

# **“Women emancipation took away all of our power”: Experiences of domestic violence against men during COVID-19**

Agnes Kyamulabi & Gloria Seruwagi

## **COVID-19 and Domestic Violence**

Several countries around the world have made tremendous efforts to suppress COVID-19 transmission and mitigate its socio-economic impacts. This unprecedented crisis unfolds in the context of many pre-existing challenges, one of which is domestic violence [1]. In May 2020, the United Nations (UN) issued an alert on the alarming rise of rape and domestic violence during the coronavirus lockdown. Proclaiming a “shadow Pandemic”, UN Women cited the following reasons for the alarm:

1. Globally, even before the pandemic began, 1 in 3 women experienced physical or sexual violence, mostly perpetrated by intimate partners.
2. Emerging data shows an increase in calls to domestic violence helplines in many countries since the outbreak of COVID-19.
3. Survivors of violence have limited information and awareness about the available services with limited access to support services.
4. In some countries, resources have been diverted from mitigating violence against women to providing COVID-19 relief

Consequently, violence remains a serious human rights violation. However, less attention has been paid to men and boys as survivors of violence. This has been confirmed and highlighted by the findings of a recent study conducted by the Department of Social Work and Social Administration (SWSA), in the College of Humanities and Social Sciences (CHUSS) of Makerere University.

Using study findings, this issue brief provides further insight and recommendations on violence against men (VAM) in the informal settlements of of Ki-Mombasa,



*A woman beating up a man. Photo Credit: Love Uganda Foundation*

Bwaise and Kabalagala-Kataba located within the Kampala Metropolitan area.

## **The ALERTs Study**

Funded by its Research and Innovations Fund (MakRIF), Makerere University implemented a COVID-19 project titled ***Adherence, Lived Experiences and Resilient Transformation among “slumdweller” (ALERTs) in COVID-19: A study of Ki-Mombasa and Kabalagala-Kataba slums in Kampala.***

The study:

1. assessed pre-post knowledge, attitudes and practices (KAP) in slum communities;
2. explored local perceptions of risk or exposure;
3. determined the feasibility of and compliance to COVID-19 preventive guidelines in slums;
4. identified existing support systems and determined their efficacy. Using a cross-sectional research design and mixed methods with both quantitative and qualitative methods, the study recruited 807 participants



Violence against men. Photo: Dailypost

(n=660 quantitative and n=147 qualitative). Data was collected through facility and community surveys, interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs).

The study sites were Kataba and Ki-Mombasa slums located in Kabalagala-Makindye division and Bwaise-Kawempe divisions of Kampala. Quantitative data was entered in SPSS, cleaned and analysed using relevant descriptive, bivariate, and multivariable statistical methods. All qualitative data was audio recorded, transcribed and analysed thematically guided by study objectives.

This issue brief primarily focuses on the qualitative arm of the study and violence against men (VAM) as one of the key thematic areas emerging from the data.

## Key Findings

### The Poverty-Violence Nexus

The ALERTs study found a close association between inadequate resources which was termed “poverty” and violence. COVID-19 containment measures such as lockdown, restricted movement and closure of schools or public places had closed the “artificial distance” within families (i.e. between parents and children and, wives and husbands). Families were compelled to spend more time together with the closure of schools and businesses. The downside is that the coming of families together provided the space and excuse for many couples to fight. This kind of violence increased because COVID-19 made managing families very expensive which put a lot of pressure on the bread-winner as one participant noted:

*During the lock down domestic violence and family break ups increased since both men and women were home without food and no income sources (KII, Ki-Mombasa)*

### Emotional Violence

Many men reported the emotional violence inflicted on them by their partners. This included being denied conjugal rights and being openly embarrassed before their

children when accused of failure to provide basic needs. Study participants in an FGD with men shared:

*There is violence because of poverty. We men suffer most in this violence like being denied sex... women treat us badly. Women emancipation took away all of our power in the homes (FGD - Men, Kataba)*

Another participant in the same FGD added that:

*Yes, women mistreat us much like my brother here has explained. When you go back home drunk... she thinks you had money and deliberately refused to give it to her while in reality you did not have the money... The way they mistreat us, they deny us our conjugal rights giving excuses that they are hungry. You also wonder “you also don’t eat, the little that is there is what you eat and service [sex] is needed... It is very bad not to have sex because your mind will have been prepared, you can even get sick because they tell us that when the sperms have started their journey, they have to be ejected (FGD – Men, Kataba)*

Whereas men claimed being unable to provide for their families, they returned home drunk and this was a major trigger for violence against them. Wives were asking where they had got the money to drink alcohol. Partly triggered by men’s inability to provide for household needs, most of the women in the two slum communities had become breadwinners in their households through commercial sex work (CSW). CSW continued and even increased in slum communities during the COVID-19 era because it was not severely affected by the restrictions. Some of the women, including those with stable partners, were plying their CSW trade from their homes.

### Role Reversal as a VAM Driver

Study findings show that a significant proportion of men within the two study communities were married to commercial sex workers, who retained the ability to put food on the table. These husbands of CSWs were opposed to their work, especially as it increased during COVID-19 and also took on new modalities such as bringing clients within their homes. This led to fighting on a daily basis. The husbands of CSWs reported being put in a more vulnerable position and suffering untold emotional violence as shown in the excerpts below:

*If I am a sex worker and I meet a young man; he first becomes my customer and I relate with him at that level but later we fall in love and we no longer use condoms and finally he moves in to my lodge. There reaches a time when that young man refuses me to go and work and once he does that we start fighting (IDI - Female CSW, Kabalagala)*

*There have been many cases of violence against men and sometimes the men’s partners who are at the same time sex workers connive with their customers to cause harm against their “husbands”. So we [community leadership] put up a rule to all sex workers, “if you marry someone from a lodge [brothel] you are suspended*

from Kabalagala for 3 months” and this will help to reduce on the many cases of domestic violence and attempted murder (KII – Community Leader Kabalagala)

### VAM Services: collusive duty bearers, incapable systems and harmful norms

The ALERTs study found that men rarely report violence against them by women. This is because of many reasons, not least being because they depend mainly on these women. **“You cannot cut off a hand that feeds you”**<sup>1</sup>; this was one of the statements made in FGDs with men. Male study participants reported that it is difficult for abused men to report violence cases because men believe that they were deprived of their powers in the home by authorities that “empowered” women to work, speak up and report. It therefore becomes difficult reporting to the same authorities – specifically when it comes to reporting on violence perpetrated by women. Leaders and existing systems were reported to be strongly protective of women and did not have the capacity to support male survivors. Therefore, most men have resorted to suffering in silence as a coping mechanism to survive. Additionally, the study findings show that male survivors of violence do not report due to the social constructions of man being strong, as shown below:

*...she beats you and you can't report because if you report to police that your wife beat you and the journalists get that information... if your parents hear or watch that on Agataliiko nfuufu of Bukedde TV [local news programme]; they are likely to disown you because society does not expect a man to be beaten, especially to be beaten by a woman (FGD with Men, Ki-Mombasa)*

### The Evidence on Domestic Violence

While the evidence shows that women and girls bear the brunt of the violence, little attention has been given to proportion of violence against men and boys [2]. This results from social constructions of being a man that have consistently built the perception of men as perpetrators, and not survivors, of violence. The ALERTs study found out that most men lost their ability to provide for their families during the lockdown and women became sole providers in most households through commercial sex work (CSW) which was not affected as much by the pandemic restrictions. The loss of jobs among men in these slum communities exposed them as sole providers for the families and as a result, attracted several forms of violence from their partners due to failure to provide. Another study<sup>2</sup> also revealed that many men were psychologically tortured due to their inability to provide for their families [3]. The study found out that during the induced lockdown, domestic violence increased in the slums of Makerere Kivulu, Kikoni, Katanga and Kisenyi and men were the main victims due to failure to provide. The study showed that women confronted and abused their husbands which triggered off domestic violence.

Besides, evidence shows that most men have lost their self-worth due to failure to sustain their families economically during the COVID-19 lockdown. This has led to persistent insults, humiliation and criticism [4] and some men have been denied their conjugal rights which has affected them emotionally and psychologically. The ALERTs study revealed that men who were denied conjugal rights considered that as an insult and felt they are not “men enough”. There is an association between family provision and conjugal rights whereby in the absence of the former, it becomes difficult for the latter to be respected.

Furthermore, men who suffered this kind of violence did not seek for services like counselling and did not report victimization. Their ability to negotiate for safe sex was also compromised. This was attributed to the harmful norms and culture of silence which continues to allow female perpetration of violence against men and fear of ridicule, with persistent inaction from authorities. However, the evidence also shows different experiences in other settings. For example, a study conducted among refugees on sexual violence against men and boys [5] revealed that sometimes the quality of services for male survivors of violence is inconsistent and that the need exceeds supply. Another study highlighted that the negative attitudes and practices among the services providers also impede service uptake among male survivors of violence [6]. MHPSS and SGBV services have not adequately incorporated the element of VAM and other unlikely survivors of violence. Other researchers also confirmed that due to social stigma regarding male victimization, men survivors of domestic violence faced an increased likelihood of being overlooked by healthcare providers, social workers and leaders [6].

### Conclusion

COVID-19 has brought several devastating effects at all levels. At the macro level, global and national economies have been affected leading to widespread loss of livelihoods and also significantly impacting on the lived experiences of individuals in their households. ALERTs study findings have profiled violence against men as one of the multiple negative spillover effects of measures to contain COVID-19 in Uganda. The new COVID era has driven communities to adopt some harmful coping mech-



1 Study community's version of “You cannot bite the hand that feeds you”

2 Building peaceful urban communities in Kampala amidst COVID-19



Photo credit: Nation

anisms like alcohol consumption, increased CSW and emotionally emasculated males also suffering in silence. System collusion and downplaying VAM severity serves to entrench harmful sociocultural norms and increase household instability with potential for heinous crime. Yet available services in the areas of law enforcement, sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) or mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) do not seem fit for purpose to effectively address this changing trend and increasing need for tailored VAM services.

## Recommendations

### Government

- Multi-sectoral and tailored approaches should be adopted to address COVID-19 effects, including violence against men, children and women.
- Existing systems in law enforcement (police), health and SGBV service delivery should be reviewed and re-equipped with skills and tools to address increasing violence cases.

### Service Providers

- Collaborate with communities – particularly survivors of violence to understand where they are likely to access services, and then establish targeted specialized services with dedicated entry points for male survivors.
- Support capacity development of service providers, identify and address negative attitudes and misconceptions, and support staff to improve respectful, confidential responses to men/boys and women/girls, child and adolescent survivors.
- Meaningfully engage local communities to develop targeted communication strategies for raising awareness about sexual violence, dispel myths or toxic sociocultural perceptions and increase access to quality services.

### The Funding Community (Donors)

- Provide funding to support and expand effective service delivery models for male survivors of violence
- Support the capacity development of existing structures and systems to improve prevention, mitigation, and response to violence for survivors across the different gender and age variations

- Fund relevant local and community-based organizations to help strengthen community-based protection, particularly for survivors of violence.
- Fund and advocate for the development of capacity development tools for frontline service providers and evidence-based programming to improve care and support for survivors.

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## For More Information, Contact:

Agnes Kyamulabi - [agnes.kyamulabi@chuss.mak.ac.ug](mailto:agnes.kyamulabi@chuss.mak.ac.ug)

Dr Gloria Seruwagi - [gseruwagi@musph.ac.ug](mailto:gseruwagi@musph.ac.ug)

Centre for Health and Social Economic Improvement (CHASE-i)

Department of Social Work and Social Administration

Makerere University

P.O. Box 7062 Kampala, Uganda

### About the Study

The ALERTs study was funded by the Government of Uganda, through Makerere Research and Innovations Fund (MakRIF).

### Study Team

Dr Gloria Seruwagi (PI)

Co-Investigators: Hilda Namakula, Catherine Nakidde Lubowa, Prof. Stephen Lawoko and Dr Eric Lugada.