We are involving men in our campaign to end domestic violence because most of them are the perpetrators," he said, urging men to speak up when they see an

abusive relationship in their communities. "Men should be the solution to this vice by reporting incidents of domestic violence to police and educating others on what a good relationship looks like."

In eastern Uganda, religious leaders are also fighting to end female genital mutilation. This practice, though on the decline, is still considered a rite of passage for girls into womanhood in some regions, often leading to child marriages and girls dropping out of school.

Evangelist Ruben Okumu from Mbale, a town in eastern Uganda, said that apart from child marriage and education, FGM affects girls' and women's health, including risks of getting HIV, infections, birth complications, pain and infertility, and in some worst cases bleeding to death.

"We have realized that a high number of young girls are dropping out of school and getting married after undergoing FGM," said Okumu, adding that FGM is a form of child abuse and should be condemned at all levels. "We are moving to the villages to talk to the people and educate them about the effects of the practice and how they should not allow it in their communities."

Meanwhile, Okumu noted that GBV cannot be tackled in isolation and he urged church leaders to work with everyone to end violence against girls and women, assist survivors and secure equal rights for women and girls.

"We need to work together if we are to end gender-based violence. We need to involve the government, NGOs, parents, community leaders, women and girls," he said, urging well-wishers to empower women and girls and legislators to advocate for stronger laws and policies against GBV. "We dream of a future where women will have a voice and girls will access their full rights, including access to education."