

Country report: Uganda

Women, Conflict Resolution and Violence:

The Ugandan Experience

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VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN UGANDA is rooted in the traditional image of the ideal woman whose only destiny lies in fulfilling her roles and responsibilities of begetting, obeying and serving. Women exposed to an atmosphere of negative comments develop a pattern of thinking in which they identify themselves as worthless, submissive and incompetent. This habitual thinking exists in men and women, as Diane Richardson writes:

All of us men and women alike have been socialised to accept all patriarchal values without question ... The notion of patriarchy operates on the conscious and the unconscious level. This makes it hard to change false consciousness about ourselves and women.¹

This socialisation has led to a system of male supremacy and female subordination, and thus the systematic oppression of women.

Violence against women has been and remains a long lived painful human experience of torture, degradation, humiliation and suffering. In Uganda this phenomenon takes different forms. In 1996, Justice L.E.M. Mukasa-Kikonyogo, Judge of the High Court, stated:

...wife beating is very common all over. Ugandan Society appears to accept it as men's God-given right and corrective measure to discipline women. Some cynics describe it as a manifestation of manhood and affection. Men are convinced that they have both legal and moral rights to control women's behavior through violence.²

Violence is a behavior learned by men as they grow. They are taught that power is the reward for the violent behavior they acquire. Their behavior gives them control over their partners and a feeling of fulfillment that they are real men.

Levels of Violence

Domestic

Much as the family is the basic unit of society, it is also the basic unit of the perpetration of violence against women. The comfort of home has become a hell of violence and torture for many women who suffer from wife battering, rape or sexual abuse.

Domestic violence in all its forms exists in Uganda. However, few cases are reported. Women in communities, including the elite, suffer silently in order to protect the image of the family. Even when neighbors are aware of the violence, they are afraid to interfere with what they consider the 'sanctity of the home'.

Physical violence in the household can lead to sexual abuse of women and children; marital rape and dowry related violence; female genital mutilation; other traditional harmful practices; or even death. Even the phenomenon of forced prostitution exists, although on a smaller scale.

While violence can affect any Ugandan woman, rural women are more disadvantaged because of little resources and isolation from relatives and friends, as well as inadequate education, knowledge and skills.

A culture of silence, perpetuated by both observers and the victims, encourages the spread of violence. Even when violence is reported, neither adequate punishment of the offender nor protection to the victim exists. This discourages even those with the courage to report the abuse.

In the community, violence also includes sexual harassment in the workplace, school, villages and institutions of higher learning where women or girls may be threatened after refusing to respond to the sexual advances of their bosses, teachers, colleagues or village mates.

Cultural

In some tribes in Uganda, women are still subjected to female circumcision which mutilates their bodies and may result in complications while giving birth. Girls are often forced into circumcision by threats that failure to adhere to the culture will leave them without husbands.

Religious

The misinterpretation of scripture in the Christian tradition has contributed to violence against women. However, Jesus himself condemns violence by challenging the Mosaic Law that convicted women and encouraged men to divorce, stone, curse or excommunicate them.³ For disciples, Timothy and Titus, ill-treatment of women or wives disqualified men from holding posts of leadership.⁴

Political

Political violence has been in Uganda since independence with women subjected to inhuman conditions that violate their human rights and human dignity. Most political problems that lead to conflict and war impact their lives in terms of violence.

When the opposition wage war, women or girls are raped. Women are often left alone after their sons or husbands are abducted or put on the frontline to die. War displaces women. They are the ones who carry their luggage along with their children in search of safety, food or other ways of survival. In Uganda, the highest population in most camps of either internally displaced or refugees are women and their children.

In the northern and eastern parts of the country, where war has ravaged the area for almost 20 years, women have suffered the consequences of armed conflict. They have been raped, made into sex slaves, impregnated or even murdered.

Political activity can even spur domestic violence. Research carried out by the Association of Uganda Women Judges in 1996 established that violence against women escalated after the presidential elections, with some husbands brutally attacking and even killing their wives for not voting for a certain candidate. Unfortunately, the incidents received little attention.

Economic

Poverty is another form of violence against women. Uganda's economy has suffered from conflict and war. Women work long hours in the home to ensure the welfare of their children, dependents and husbands as their 'first born'. Their labor is often without compensation or recognition. Some women may suffer emotional and moral violence with feelings of hopelessness, self-hatred and remorse.

In most rural communities women dig, plant, weed, harvest and carry the harvest to the market. Alternatively, they may support their families through income-generating projects, such as selling handcrafts. Husbands may follow their wives to market to collect money. If a wife questions her husband, she is often silenced by severe beatings which become her 'share' of the profits.

Unemployed or underpaid men who do not earn a reasonable income may feel helpless and turn to alcohol, drugs or affairs to ease their pain. Often, women silently suffer the emotional and psychological violence of their husbands' actions lest they speak out and are further abused.

Educated and highly employed women who have the economic means may find their success compromised by threats of violence. Some are even forced to open joint accounts with their husbands and disclose all their assets and savings. Beatings and fights are common, though rarely discussed in order to maintain a public image.

Still, some prominent women break the silence and seek the assistance of relevant authorities. Catholic Church responses have been weak, often affirming that women must bear the burden of their marital vows "... for better or for worse, till death do us part." Is this response justifiable when it disregards the dignity and rights of the women? The Catholic Church in Uganda and the world over must face this question. Without advocacy and action, violence in married life will continue with women suffering silently.

The Local Social Teaching and Violence Against Women

The Uganda Catholic Bishops have deliberated on the plight of women, but they have not issued any pastoral letters or held a pastoral synod dedicated to violence against women. In only a few letters do the bishops address this crucial topic:

Shaping Our National Destiny, 9th October 1962

This letter addresses many political and social issues regarding people's behavior in the wake of Uganda's independence. The letter also advocates on behalf of women in the following ways:

- The bishops urge Ugandans to respect women and their rightful place within the community as part of God's creation. They remind Ugandans that women have the basic rights due to all human beings created in God's image. A nation that neglects its women is a backward nation not utilising all its human resources.
- The bishops further advocate for the education of the girl-child believing that the more women are educated the more homes will improve.
- They call upon Christian parents to set the example and "show themselves willing to forego all Bride Price" which a husband may use to rule over his wife as his 'property', and justify his right to 'discipline' (ie. beat) her as he sees fit. "Let the parents understand that the wealth which they may receive from bride price is at the cost and well-being of their children's marriage."

The letter concentrates much on the rights and responsibilities of both men and women in the household but does not address domestic violence or conflict resolution directly.

Be My Witnesses: The Vocation and Mission of Women in Church and Society Today, August 1996

This letter was an outcome of the bishops' first encounter with representatives of women from all parts of the Uganda who shared with them their joys, hopes, visions and plans as well as the problems and obstacles they encounter in their daily vocation and mission to the family, the church and society. It does not directly address violence against women or their roles in conflict resolution. However, some general remarks about their suffering are made:

- The bishops join the international community to express concern about the plight of women worldwide suffering from cultural, legal, religious and structural discrimination. They also acknowledge the oppression of women in various circumstances and sectors of life, such as high percentages of poverty and illiteracy in rural women.
- The bishops highlight and defend the dignity and rights of women in Ugandan society but do not focus on violence against women or their involvement in conflict resolution.
- The bishops condemn traditions and practices that promote and are a source of injustices against women such as men's superiority complex, wife beating, commercialisation of dowry, child-marriages, forced marriages, polygamy and the exclusion of women from important decision making meetings and bodies.

- They call upon society to discard those traditions and practices that oppress and torture women in accordance with the Uganda 1995 Constitution which states, “Laws and cultures, customs or traditions which are against the dignity, welfare or interest of women, or which undermine their status are prohibited by this constitution.”⁵

The African Synod

The African Synod of Catholic Bishops acknowledged the existence of violence against women in Africa as a form of ‘structural sin’. They condemned it, stressing that:

1. Violence against women is violence against humanity.
2. Violence against humanity is violence against God.
3. Violence is a sin against God, humanity and the whole creation.

Universal Catholic Social Teaching on Violence Against Women

As a student of Catholic Social Teaching (CST), I have yet to encounter any church documents that adequately address domestic violence against women. Violence is acknowledged in most of the Vatican and local social teaching documents but without specific reference to its prevalence within the family or home. The Catholic Church is relatively silent in its official teachings regarding domestic violence.

If the church remains silent rather than defend the rights and dignity of all human beings alike, the cycle of violence against women may continue for generations. The Catholic Church with her traditional structural problems and handicaps may not find violence against women a serious theme, unless some of those in the hierarchy develop a capacity to assimilate reality and act accordingly, especially by becoming immediate advocates for women against this evil. Women need to unite with all men of goodwill to deliberate on the issue and present relevant strategies to address the problems.

Women in Conflict Resolution

Those who manufacture war and violence the world-over are the very same people that sit at negotiating tables intending to dialogue about peace while women often play the role of secretary, tea-girl or cleaner.

After nine years of persistent suffering by the ruling regime, including the murder, abduction and rape of their children, many women joined Uganda’s ‘bush war’ from 1979-86. This marked the beginning of vocal women in circles of leadership including the army and the church.

In the northern part of the country where conflict and war has persisted for twenty years, most of the successes in negotiations have been attributed to the inclusion of women in the negotiation processes. Alternatively, where women were excluded little or nothing transpired. At present, Mrs Betty Bigombe heads the negotiation team, the Concerned Mothers’ Association. Many women work with Sudanese women’s peace organisations to spearhead conflict resolution processes across the borders.

In Uganda, we believe that when a woman talks of peace she means it. At every stage of conflict or war women suffer. They must not be side-lined from conflict negotiation desks. Rather, they must be well empowered to contribute to positive change and peace in society. In his World Day of Peace message in 1995, Pope John Paul II urged women to become “Teachers of Peace” because of their unique God-given dignity as co-creators, care-givers and nurturers of human life. As long as the perpetrators of conflict and war create social, cultural and religious barriers toward women’s full participation in negotiations, wars will continue and peace talks will remain peace jokes.

Endnotes

¹ Richardson, Diane, *Introducing Women Studies. A Feminist Theory and Practice* (London, Macmillan Press Ltd., 1993) p.53.

2 Mukasa-Kikonyogo, L.E.M., "Violence against Women and Children in Uganda," presented at a seminar at Rubaga Social Centre, Kampala, July 1996.

3 Mt 19:1-12, Jn 8:1-11

4 Tim 3:12, Titus 1:6-8