

Ending Violence Against Women and Girls in Uganda: Take Urgent Action Now!



Ms. Elsie G. Attafuah
UNDP Resident Representative

Every year between 25 November and 10 December the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) joins the rest of the world to commemorate the 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence, a global campaign advocating for the prevention and

elimination of Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG). The campaign's theme for 2022 is "UNITE! Activism to end violence against women and girls", inviting all of us to play a role in showing support and galvanizing efforts to end VAWG. To commemorate the 16 Days of Activism, I and the UNDP family have joined the call for collective and concrete action to protect women and girls from violence and in turn to achieve sustainable development for all. This call is more urgent than ever due to increasing prevalence of VAWG across the globe, something that has been exacerbated by current global shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic, conflict, climate change, and associated loss of livelihoods and economic stress.

To put this into context, UN Women estimates that 1 in 3 women worldwide experience some form of physical or sexual violence in their lifetime, while 1 in 5 girls are married before they reach the aged of 18. UNDP also reports that, following climate-related shocks, 80 percent of people displaced are women and when women are displaced they face a greater risk of violence. In these

uncertain times in which we live, we must ensure that women and girls are protected from all forms of violence.

Here in Uganda we have seen an alarming increase in cases of defilement and teenage pregnancy, with UNICEF reporting that 25 percent of girls between the age of 15-19 have begun childbearing. This is the highest teenage pregnancy rate in East Africa. Between 2020 and 2021 over 650,000 teenage pregnancies were reported, with 32,000 teenage pregnancies reported in the month of December 2021 alone. These statistics are staggering and unacceptable. What's more, given Uganda hosts one of the youngest populations in the world with 55 percent being under the age of 18, there is an urgent need to act and protect Uganda's women and girls from such violence.

Anchored in UNDP's Gender Equality Strategy which assists countries to accelerate progress on gender equality and the empowerment of women, UNDP Uganda is committed to eliminating all forms of VAWG.

Together, UNDP and partners from the Government of Uganda, development partners, private sector, civil society and UN agencies have implemented various initiatives including support to women-led businesses to encourage women's economic empowerment; skilling of youth and Gender-Based Violence (GBV) survivors to enhance livelihood opportunities; establishing GBV Shelters to provide safe spaces for survivors to access essential services; establishing virtual courts to enhance access to justice for GBV survivors; and developing a GBV Online Course to build civil service capacity in GBV prevention and response. UNDP is also working to eliminate VAWG through the Gender Equality Seal for private and public institutions, an initiative that has seen over 90 companies join and make commitments to promote gender equality in the workplace. Many of these companies have already reported increased participation of women in senior positions, implementation of policies to eliminate VAWG, and improved productivity due to greater women's empowerment in the workplace.

We must also recognize efforts made by several partners to prevent and eliminate VAWG in the country, particularly women's rights organizations that have worked tirelessly for more enabling laws, policies and gender-responsive institutions; increased provision of essential services for survivors of GBV; and partners from the private sector and religious, cultural and traditional leaders committing to join the fight against VAWG. However, there is still significant progress to be made.

As we maintain our collective efforts during the 16 Days of Activism and beyond, we must make a conscious decision to alter this narrative and create a safer world for all women and girls. To achieve the 2030 Agenda and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), we must take urgent action at an individual, institutional and national level. Together we must create a world free from VAWG, we must empower women and girls, and we must continue to push forward together to ensure women and girls live in a world full of opportunities and free of violence.