



Do not be a bystander

*Gender-based violence anywhere
is a threat to peace and security everywhere*



EDITORIAL



I am delighted to share with you the first-ever special edition by *Vice Versa Global*. This is a significant milestone for us, coming just three months shy of our two year anniversary. In our capacity as a media platform helmed by young African journalists in the Global South, we believe in the power of a positive narrative, one that we convey through the eyes of our generation.

Through positive storytelling, we endeavour to retell and take ownership of the African narrative. This perspective does not imply that we are oblivious to the numerous global problems that still exist. In contrast, we prefer to share accounts that highlight those working to improve the world, no matter how modest their efforts may seem. After all, progress, no matter how small, is better than none.

That being said, this issue is more than an assortment of stories. The magazine chronicles the fight against gender-based violence and the victories won by the many individuals, groups, national, and international organisations that have taken up the cause.

With the world constantly changing, it shows how young people are redefining activism in light of the new realities surrounding GBV. Some people, like Patricia Kamene, 26, use her words to advocate against it among people with disabilities. This is because, as a blind person, she has first-hand experience with the potential risks and prejudices that people with disabilities face daily.

However, current trends demonstrate that much more work remains to be done. According to Florence Machio, looking forward requires a look at the past to ask deeper questions about why things are the way they are, what has changed, and how they have shaped our world and global political systems.

The onus is on us to ensure that those who come after us can look at the future with optimism—because we will have laid the groundwork for them to live in a world where their human rights are recognised and respected.

In light of this, it is imperative that the world speaks with one voice and mobilises resources to combat gender-based violence. More political will and cross-sector collaboration are required to eliminate gender stereotypes in areas such as religion, culture, war, and the provision of adequate resources for institutional mechanisms that prevent GBV.

Young journalists from the South, motivated to present a more accurate picture, have driven the initiative to address it in this magazine. Our accounts demonstrate that young people are aware of pressing global issues. Through storytelling, we can better reflect on their perspectives on pertinent issues, such as these, and the solutions they offer.

Our society is a work in progress—and we believe that through storytelling we can contribute to its growth and improvement.

Enjoy the read.

Eunie Mwaura

4. Shattered dreams
A GBV survivor's tale of victory
by *Nicera Wanjiru*

7. Together we can
by *Pinkleen Oinokwesiga*

8. The fight for gender equality
Global trends on GBV
by *Florence Machio*

12. Uganda's access to legal help
A haven for victims awaiting justice
by *Emmanuel Mandebo*

16. Rising above hate
One brave woman's resilience in the face of adversity
by *Eva Nakato*

18. A life-altering call
Helping survivors, one call at a time
by *Elizabeth Kameo*

22. Sexual violence in disaster-prone and conflict-ridden areas
Using academic research to find meaningful solutions
by *Elizabeth Kameo*

26. For the love of a river
The story of Bosnia's courageous women
by *Elizabeth Kameo*

28. Lives imperilled
Pulling back the curtain on the oldest profession
by *Cynthia Omondi*



38

32. GBV in men
A candid conversation on the role of gender in fighting the vice
by *Martha Nalukenge*

34. Embracing gender diversity
Addressing the root cause of gender inequality
by *Cynthia Omondi*

38. Protecting the rights of the minority
Filipino's rights defender's quest for justice
by *Mariejo S. Ramos*

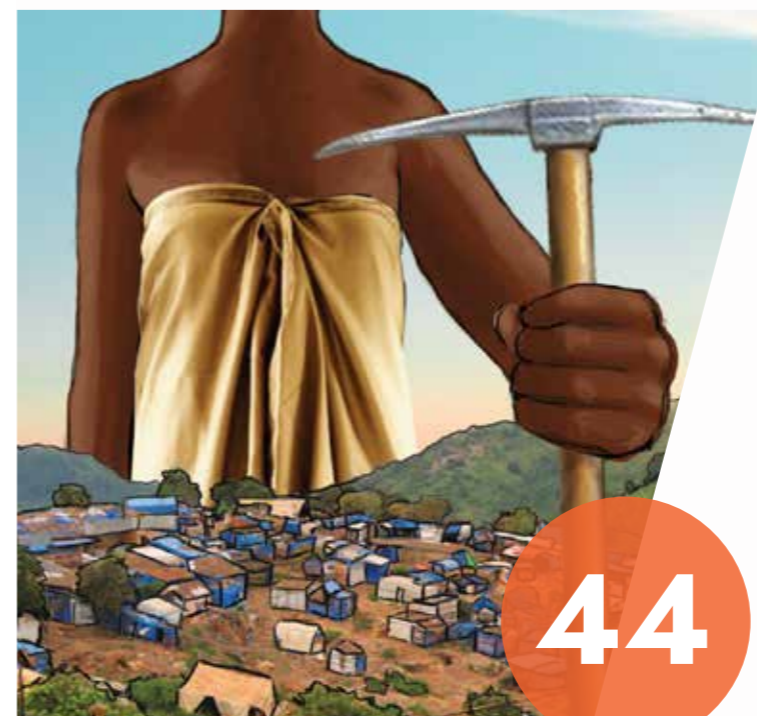
42. Let me speak
A poem on gender-based violence
by *Patricia Kamene*

44. We are not backing down
The remarkable resilience of Ugandan female miners
by *Pinkleen Oinokwesiga*

50. Combating an emerging menace
Promoting a safe space for women and girls
by *Nicera Wanjiru*

53. The new avenue of corruption in the WASH sector
The price that women and girls have to pay
by *Eunie Mwaura and Nicera Wanjiru*

56. Advancing gender equality
Changing the transgender perception in Uganda
by *Eva Nakato*



44

Colophon

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GBV SPECIAL

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My Story, My Voice

NICERA'S STORY OF TRAGEDY TO TRIUMPH

By Nicera Wanjiru
Artwork by Abdulwadud Bayo

Every child deserves to grow up in a society free from harm and danger. Unfortunately, gender-based violence affects women and girls disproportionately. In recognition of the annual 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence, Nicera Wanjiru shares her personal story—from the initial struggle to the ultimate victory, and how she is helping other victims of the vice.

I had big dreams while I was in high school. I would become a renowned journalist, get a boyfriend, fall in love, get a good job, get married, and start and grow a family—all this while climbing the social ladder to self-actualisation. Never in my wildest imaginations did I ever think I would be a victim or survivor of gender-based violence. Sadly, it happened while I was still a student.

One of the most difficult things for a victim is where to report it. They usually face stigmatisation and are humiliated, even by close family members, who silence them for fear of being disgraced. Such conditions make communication difficult, since they can't open up to anyone. I decided to stay silent, which was torturous, especially seeing my perpetrators walk scot-free.

To get away from the toxic environment I felt was draining me emotionally, I moved to the big city and became a house-help, without my family's knowledge. Later on, I decided to pay my sister—who stayed in Kibra—a visit, since by then my family had no idea where I was; it turned out to be a terrible idea. The visit opened up old wounds as I was accused of things I didn't know of.

Apparently, I had gotten pregnant by a wealthy neighbour and decided to run away and since they couldn't see a big belly, they concluded that I had procured an abortion. There was nothing I could say to defend myself or change their minds. I hated and cursed myself in equal measure, as the tears and loneliness set in. With no one to speak to, it became the start of my complications.

I started becoming weaker by the day, which meant I could not continue with my house-help job. Growing up, I used to despise slums but now it was the only option I had left, moving in with my sister. Despite objections from certain family members, she took me in wholeheartedly. I thought it would help me heal, but it didn't.

Soon after I was in liquor and drug dens, trying to sip and puff my troubles away. It is unfortunate that when I experienced GBV, it hadn't become a topic of public interest. Many victims' lives deteriorated as they fell into depression and substance abuse while others, overwhelmed, committed suicide.

By this time, my mental and physical health was deteriorating. I would suddenly lose consciousness without warning and my grip became weak. My sister decided to take me to Kenyatta National Hospital, the country's largest referral hospital. With our explanation, the doctor immediately prescribed some medication, insisting on the need for more tests to be done to ascertain the problem. I was also told to start making monthly visits to the hospital.

'All the symptoms point at epilepsy, so make sure you take these medications without fail,' the doctor said. For a while this became

the norm, going to the hospital monthly for more medication. Over time I realised that I was losing my memory, while my speech was becoming slurred. I remember informing my sister about it and she insisted we go back to the doctor.

When we went to the hospital the next day, the doctor didn't hold back: 'I am referring you to Mathare Mental Hospital'—the national psychiatric institution—'for more tests.' Initially, I thought he was joking. My elder sister, whom I was with, tried to act like all was well, but I could see that she was holding back tears. At that moment I honestly wished for death, I couldn't comprehend that this was my new reality.

At the institution, the doctor disclosed that I was not okay, then went ahead and lectured me about it. That was when I realised it was upon me to rise and draw strength from what had befallen me, or forever remain a victim and slave to it. As I struggled to regain my memory, I was lucky to meet Jane Anyango, the founder of the Polycom Development Centre, who introduced me to other young women who used to have sharing sessions.

During one of those, it dawned on me that I could use my story to highlight the challenges bedeviling young women—not only in Kibra, but in the region. Together with other survivors, we decided to mobilise and organise young women from our neighborhood into groups. Our objective was to build our capacity and help each other heal from trauma brought about by GBV and other life-threatening social ills.

As a victim, it is very important to have a support system that will help you overcome and recover from such an experience. We live in a society where a majority of men still objectify women, and perpetrators of GBV evade justice. We need proper laws and mechanisms to protect women and dissuade perpetrators from engaging in the vile act.

The Young Women Initiative (ywi) is an initiative by a consortium of civil society organisations working across Nairobi on issues affecting the youth that I was fully engaged in. As one of the leads in the ywi project, I was able to use my experience as a victim and survivor to motivate many young women who were suffering in silence to open up and seek professional help. This aided in ending the vicious cycle of violence in their lives.

With every rescued and transformed young woman, our team got motivated to work harder and expand our area of coverage. We wanted to reach out to many other needy young women and men. Healing is a process, it does not happen overnight. By then I had not come out publicly about my past, though I had shared my story



‘Never again’ has been my rallying call as I continue with my efforts to build and strengthen a community of willing young people

building and exchange programmes, both local and international. My self-esteem went through the roof, since I would be representing my community and country on international platforms.

My dream of becoming a journalist was actualised at Muungano through their *Media for Mentors* programme, now Know Your City TV. I needed to become a journalist, so together with others we were trained to be able to articulate the needs of our community better.

I would pen down my stories and take photos for them. Years later, I got the opportunity to write for an international publication, the *Vice Versa* magazine, and at times my articles are published in *The Voice Magazine*. I am grateful to everyone who believed in me, even at my lowest, and they continue to believe in me.

‘Never again’ has been my rallying call as I continue with my efforts to build and strengthen a community of willing young people. Our goal is to realise a transformed and resilient community.

To attain that, I made a deliberate and conscious decision to become the link between my community and relevant opportunities from different sectors. To boost the realisation of women’s rights, I champion the acknowledgement and inclusion of women on all decision-making platforms.

To any person out there who is a victim of gender-based violence, I pray you find a safe space to be able to share your story. Through this, I am sure your healing process will commence. ▼

Nicera Wanjiru is a content creator, writer, community mobiliser, and founder of Community Mappers. Through her experience, she developed a passion to amplify the voices of communities through storytelling videos and data collection, for which she has training experience with Slum Dwellers International. For Vice Versa Global she focuses primarily on the themes of climate change, innovation and technology, and gender-based violence. On the platform’s YouTube channel, she also hosts Community Voices, where together with her team, they give voices from local communities a chance to be heard on many issues that affect them.

within my circles. That was the period I became very vocal in my community, although I was still struggling with my speech.

It was recommended that I go for trauma healing and counselling under the *Kenya Tuna Uwezo* programme. Our lead, John Okanga, noticed that I was still struggling to be myself. ‘Nicera, you are faking a smile, I can tell this is not you,’ he told me. ‘I would like you to join others for a trauma healing and counselling session.’ He wondered how I was coping and still doing community work with all that was happening in my life.

A new chapter was opened and for the first time in a long while, I felt relief. I would get counselling sessions from him and he would check on me from time to time. Though the pain and bitterness from my past were still there, they didn’t weigh me down like they used to.

Through sharing my story and meeting different people during my healing process, I was able to offload the heavy burden I had been carrying. I gained valuable lessons that helped me come to terms with my past, and face the new chapter of my life.

I felt appreciated and with renewed vigour. I was able to fight for the rights of the railway allocation project beneficiaries—who were being illegally evicted—thanks to the data that was collected by Muungano wa Wanavijiji. During this period, we were able to bring a consortium of nineteen organisations to listen to the community’s grievances.

After I joined Muungano wa Wanavijiji (Slum Dwellers International Kenya), it shaped and sharpened me through capacity

together, we can

By Pinkleen Oinokwesiga

Growing up

Women were confined in boxes
Like options displayed and discriminated
Tossed around from one door to another
By perpetrators who use gender stereotypes
To justify violence against them.

Check one, the physical
Check two, the sexual
And the unchecked psychological, economical, verbal, emotional
That threaten other fundamental human rights like right to life, liberty and security of person.
Yet these, breed and magnify into Gender-Based Violence
Commonly rooted in gender inequality and a series of complex patriarchal beliefs,
Many of which are specific to cultures, nations and communities.

Did you know
25% of women and girls over the age of fifteen have experienced some form of intimate violence?
Yes! And 35% of women worldwide have experienced either physical or sexual violence!
See! all humans are born free in dignity and have rights and freedom.

So, what have you done?
To end that rape culture
To stop that intimate violent culture?
What’s your role as a man in tackling and protecting your sister,
From coercion and arbitrary deprivation of her liberty?

What have you done?
To put an end to child marriages, FMG, online harassments or economic abuse?
As a father, you are respected yet still you promote and spread the disease
Like a parasite, you instill, you increase
Quid pro quo!!
You confine women and define them
According to gender not their ability.
It is a vicious cycle
That must come to an end.

And together! We can!

Pinkleen Oinokwesiga, aka Pinkie Kwetsiga Ashley, is a Ugandan human resource practitioner, editor, poet, writer, and performer. She is affiliated with the all-female Ugandan poet group Echo Minds Poets. Several of her works have been published in different publications across the globe, a number of Ugandan anthologies, and online platforms like Vice Versa Global.

She is a literacy advocate and activist that appreciates creativity, using art—mostly poems—to spread awareness and tackle issues that people fear expressing openly. Through them, she has counseled and connected with girls who have similar experiences, and those that relate to her poetry. She hopes to continue using it as a medication since, through it, she found herself.

She is the current deputy lead administrator/Ugandan coordinator for WAI—Wake-Up Africa Initiative. It’s based in Nigeria and focuses on identifying, refining, and defining talent and creativity, including poetry and writing skills.

The silent pandemic,

its challenges and solutions

What are the current trends in gender-based violence? *Vice Versa Global* spoke to activists to capture emerging global trends on matters GBV. What is running across board is one statement: until women and girls are free from all forms of violations, it cannot be business as usual, neither can we expect development in its true form.

By Florence Machio

Women's rights issues across the world have one thing in common—patriarchy is at the root of their non-realisation. The same rights that women and girls have been pushing for especially around their bodies are still the same as they were in the seventies, albeit with now legal instruments in most countries. The challenge is their implementation and, in some countries, dealing with a lack of political will, religious sectarianism, culture, war, and a total lack of funding for the structural systems to work.

Looking at the future, therefore, requires taking a peek at history. The *Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women* defines violence against women as 'any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.'

Since the beginning of the 1990s, this vice has gained much attention in the human rights discourse. However, it took a long and persistent struggle by the women's rights movement to persuade the international community to deliberate it as a human right. For

many years, countries paid lip service to this issue.

The agenda for the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights, held in Vienna, did not originally mention women or any gender aspects of human rights. It was the women's rights movement that brought attention to the issue of violence against women during the conference, leading to its recognition in the *Vienna Declaration* as a human rights obligation.

The UN General Assembly adopted the *Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women* in December 1993. It was the first international instrument to specifically address the issue. It recognises that such abuse constitutes a violation of the rights and fundamental freedoms of women and a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between men and women.

It calls on states to condemn such violence and work towards its eradication. In 1994, the Commission on Human Rights appointed a special rapporteur on violence against women, its causes, and consequences. This enabled a dynamic development of human rights standards to respond to contemporary challenges and emerging issues concerning violence against women.

The international instruments that governments happily sign at conferences still lack the political will to actualise them

Left: former Miss World Africa, Quiin Abenakyo, has her own foundation that fights violence against girls

Through her research, she significantly developed concepts and legal frameworks on women's human rights and violence against them. The Fourth World Conference on Women reaffirmed the conclusions of the Vienna World Conference, listing violence against women as one of twelve critical areas of concern. The *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women* does not explicitly mention violence against women.

However, the committee, in its general recommendation No. 19 (1992) on violence against women, asserted that it is 'violence directed against a woman because she is a woman or affects women disproportionately.' This seriously inhibits their ability to enjoy rights and freedoms on a basis of equality with men. This adoption was a critical precursor to the recognition of this issue at the Vienna World Conference.

Thereafter, the Africa Union drafted and adopted the famous *Maputo Protocol* which has been touted as one of the most advanced women's rights movements in the world. It speaks on harmful practices and provides for abortion in cases of incest. While many states have adopted and ratified CEDAW and the *African Charter on Human and People's Rights*, some have done so with reservations.

According to the *UN Human Rights Report*, women in all countries, irrespective of status, class, age, caste, or religion, experience violence in virtually all spheres of life, whether at home, at work, on the street, or in times of conflict. It is also present throughout the lifetime of a woman, affecting girls and older women, too.

Specific groups of women suffering from various forms of discrimination, such as women with disabilities or migrant women, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender women, are particularly vulnerable to violence. Such violence is a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between men and women.

A human rights analysis posits that the specific causes, and the factors that increase the risk of its occurrence, are grounded in the broader context of systemic gender-based discrimination and other forms of subordination. The international instruments that governments happily sign at conferences still lack the political will to actualise them.

Rape is described—by the special rapporteur on torture—as one form of sexual violence, as are threats of rape, 'virginity testing,' being stripped naked, invasive body searches, insults, and humiliations of a sexual nature. The forms of violence that could be considered gender-based torture include forced abortions and the denial of safe abortions for women who have become pregnant as a result of rape.

She believes that the powerlessness of the victim and the purpose of the act are the most decisive elements to determine wheth-

er an act amounts to torture, or other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment. According to the World Bank's *Women and Business Law Report* (March 2022), globally, women only have three-quarters of their legal rights afforded to them compared to men. 178 countries maintain a legal barrier that prevents their economic participation.

The report measures laws and regulations across 190 countries in eight areas—the same ones where they face GBV—impacting women's economic participation. Keep in mind their denial is a basis for abuse. The areas are mobility, marriage, workplace, assets, parenthood, pensions, pay, and entrepreneurship. This year's annual report included a 95-country pilot survey of laws governing child care, a critical area where support is needed for women to succeed in paid employment.

While laws are important, it is critical to analyse the reality experienced by women. While there have been significant improvements in the WBL index in the Middle East, North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa, these regions continue to lag overall. Before 2021, for example, women in Gabon had no law to protect them from violence. Through comprehensive reforms, they can now report cases of violations as well as get jobs without permission from their husbands.

The country also enacted legislation protecting them from domestic violence and gave them financial freedom by removing the restrictions that prohibited them from opening bank accounts. Angola, on the other hand, enacted laws criminalising sexual harassment in employment, a growing global phenomenon that was highlighted through the #MeToo movement that began in America.

The pandemic exacerbated the GBV silent pandemic, as has been shared in several studies across the globe. It brought to light the fact that violence against women and girls can no longer be ignored. During the pandemic, most countries planned for the health aspect, only to realise that there is another pandemic that they did not think about. Now is the time to act for those that are always forgotten—women and girls.

The Sustainable Development Goals tracker report stated that the pandemic resulted in about 1.4 million pregnancies among teenage girls. While out-of-school girls are at increased risk of violence, child marriage, child labour, trafficking, and early childbirth, only 42 percent of countries had measures to support girls' return to school in early 2021.

According to research carried out by Rutgers, the Covid-19 pandemic's impact on young people's sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) laid bare and exacerbated existing inequalities, unwanted pregnancies and early marriages. The report further stated that fifty percent of young people missed crucial and reliable information on sex and Covid, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation.



A self-defence course for women given by the Quiin Abenakyo Foundation in Kampala



Two women engage in one on one combat in a self-defence class

In Kenya, one county recorded three thousand pregnancies during that period, according to a national health survey. This led the government to call for an investigation by the National Crimes and Research Bureau, with results pointing to cases of violations by people close to them, specifically relatives. The Rutgers report further indicates that 33 percent of young people, in countries where the study was undertaken, felt more vulnerable to sexual harassment, and sexual, physical, and emotional abuse compared to before the pandemic.

UNFPA projections suggest that six months of Covid-related disruptions and lockdowns would result in an additional 31 million cases of gender-based violence worldwide. The interruption of programmes to prevent child marriage, as well as the negative effects on household economic status, are likely to result in an additional thirteen million child marriages.

UNICEF (2020) documents how families may consider early marriage a viable option if the pandemic has caused or exacerbated food insecurity and economic hardship within their households. The consequences of the pandemic also include an increase in child labour among adolescent girls, loss of income and reduced financial empowerment, increased household work, and reduced access to healthcare alongside increased maternal deaths, together with greater food insecurity and malnutrition.

Reach a Hand-Uganda (RAHU), a member of the RHRN network, recently completed a study. It found that the increasing number of gender-based violence cases in homes requires urgent attention from both the government and civil society organisations to ensure that young people can access psycho-social and counselling support while in isolation. It should be noted that Uganda took the longest time to open schools in the region.

In 2021, the world held the Generation Equality Forum, with one of the key issues discussed being GBV, and launched a five-year action plan to accelerate investment and implementation of gender equality. The outcome of the forum included major commitments from heads of state and government of France, the United States, Kenya, Argentina, Georgia, Finland, Canada, South Africa, the European Union, and from international organisations as well as the private sector.

It was made clear that the biggest challenge to ending the vice is financing; if we do not put money where the laws are, it ends up being hypocritical. Kenya's president announced a national strategy and resources to prevent and respond to it. The prime minister of Canada presented his country's commitment to invest in the care system to benefit women and girls, while Georgia's president presented her commitment to lead legislative change on the legal definition of rape.

The vice president of the United States also made policy and resource commitments. Countries are becoming more aware of the need for not only legislation but financing. It is no longer enough to make laws, it is critical to put in money so that they can work to protect and respond to GBV. Perhaps the most notable quote was that of president Macron.

He said, 'Through the Generation Equality Forum, France's objective is to state loud and clear that the rights of women and girls are universal, as are all human rights, everywhere, all the time. This model that France defends is not a negation of our differences. It is about affirming that no cultural or religious relativism, no regional or identity-based particularism, justifies that a woman cannot enjoy the same rights and opportunities as a man.'

The UN secretary-general António Guterres, speaking at the

It was made clear that the biggest challenge to ending the vice is financing; if we do not put money where the laws are, it ends up being hypocritical

same Forum, welcomed the bold ambition of the Forum. He reiterated that it was a moment to redress a global imbalance, with activists, policymakers, and leaders across all ages shaping our world into a more just and gender-equal society.

Kavinya Makau of Woman Kind states that violence against women and girls has to be looked at with the wider context around patriarchy, which makes the situation more exacerbated. She says activism has to be packaged and solutions sought in the context of the different conditions women and girls live in, because they are not homogenous.

'Globally, the issue of sexual harassment is gaining momentum, especially at the workplace,' she says. The International Labour Organisation convention No. 190 on sexual harassment in the workplace needs to take centre stage by all governments that should ratify it. This is the first international treaty to recognise the right of everyone to work in a world free from violence and harassment.

It was adopted in 2019 by the ILO and came to force on the 25th of June, 2021. Governments that ratify it will be required to put in place measures to prevent and address violence and harassment in the workplace. It presents a unique and historic opportunity to shape a future of work based on dignity and respect for all, as more women join the workforce.

According to Makau, a lot of collaboration among activists will help in putting pressure on the global community to ratify and domesticate it. There is a need for a global outcry given the theme of this year's 16 Days of Activism. Many girls from Africa have gone to Saudi Arabia to seek employment, only to return with stories of torture and discrimination. Sadly, their governments seem not to be bothered. If signed by all states, this convention will ensure that irrespective of where one works, the law will protect them.

Kenya joined the Generation Equality Forum and made twelve commitments, which include financing GBV as well as having shelters in each of its 47 counties. It remains to be seen whether the new administration will honour these commitments. It is the job of activists to hold the government accountable if women and girls are to be safe.

South Africa held its second presidential summit on ending GBV in early November 2022. Activists pushed for financing and coordination of duty bearers in ensuring the government is not paying lip service to women's rights. According to Sibongile Ndashe of ISLA and the co-chair representing the civil society group, the summit was more of a clinic to check on accountability, amplification, and acceleration on ending GBV.

She states that the Total Shutdown Movement of 2018, with its 24 demands, gave birth to the first presidential summit to end the vice. It was convened to examine what happened to the national plan and how best to ensure prevention, protection, response, and economic power can be part and parcel of ending it. She recognises that while civil society does the community work, it is the job

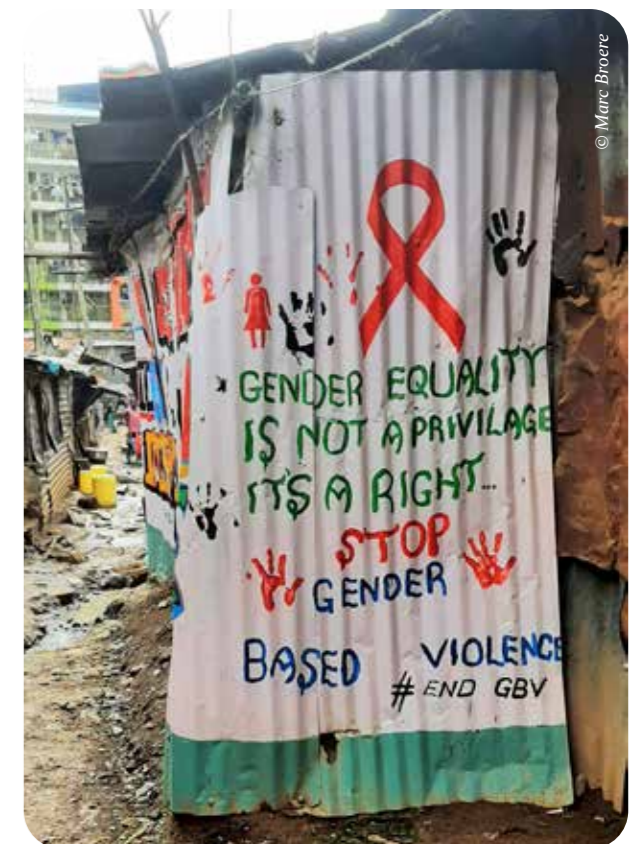
of activists to hold the government to account, as opposed to the government seeking accountability from NGOs.

Rape remains under-reported and there are still some violations like intimate partner violence that are not recognised by police in many countries, leaving women and girls vulnerable. She believes that while the rest of the world is at 'peace,' women and girls' bodies are continuously attacked through violations. 'It is supposed to be a peaceful time, yet for women it is wartime!' she says.

It is the wearer of the shoe who knows where it pinches, hence the need for women to be on the table when peace deals are made. They play a key role in the prevention and resolution of conflicts, and post-conflict reconstruction. It is still not safe for women across the world. In Asia, especially India, we have the challenges of the caste system and religion that keeps on subjugating women. In South America, they are imprisoned for miscarriages, while in America there is a cold war on women's uteruses given the reversal of the *Roe vs Wade* ruling.

The call to action is clear: governments need to do right by women. The collaboration of all sectors, as seen during the Generation Equality Forum, is critical so that none is working in silos. Where there is conflict, the world needs to speak in one voice and pull resources to end violence against women and girls. More women in political spaces are critical to safeguard gains made and ensure that their voices are heard at the policy-making and budget allocation tables.

Looking into some of the emerging trends all activists spoke about, cyberbullying manifests the violence that usually occurs to women. The constant threat of harmful cultural practices need more work than just enacting laws; we need community engagement to change behaviour the same way governments went all out when dealing with the pandemic. The issues of women who identify as lesbians, and those with disabilities and the unique vulnerabilities they face, are issues that governments can no longer ignore if we are to end violence against women and girls. ▽



Attention to GBV on a door in the Mathare informal settlement (Kenya)

Right: Harriet, a social worker and counselor at Kamuli Advisory Centre

The Busoga sub-region in eastern Uganda has continuously appeared in the news for many wrong reasons. From headlines of abject poverty to the countless number of locals dying due to jigger infections, and now, recently, it appears to be grappling with high prevalence rates of gender-based violence.

By Emmanuel Mandebo



Access to justice for GBV survivors made possible



Hilda Viola Murhon, coordinator and legal officer, Kamuli Advisory Centre



Justine Nabwire, coordinator and legal officer, Namutumba Advisory Centre

On the outskirts of Kamuli town, in Kamuli district, approximately 150 kilometres from Uganda's capital Kampala, I am welcomed into what will turn out to be a highly restricted residence. Aisha Namuganza, who is in charge, warmly welcomes me. There is dead silence in the dwelling, except for sounds coming from a small room. There, a girl of about fifteen years is reciting the letters of the alphabet with a group of seven infants. Food is also being prepared on a charcoal stove in one of the nearby rooms.

A number of the rooms inside the building are locked. Shortly, we are informed that the rooms have occupants, but there are restrictions as to who can access them. Men are not allowed anywhere near the rooms except upon being granted special permission. Next, we are introduced to 21-year-old Irene Mwajjuma*. She narrates that the father of her now three-month-old baby had rented her a small room to stay in.

However, he abandoned her when she was only three months pregnant and never took care of her again. When she gave birth, she had to devise a plan of action for herself and the baby. He recently reappeared and attacked her at her workplace, before taking away all her household items from her rented room. She sought refuge at the shelter, and has called it home for about a week now.

*not their real names

Rita Aciro Lakor is the executive director of Uganda Women's Network (UWONET), a leading women's rights organisation which also runs the shelter where Mwajjuma lives. Violence against women has always been a problem in the country, with over fifty percent of women and girls aged fifteen to 49 experiencing violence during their lifetime.

According to the Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS) report for 2021, physical violence by partners was at 22.3 percent, sexual violence 16.6, and physical and sexual violence at 9.3. The report also indicated that 14,134 defilement cases were reported to police in 2020, up from 13,613 cases in 2019 (a 3.8 percent increase): meaning 1,186 cases were reported every month, translating to forty cases daily, up from 1,140 cases every month and 38 daily in 2019.

The *Annual Police Crime Report of 2020* showed even more alarming statistics about violence against women and girls—13,145 female adults were reported to have been victims of domestic violence as compared to only 3,408 male adult victims. What is of greater concern is whether those abused have been able to access basic health care, let alone access to justice.

Harmful cultural practices have been cited as the leading cause of the high rates of gender-based violence in the sub-region. This is brought about by the patriarchal nature of society that considers women as inferior to men. Many of these beliefs have not only kept women back, but also greatly contributed to violence against them. For example, they are not allowed to own or inherit their deceased parents' property, or even that of their deceased spouses.

In addition, they have very limited or no decision-making power over their own earnings. High poverty and low literacy levels are

The locals are still attached to their cultural beliefs even when they are in clear contravention of the law and discriminatory towards women and girls

next on the list. The government has tried to assist survivors, but the services offered are not only very minimal, but also of questionable quality. That is where UWONET comes in, to bridge the gap between what the government can provide and what it has not.

Having been in existence for close to thirty years now, the organisation has brought together several women-led organisations and created space for advocacy and joint initiatives to influence policy and legal reforms. It works within specific key areas, one of them being women's rights and access to justice, including violence against women.

It has also been the voice of women and is instrumental in uplifting and amplifying their voices. They have been at the centre of creating awareness and information sharing aimed at attitudinal change around the subject of discrimination against women and gender inequality.

They have been able to influence the laws of the country regarding the rights of women. They have also been able to influence reforms in domestic violence laws, and laws against female genital mutilation, to mention but a few. Having a law in place is already a step forward, as they would not be offering some of the services they do in its absence. Consequently, the laws offer more assurance in terms of women's and girls' protection.

'At this point, we are unable to conclude whether that law has produced the intended effect, but it has certainly been helpful since



UWONET banner at the GBV shelter



The exterior of the Kamuli GBV shelter



One of the dormitories at the GBV shelter

one can imagine the danger the survivors would have been in if it was not there,' Rita Aciro Lakor notes. Gender-based violence programming is in the DNA of the organisation, because violence against women is central to their work. They currently have a programme that is being supported by the Dutch embassy in Uganda. This has enabled them to reopen their shelters in the Kamuli and Namutumba districts in Busoga.

Initially opened in 2013, they ran up to 2018 before they were closed due to financial constraints. As of now, they are up and running thanks to the support of the Dutch embassy. On top of the two shelters, they also have two advisory centres in the two districts which serve as the first point of contact for clients. The survivors that end up at the shelters are those that require temporary accommodation owing to the peculiarities of their case.

Besides running the shelters and the advisory centres, they continue to offer legal aid, outreach programmes, psychosocial services, community sensitisations and awareness, as well as working hand in hand with the concerned duty bearers charged with handling matters of violence against women in the sub-region.

Many of these beliefs have not only kept women back, but also greatly contributed to violence against them

UWONET also works with cultural and religious institutions that are the informal justice actors as close to 95 percent of community members still prefer the informal justice system. However, the biggest problem with them is their bigotry. They are built on traditional justice systems that have been notorious for disregarding and discriminating against women and girls. So, they are targeted to instil a change of attitude in them.

The advisory centres in eastern Uganda handle about one hundred cases a month. This is with the one in Kamuli handling about forty to forty-five, whereas the one in Namutumba handles between fifty and fifty-five cases. Most civil cases involve lands, such as inheritance disputes and evictions. Rape and defilement, physical abuse, child neglect, and economic violence top the list of criminal cases reported there.

Most of the clients got to know UWONET and its services through the various sensitisation and community awareness activities that they have conducted in the various parts of the respective districts. The referral system is also another reliable source of clientele. This is through the support groups of survivors, duty bearers such as the Uganda Police, probation and social welfare officers, local leaders, resident district commissioners, chief administrative officers, and religious and cultural leaders.

According to Harriet Nabirye, a social worker with the Kamuli Advisory Centre, the first thing they do after receiving a new client is offer psychosocial help, because most survivors are traumatised. A decision is then made regarding whether to refer the case to the social worker or the legal officer for further attention after calming down the survivor.

If mediation is deemed necessary, the perpetrator is summoned via a letter addressed to them through their area's local council chairperson. In the process, all the principles of justice and fairness are applied to reach an amicable conclusion to the matter. This is for civil cases—most of them are resolved through mediation. Reason for this is that the locals find the formal courts intimidating due to the length of time it takes to resolve matters and the subsequent costs involved.

Community mediation sessions are used to sensitise members to basic aspects of the law as well as the rights of women. This is because it has come to the attention of the organisation that most of the cases arise out of ignorance by the perpetrators. In criminal cases, they offer handheld support that involves taking the survivor to report the matter to the police. They also take them for medical examinations and follow up on the investigations with the police, assisting in situations where the police are constrained due to limited resources.

Before the shelters were established, the police were overwhelmed by the number of survivors that needed urgent sheltering, yet they didn't have the capacity to do so. There were many instances where women and girls were evicted from their homes, hence the shelters were the only available place of residence for them as they sought justice. So, the concept of sheltering came about to offer a temporary safe space for survivors—a space where they could stay, heal, get psychosocial help, as well as receive emergency medical assistance.

'I have been provided with a place to sleep, food, clothes, as well as counselling for the period I've stayed here,' states Irene Mwajjuma*, one of the survivors at the Kamuli shelter. The length of stay at the shelter depends on the nature of the case and the time it will take to be resolved. The majority of survivors stay at the shelter for one to two weeks. However, there have been cases where some have been there for longer than three months due to the complexity of their cases.

Aisha Namuganza, the matron, states that the shelters have restored hope in the survivors. They usually emerge looking healthier and more empowered. This is because they have been able to take a break from the abusive environments they were living in before admission to the shelter.

The survivors were also taught several life skills, like basic art and crafts and backyard gardening. This was to enable them to gain skills for self-sufficiency and independence. However, the programme has since been halted due to financial difficulties.

Only after harmony has been restored can survivors be resettled. In sexual assault cases, for example, this is done after the perpetrator has been apprehended. Other factors include whether the survivor will be safe upon return to the community. Further, follow-ups are done to ensure that the survivor is indeed safe wherever they have been resettled. Sometimes it is necessary to hold survivors for a longer period, but resources are scarce.



However, there are still a few obstacles to overcome. The locals are still attached to their cultural beliefs even when they are in clear contravention of the law and discriminatory towards women and girls. High poverty levels and low literacy are also proving to be substantial challenges. They are unable to intervene in those two areas as of yet, so their efforts are limited.

Regardless, they have done their part by showing up for their clients and employing a comprehensive approach, especially with the handheld model. In addition, they have collaborated with various duty bearers. 'Of course, a lot still needs to be done, but we are proud of the strides we have made so far,' Justine Nabwire, a legal officer and coordinator attached to the Namutumba Advisory Centre, states.

On whether GBV can be brought to an end, Rita Aciro does not think so. As she puts it, the vice can only be reduced, not eliminated. 'Criminality cannot be eradicated regardless of how modern a society is. The focus should be on reducing the level of impunity exhibited by perpetrators.'

'As the embassy, we have the mandate to support initiatives that enhance the rule of law and human rights. We identified areas that are critical to the Netherlands, among them sexual and gender-based violence. If you can work on those issues, you can support women to access justice, because they form the majority of the victims. Owing to the lockdown associated with Covid that led to a sharp rise in the number of GBV cases, we had to devise means of coming up with initiatives to respond to this concern. We engaged several stakeholders and zeroed in on UWONET.'

'We chose them because of their reputation for providing support for women. In addition, they are the only private initiative that runs shelters for women and children who have been victims of GBV. Previously, they had other partners whose projects were coming to an end and the shelters were on the verge of being closed. As the embassy, we had to step in as there was an urgent need to continue operating the shelters. Consequently, our partnership has enabled continuity of the shelters which has led to more victims receiving the much-needed services therein.'

—Mrs. Grace Babihuga Nuwagaba, senior policy officer for security, rule of law and human rights, at the Dutch embassy in Uganda

'Before my husband passed on in 2016, we had been married for fifteen years and had four children, before we fell out. Early in 2022, my mother-in-law invited me back to my marital home. My co-wife, however, obstructed this and proceeded to have me arrested on the grounds that I had trespassed on her property. I was referred to UWONET in June 2022 and mediations were subsequently conducted in the presence of our father-in-law. Consequently, I was allocated five rooms from my late husband's property, from where I now earn some money, which enables me to support myself and my children. I'm truly grateful to UWONET for their prompt response.'

—Maria Mugoya*, survivor, Namutumba district

Beyond the scars



© McWilliams Wasswa

At only nineteen, Kirungi Linneti became the victim of an acid attack from her ex-lover. She turned tragedy into triumph by rising above the scars and is now a renowned activist in Uganda. Her inspiring story brings hope to many women and girls who are the main victims of this heinous act.

By Eva Nakato

It is estimated that there are over fifteen hundred acid attacks annually in the world, yet this is a crime that often goes unreported for fear of reprisal. An acid attack is an intended act of throwing corrosive substance on the face and body of a victim, causing long-term scarring, physical disfigurement, and sometimes permanent disability. It is becoming a rampant form of gender-based violence as it aims to disfigure, maim, torture, or kill. Most of the victims end up in total denial, while others commit suicide.

In 2012, Kirungi Linneti was burnt with acid by her violent and obsessed ex-lover, when she was only nineteen, for turning down his marriage proposal—an incident that almost claimed her life. She had just finished high school and was eagerly waiting to join university when she noticed his behavior change. He started tracking her whereabouts through her phone, diverting her calls to his, and went as far as hiring spies to monitor her movements. It became intolerable, but she stayed, believing that he would change.

After the holidays, she joined the university and was lucky to secure a job that would help her get by. When she shared the news with her boyfriend, he rejected the notion, saying he was against her working in a male-dominated company. They came to a compromise, agreeing that he would help her get a better job. He failed to do so. Eventually, she took the initial offer and that was when things went from bad to worse. He hacked her phone, contacted all her male colleagues, and warned them to keep off his wife.

When Linneti finally joined the university, she opted to stay in a nearby hostel, a decision he was also against. He rented a

two-roomed house hoping that they would move in together as a married couple, a vision she didn't share, since her goal was to focus on her studies before getting married. She then requested him to meet her parents first, and inform them that they intended to stay together, something he refused to do.

It finally dawned on her that their relationship wasn't going anywhere when he raised his hands on her, because he thought that she was deceiving him. He had requested a meet up which she agreed to, but only after she was done with her exams. Due to his insecurity, he checked her timetable to confirm whether this was indeed true, only to find out that it was set for the following day.

She tried to explain that she needed the extra day to prepare for the exam, but he would hear none of it. This was when he attempted to slap her, but she grabbed his hand before he could. She had had enough and asked to end the relationship. He threatened to kill her and any man that would come between them—a threat she assumed was being made out of anger.

The following morning, as she set off for the university, she recalls hearing footsteps following her and a voice beckoning her from behind. Suddenly a figure dressed in dark clothing, and carrying a blue bucket, poured something on her face. The burning sensation she felt elicited screams from her. A man who was nearby tried to salvage the situation by pouring water on her, but her hair caught fire, adding more injuries on one side of her face.

She ran into the middle of the road, ready to die, but for more than two hours no one came to her rescue. She was eventually taken to the burns unit at the Mulago Hospital for further treatment. For over a year she underwent six surgeries, including one to detach her neck from her shoulders. She lost an ear, but luckily, after two months, her eyesight was restored.

During that time, she interacted with other acid and burn survivors. In some instances, the attackers would come to confirm whether their victims had survived or not. After treatment, Linneti went back to complete her education. Out of fear of the unfair treatment she would face, she put on a veil to hide her identity and managed to graduate with a degree in Social Sciences.

Her passion for supporting acid attack and burn survivors grew stronger, so she did a counseling course. Doctors at the burns unit usually invite her to hold counseling sessions for fellow survivors.

She established **Hope Care Rescue Mission**, a nonprofit organisation that supports acid attack and burn survivors, victims of GBV, and other marginalised people in Uganda. It offers counseling, palliative care support, and empowerment programmes, among others. They also do follow-ups on the survivors to find out how they are coping and, later on, carry out an assessment. They also empower their dependents with hands-on skills like art and craft.

Sadly, her ex-boyfriend was never held accountable. She is fighting to make sure such cases cease through an ongoing petition by demanding for the Ugandan government to pass a law against acid attacks. 'We know from legal initiatives in other countries that the best way to fight this is by enforcing tougher laws on the sale of acid, and punishment for perpetrators. Presently, someone convicted of an acid attack can be sentenced to up to seven years in prison.'

Kirungi Linneti features in the Up-close with Eva Nakato show, that provides you with an in-depth interaction with leading game-changers, ranging from business and community leaders, peer influencers, and top shots from all around the globe, availing you with provocative and mind-blowing facts. The show airs every first Friday of the month on the Vice Versa Global YouTube channel. For more information about Linneti's organisation: hocram.org

'We know from legal initiatives in other countries that the best way to fight this is by enforcing tougher laws on the sale of acid, and punishment for perpetrators'

'Not only is this very lenient for an act of attempted murder,' she says, 'but perpetrators are rarely charged. Of the over two hundred acid attack survivors that I have worked with, only twenty percent of their perpetrators were charged or faced any legal consequence for their actions.'

Linneti finally met the love of her life, ten years later, who genuinely loves and appreciates her. She encourages other survivors to never lose hope in themselves and encourages women and girls to never compromise in toxic relationships. ▽



THE STORY OF BENIN'S

TOLL-FREE NUMBER



'We, young tailors and hairdressers of Benin, say no to workplace (sexual) violence in our apprenticeships!'

Cases of violence and harassment in the workplace are still very prevalent and appear to be intensifying. Sadly, its victims choose to remain silent out of fear of retribution from their harassers and victimisers. To counter this, the Centre d'écoute et d'Accompagnement CAPJ/COSI offers a free helpline for women in Benin who are victims of violence and harassment in the workplace.

By Elizabeth Kameo

With a slight smile on her face, 41-year-old Françoise (not her real name) says, 'To overcome, you have to confront. I had to face and overcome the challenges, for my children and me. After suffering in silence for years, I had to find help. That is how I came to the support centre CAPJ—Centre d'Accompagnement Psycho-social et Juridique. Today, I am a survivor.'

In March of 2007, then 26-year-old Françoise began working as the executive secretary to the director for a private transit and transport company in Benin. Three years later, her boss—the owner of the company—began sexually abusing her. It is estimated that workplace sexual harassment makes up twenty percent of gender-based violence cases in the country.

'One day he called the office from his house and asked me to get him some paperwork. On getting there, I found him alone and that is when he sexually abused me. It was the first time and would continue for over nine years. He threatened me, saying if I ever told anyone, something bad would happen to me... so I kept silent.'

From then on, she says he would send other workers off on errands, ensure it was just the two of them left, and subject her to more sexual abuse. The first attack took place in October 2010 and lasted until the end of November 2019. 'When the person you respect the most abuses you, you lose something. For me, it was my courage and confidence. I had no support system at the time, so depression set in, since I was always worried about losing my job. I was suffering in silence until I met my partner.'

In February 2021, two years after the abuse had ended, she finally found the courage to confide in her partner and resign from her job. She sought help after a friend told her of CAPJ, though it was not until August this year that she went there. Today, her case file is with the vice squad. 'At the centre, I was listened to, offered psycho-

logical help, and provided with a lawyer. It has been recomforting. I feel protected and supported.'

'The next step is the court hearing,' Marilyne Sourou, head of the psycho-socio and legal support centre, says. 'In the meantime, we are waiting to have a meeting with the lawyer that COSI-Benin has hired for her.' CAPJ is part of COSI-Benin—the Confédération des organisations syndicales indépendantes du Bénin. It was set up by the latter with support from its Dutch partner, CNV International, on the realisation that there is a growing number of women and girls who are falling victim to workplace harassment.

It acts as a listening and reconciliation centre, offering legal services in situations of conflict in the workplace. Located in Cotonou, it provides a place for victims of violence and harassment in the workplace and learning environments who are listened to, advised, and guided psychologically, legally, and given health care where necessary.

Survivors throughout Benin can reach the centre by calling the toll-free number 91 47 00 00. It is the only helpline in the country set up with the sole purpose of helping survivors of workplace harassment. 'It is available free of charge for subscribers of the most popular mobile operators in Benin,' Sourou says. 'Through it, CAPJ registers complaints and refers victims and survivors according to their geographical location.'

Using the helpline, they hope to break the silence as far as sexual harassment toward women and girls in the workplace is concerned. While Benin has a legal framework for the prevention and repression of gender-based violence as stated by Law 2011-26 of 9 January, as in many other African countries, these laws are only good on paper.

'Lack of respect for women's rights is still the norm,' she explains. 'They still have no access or find difficulties when seeking justice in cases of violence. There is a weak, or in most cases no implementation at all of the laws adopted in favour of women.' One of COSI-Benin's tasks is advocating for the ratification of the ILO Convention C190 to condemn all forms of violence in the workplace, including sexual harassment.

In Benin, 69 percent of women and girls are reported to have been victims of different forms of GBV—physical, verbal and psychological, sexual, and harmful traditional practices. Twenty percent of these are cases of economic violence. A trade union organisation, COSI-Benin also set up a national women's commission, whose aim it is to combat workplace sexual harassment by informing and sensitising about their rights as well as the country's legal framework.

'When the person you respect the most abuses you, you lose something. For me, it was my courage and confidence'

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‘Lack of respect for women’s rights is still the norm. They still have no access or find difficulties when seeking justice in cases of violence’

Today, Françoise is one of those the centre has helped find answers and seek justice. She no longer considers herself a victim, but a survivor. ‘There was a time in my life when I considered committing suicide, but then I realised it was not the way out. With three children, I sought help from COSI-Benin. I now have support from the centre, but I hope to gain support from the judicial institutions as I seek justice to have my abuser held accountable for his actions,’ she adds.

‘He nearly destroyed my life and that of my children. They did not go to school for a year, because I could not afford it.’ As for the long-term effects of abuse over such a long period, she says there could not be a bigger challenge. ‘I hope to find justice and see my abuser punished for his crime. I am still jobless and depend on my partner and family for my financial needs. I cannot imagine going back to work with a male boss. Maybe one day, but not yet.

‘Those in power need to understand what is happening—listen, and support us. When you are abused, you become vulnerable and need all the support you can get. I have confidence in the system and I hope my abuser will be judged accordingly.’ Since 2020 to date, CAPJ has registered 157 complaints, including sexual harassment (mainly in domestic workplaces), sexual assault, physical violence, and threats, all at the workplace.

They currently have two pending court cases. Legal services are provided free of charge to survivors and victims through a partnership with a lawyer’s office whose costs are covered by COSI-Benin, with the support of CNV Internationaal. ‘This was put in place after we realised that most women found difficulties in obtaining justice, because they could not afford legal fees,’ Sourou says.

She explains that as per the centre’s role of listening, when survivors reach out for help they are received in confidence, listened to, and their complaints registered. ‘The centre then advises and informs, emergency measures are taken where necessary, and the person in question is informed of the legal system and their rights. We discuss available measures that can be taken and orient them towards the most suitable service, legal, psychologic or other,’ she states.

While CAPJ is not in a position to offer holistic care to survivors, she reveals that they have an alliance with Social Promotion Centers—specialised institutions of the State with the necessary resources to help victims and survivors. But even with the toll-free line in place, she admits there is still a lot of ground to be covered to ensure that its services are accessible to workers all over the country. To this effect, CAPJ has organised awareness and sensitisation workshops in the south and north of Benin, and public outreach programmes through radio and television broadcasts.

They are also tapping into the power of social media. ‘A WhatsApp forum was created in January 2021,’ Sourou says. ‘It is a melting point of information and awareness called *Les VBG, On en parle*, or “Let’s talk about GBV.” It brings together media professionals, anti-gender-based violence activists, lawyers, opinion leaders, and trade union leaders. With about two hundred members, the forum holds debates on topics related to violence at work and on *Convention 190* and *Recommendation 206*, as adopted by the ILO, on violence and harassment at the workplace.’

The biggest challenge is ‘breaking the silence,’ Sourou contends. ‘Our cultural context does not favour this; it is really difficult for victims of violence to speak out in their workplace. Beyond culture, they are afraid of finding themselves unemployed, or not being sufficiently protected from their tormentors. Since the legal process is also long and tedious, they do not always have the resilience and strength to deal with it. In addition, currently CAPJ is not known and accessible to all and we still lack technical resources.’ But this is not stopping them from fighting the good fight.

She is confident that Benin’s current government is on the right track to tackling GBV in the workplace. She also believes the country’s ratification of *Convention 190* and *Recommendation 206* will be useful in this quest—but, Sourou adds, ‘Most importantly, women who languish under the weight of silence need to break it and free themselves.’



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Helplines play a vital role in allowing people who may be in distress or in need of psycho-social support to communicate in their way and in their own time. The fact that it is confidential gives people a sense of control, making them feel free to discuss matters far too risky to share face-to-face. Calling a helpline is a great way to be heard and to get sound advice on how to approach your problems.

SGBV in humanitarian situations

By Elizabeth Kameo

The level of sexual violence increases in humanitarian situations, and as is the norm, women and girls suffer the most, regrettably. A study conducted by KIT and Save the Children International aimed at identifying and attending to the needs and rights of groups affected by this transgression.

For thirteen years, the Islamic group Boko Haram has continuously terrorised communities in Nigeria's Borno state, killing men and boys, and abducting young girls and women. In April 2014, they abducted 276 girls from a government secondary school in Chibok. This act brought to the limelight the little-researched and less-addressed issue of conflict-related sexual violence in humanitarian settings and areas of conflict.

The infamous hashtag #BringBackOurGirls—first posted by a Nigerian lawyer—not only trended globally, but brought worldwide attention to the dangers of ever-present sexual violence in humane situations. According to Amnesty International, this abduction was a small percentage of the total number of people abducted by them. In 2015, Amnesty estimated that at least two thousand women and girls had been abducted by the group since 2014, with many of them being forced into sexual slavery.

Different actions have helped bring about a growth in the number of programmes that seek to find solutions as well as prevent sexual violence in humanitarian and conflict settings. Nonetheless, it remains a complex issue with more challenges brought on by the lack of no or very scant available qualitative research in finding solutions.

Below: Hanan stands outside her home in Aden, southern Yemen



Senior sexual and reproductive health and rights advisor with the Royal Tropical Institute (KIT) Lincie Kusters says this lack of evidence led to KIT and Save the Children International's *Research for Change* project, which focused on assessing sexual violence in the context of disaster-prone and conflict-ridden settings. Funded by ECHO, the research was conducted in Borno state, Nigeria, and in Lahj and Aden governorate in South Yemen between 2019 and June 2022.

With a particular focus on sexual violence, the project further sought to include references to the full spectrum of SGBV where relevant. It would then provide evidence-informed recommendations to contribute towards increasing the capacity of humanitarian actors, to enable them to adequately identify and respond to the needs and rights of groups affected by sexual violence.

Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV) is among the greatest protection and public health challenges to be faced during humanitarian emergencies. It violates the right to life, the right not to be subjected to torture, inhumane or degrading treatment or punishment, the right to equal protection under the law, the right to equality in the family, and the right to physical and mental health (CEDAW, 1992).

According to the project research findings, 'one of the greatest challenges in addressing it in a conflict which involves responding to survivors and bringing perpetrators to justice, is the insufficient or unavailability of data.'

Carried out in Borno and in Lahj and Aden, the research shows patterns of sexual violence in humanitarian settings have been influenced by the rise in conflict, mass displacement, and disruption in the rule of law.

In Borno, the Boko Haram conflict has brought to the surface gender realities that have seen changes in sexual violence and its incidence. Women have been forced into exchanging sex for food and money, while young girls are forced to accept the fate of forced marriages to ensure their families are protected and fed.

Eight and a half million people are in need of life-saving assistance, while 1.7 million of those affected are women of reproductive age. The GBV prevalence rate is estimated to be at thirty percent, and sexual violence at sixteen. While Nigeria has ratified international and regional human rights treaties and policies, their implementation was uneven across the country.

South Yemen has been engulfed in more than seven years of conflict, with 23.4 million people requiring humanitarian assistance. In 2017, UNFPA estimates put more than three million women and girls at risk of gender-based violence and sixty thousand at risk

Women have been forced into exchanging sex for food and money, while young girls are forced to accept the fate of forced marriages to ensure their families are protected and fed



A Yemeni mother visits the Qa'a Al-Raqah health facility

of sexual violence, including rape. Currently, in 2022, 6.5 million women require GBV protection.

The economic crisis continues to worsen with numerous outbreaks and changing conflict lines with the number of internally displaced persons standing at over four million. Children were the group most frequently mentioned in south Yemen, while rape, especially of children and teenagers, was believed to be the most common form of sexual violence. Male children were mentioned to be more often affected compared to females. Child marriage was thought to be on the increase since the war started, with the youngest age group recalled being nine.

'If this was happening in other countries... if something like this happened to a child, half the earth would know and would demonstrate. No light has been shed on us, meaning that everything has become normal'—a teenage girl, in Lahj

'In both contexts,' Kusters says, 'there is a lack of data on sexual violence. The study was qualitative and engaged health care providers and humanitarian aid workers, survivors and community members, and assessed the services in health facilities.' According to her, it was imperative to investigate the perspectives of the survivors, what kind of support they got, and the kind of health service provisions they had.

It was also imperative to investigate how and whether international and national guidelines on dealing with sexual violence in these settings are adhered to. 'There was the need to identify prevalent types of sexual violence, responses, and the quality of services available. This would give insights to humanitarian aid practitioners in both settings on what kind of sexual violence responses exist and if there was adherence to the guidelines on working with sexual violence in service provision,' she says.

Results from the research point to the link between conflict and the increased incidence of some forms of violence such as sexual exploitation, early and forced marriage, and marital rape.

'My father forced me to marry someone, he said that I must marry that man. I said that I did not like him, but he said that if I did not marry him, there would be no you and no me...'—a 22-year-old woman in the Gwoza IDP camp, in Borno



Fatima, 22, collects water from the well at the Dorowa village, with her son Rabiou

Such revelations are proof there is a breakdown in the socio-economic systems, causing sexual exploitation. Sarah Ashraf—a global health expert with Save the Children—says in South Yemen, the conflict has led to a breakdown in social structure, economic hardships, and cultural norms. This has translated into reduced accountability and exacerbated the increase in sexual violence and supports the abuse of power.

While sexual violence incidences are prevalent in both contexts, research shows that their forms differ. What is considered by some as sexual violence, differs from others, as does how people react and speak about it in the two settings. 'In South Yemen, talking about it is seen as taboo. There was hardly any response from support,' Ashraf adds, 'It provides insight to practitioners and governments into the urgent need to prevent sexual violence and provide better support to survivors.'

In Borno, Nigeria, the landscape is different. Discussions on sexual violence were less of a taboo—the existence of sexual violence was acknowledged. 'There are forms of sexual violence that are known and talked about, such as rape and abduction. However, rape within marriages is not considered as one,' explains Diana Amaniyire, global health expert on SRHR and technical advisor to Save the Children.

Ashraf asserts that the openness in Borno could be linked to the fact that the large-scale conflict has been ongoing for so long that people have been exposed to mass abductions and sexual violence. This has given space for discussion of sexual violence within all spheres of the community, leading to government and other entities acknowledging the need to start thinking of actions to take.

'In the South of Yemen,' she explains, 'the conflict and economic crisis are prevalent but sexual violence being used as a weapon of war was not something that came up. It is a phenomenon that is happening, but not so obvious and on such a massive scale that people are okay to talk about it.'

'There is also the problem of very few things being done or certified within the health system for sexual violence. Some actions are

being taken, but these are adhering to the formal protocols, so space to talk about it openly is still limited.'

'In Nigeria,' Amaniyire states, 'there has been a lot of sensitisation about SGBV on the ground level through community initiatives such as aunties (older women in the communities). The local leaders have also created a conducive environment for victims to know that they can speak up.'

These structures, she says, have built a level of trust that is providing a beneficial platform in Borno for victims to speak up. They are a model example of how community-based initiatives can be beneficial to victims in these settings, even with a lack of humanitarian aid, or where it has been withdrawn or is reduced.

The project reveals challenges that need to be acknowledged in the wake of sexual violence in humanitarian settings such as survivor naming and shaming, and self-stigmatisation, which means few survivors ever speak out. A lack of accountability also means perpetrators stay unpunished and there is hardly a legal support system.

The question remains, how will this research be turned into concrete action situations in these settings? According to Kusters, the next step is widely disseminating the findings so they can be used by different stakeholders and incorporated into programmes. 'One significant aspect of conducting the research was to provide insight to service providers, government agencies, NGOs and humanitarian aid agencies to make a difference. We engaged MOH international and local NGOs.'

'After the research, we had validation sessions with key stakeholders, through dissemination sessions in different countries, and organised webinars. We will continue this engagement so they can incorporate research findings into their programmes. Currently, the focus is on disseminating and advocating for improved services.' One major platform that will be used for dissemination is Share-Net International's digital platform which has a member base of over a thousand practitioners and policymakers.

Ashraf says in Yemen, they are already finding ways to turn the research recommendations into action. 'The response from the MOH was very promising. They organised a workshop with different stakeholders and began developing an action plan. This was to see how the results can be used and what can be done in the immediate and long term, to ensure that the health system incorporates some of the recommendations.'

'In Nigeria,' Amaniyire says, 'research findings have been disseminated through the GBV subsector in the Health Ministry and implementing partners. There is commitment at the civil society organisations level. We are engaging with implementers, so they can find ways to incorporate some of the recommendations into their programming. However, the subsector needs to be engaged to come up with concrete plans.'

Additionally, simple recommendations that do not require humanitarian assistance should be lifted. Ashraf explains: 'One of the main objectives of the research was to try and come up with concrete suggestions and guidelines enabling the health system to be improved, and provide better services of a quality that are acceptable to the communities.'

'Those who do not require funding should be given support to make those adjustments and changes to the health system. That is the easier route. There are aspects of the health system that will require funding, no doubt. However, there are those that need policy changes, guidance, aligning, and realigning protocols with international standards, which is a big aspect of this study.'

The above, she says, can be done through existing forums such as the health cluster forum, the reproductive health sub-working forum, and the GBV working groups. They can play a significant role in endorsing some of these actions as well as holding stakeholders and partners accountable. They also keep dialogue and discussion open.

A lack of accountability also means perpetrators stay unpunished and there is hardly a legal support system

According to Ashraf, a sustainable humanitarian support model can be achieved by reconciling services and finding ways to deal with the breakdown of the social and economic system.

'When livelihoods are affected, there is an increase in vulnerability. All stakeholders should be engaged to create a multisector approach from prevention to sustainability; psychosocial services, social services, protection-related services, legal aspects, and food security and livelihood (FSL).'

Amaniyire adds that equipping women-headed families and vulnerable groups with income-generating skills is key in ensuring that they have income sources in cases where they do not have access to distributed rations. 'In Nigeria, there is proof that there have been developments in this, but it was still not strong enough to give them that economic power to feel like they are in a safe space to say no to exploitation. This needs to be strengthened right from the start of humanitarian responses and built into the system.'

'As we focus on sexual violence,' Ashraf says, 'we need to ensure we design holistic comprehensive projects right from the beginning and not look at it from a health perspective or a psychosocial perspective and then link it up with others. That linking up aspect becomes more challenging if it is not part of the same project.'

It is also essential that these programmes consider boys, adolescent boys, and men. 'We have focused so much on women and girls,

and rightly so, because they are very vulnerable; training midwives and women doctors and female service providers. However, this has created a barrier within health systems where boys and men are left out. Many will not turn to female service providers to talk about sexual violence.'

'There is a need to change strategies and relook at how we programme for SGBV in different programmes differently so that all can access services. This research brought about a lot of positive attention to the topic and subject area and that is what was needed.' Ashraf and Amaniyire emphasise the importance of using the research to implement and create projects supporting country programmes to turn these findings into actual tangible interventions.

Share-Net International is the leading knowledge and connections platform on SRHR. It has a network of experts and member organisations who combine the strengths of key international actors while harnessing localised knowledge. This promotes the development of better policies and practices in SRHR, including HIV.

'We use the Share-Net knowledge platform to advance the sexual and reproductive health agenda, especially those topics and themes that are less addressed or known such as SGBV in humanitarian settings,' Dorine Thomissen, the Share-Net International coordinator, adds.

She says they bring together researchers, policymakers and practitioners with the aim of improving policy and practice. 'We want the results to be accessible to a wider public that will use them for improvement of programmes. It is not only policy and practice that we aim to improve through this research, but also relevant issues that come up.'

'The way SGBV is discussed around the world has changed, but this research project is very specific. That is why as part of our objectives we will provide the opportunity for it to gain more attention. This is so that recommendations can be turned into policies and actions.'

She is confident that dissemination of the research project on their platform will be of substantial benefit. Drawing from examples given by members of Share-Net, she says there have been positive responses. This shows that research disseminated on the platform is being used for change by members through integration into their programmes or for lobbying and advocacy purposes. ▽



Internally displaced children in Banki IDP Camp, Borno State (Nigeria)

The brave women of Kruščica



‘The river belongs to everyone; it is our livelihood and if I have to go to the bridge and protest again, I will do it without hesitation’

is the president of the NGO Bistvo-Hrabre žene Kruščice. She was also a member of the Council of Mjesna Zajednica for four years.

‘Mjesna Zajednica,’ she continues, ‘is the lowest tier of the local self-government. Six of those brave women won seats in the council, and they used their positions to fight legally and physically against MHE on the Kruščica River. Of course, our efforts were supported by the community. My biggest motivation was and still is my children. The river belongs to everyone; it is our livelihood and if I have to go to the bridge and protest again, I will do it without hesitation.’

When Zukan and the women were attacked, Bosnian police violated civil and human rights—allegations they denied, though there is proof. Instead, they accused the villagers of illegally blocking the public road and denying passage to all traffic.

An article was published by the Council of Foreign Relations and updated in March 2022, titled *How Police Compare in Different Democracies*, by Amelia Cheatham and Lindsay Maizland. It reported that according to the Council of the UN Code of Conduct for Law Enforcement Officers, adopted by the General Assembly in 1979, ‘officers should only use force as a last resort.’

Amnesty International asserts, ‘Under international law, police officers should only ever use lethal force as a last resort. This means only when protecting themselves or others from the imminent threat of death or serious injury, and only when other options for de-escalation are insufficient.’

While it has detailed guidelines on the use of force by law enforcement agencies, and how they can improve their laws, policies, and guidelines, it also states: ‘Every country has its domestic laws and there is no one-size-fits-all prescription for making them safer and fairer.’ It proposes that where the use of force has resulted in injury or death, there must be a prompt, thorough, independent, and impartial investigation.

Thanks to the brave and defiant act of these women, their fame spread like wildfire, going beyond their small village in the Vitez municipality, central Bosnia. Today, they are referred to as the ‘brave women of Kruščica’ for their daring act. Yet, they were neither looking for fame nor popularity, they simply wanted to save their river; their source of livelihood.

The Kruščica River is one of the many waterways that are at risk of being destroyed through the construction of hydropower dams in the Balkans region. If not properly and extensively assessed, they pose the risk of causing irreparable damage to the climate and environment.

By Elizabeth Kameo

In August of 2017, Amela Zukan was amongst the brave women from her village who used their bodies as barricades to protect the Kruščica River. ‘I was on that bridge, that morning, with other women trying to prevent the construction machines from passing,’ she says. ‘We will forever remember that day, because we were brutally beaten for trying to save our lifeline—for water is life.’

‘Hopeful that they would not beat us, we decided to stand in front of the men for their protection and begged the police not to approach. That morning, 23 women were detained and treated like criminals. I was not among them, but together with others we went to the police and requested their release. After three hours they were released and warned not to go back to the bridge. One of them received a suspended six-month sentence.

‘These intimidations did not deter us from defending our river. The second time the machines came, accompanied by the police, was in 2018. To avoid misdemeanour charges against some of the women, only six of us—from Mjesna Zajednica—came out to block their path. Many attempts were made for the machines to pass, but we stood our ground. We were then taken to court and received suspended sentences. I often wonder what kind of country we live in, where the police work for the oppressors instead of protecting the people.’

According to Amnesty International, police brutality refers to various human rights violations by the police, including beatings, racial abuse, unlawful killings, torture, or indiscriminate use of riot control agents at protests. Bosnia and Herzegovina ratified the *UN Convention against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment* in 2008, but is yet to set up a national preventative mechanism.

Since 2020, several human rights organisations have expressed concern for the fact that police brutality has become a growing concern for many countries. According to research, police brutality rates are higher in areas with large concentrations of low-income residents, showing a possible link between the brutality and poverty.

The 38-year-old Zukan was born in Zenica, Bosnia. She moved to Kruščica, got married, and had children. When she took to the bridge that day, she was a simple trader and shop owner. Today, she

On an ice-cold morning in August five years ago, a peaceful protest turned into a brutal attack on civilians by the very same agency that is supposed to protect them. The bravery of a few women that day may have saved their river, but it nearly cost them their lives as many were subjected to police brutality, imprisonment, and even denied medical attention.



Amela Zukan

This story was shared with Vice Versa via Ana-Marija Mileusnić (Friends of the Earth Croatia) and Isabelle Geuskens (Milieudéfensie). They are both members of the Gender Justice and Dismantling Patriarchy Working Group (GJDP WG) of Friends of the Earth International.

115 small hydropower projects (HPP) have already been constructed in Bosnia and at least 340 more are in stages of planning, preparation, and construction. These women hope to put a complete stop to them. Their brave acts have not been in vain, though, as they have inspired other communities in the Balkans to stand up for their rivers, too. ‘We are glad our efforts are seen as a symbol of resistance, prompting other communities to defend their rivers,’ Zukan states.

The women are now members of the Coalition for the Protection of the Rivers in Bosnia, which serves as a platform for joint action and supports many local communities and initiatives. The Balkans, home to the last wild rivers in Europe, are being threatened and put at risk by private investors who claim the HPP is the ‘only’ renewable source of energy.

However, environmentalists maintain that these projects risk causing species extinction, displacing people globally, and contributing to climate change. These fearless women sought, and still seek to protect their river from the threat of destruction through projects that profit investors while destroying landscapes, harming local agriculture and potential for tourism, and depriving the people of their source of potable water.

Researcher Alma Midžić explains, ‘Brave women of Kruščica, a non-formal group, brought together the women while Eco Bistvo was formed to provide a legal entity to represent them in court and help deal with administrative issues. Furthermore, when representatives of women were recently elected, they decided to add their name to the latter, as it proved to be a true representative of community interests.’

Zukan says, ‘The courageous people of Kruščica are not giving up. The legal struggle against the HPPs on the river is still going on, since the Supreme Court did not admit our evidence. The case proceeded to the Constitutional Court where our lawyer, Bruno Božić, sent an appeal. We hope we will win and protect our basic right to life and water. We have been making efforts to bring tourism back and return to our old glory, considering that this place has a tradition of recreational tourism. Of course, in harmony with nature and based on the principles of sustainability.’

Today, Eco Bistvo is spearheading different tourist projects to benefit the community and support tourism. ‘With the support of the community, we are fixing up a picnic area, a flow pool on the river, and much more. Kruščica has always been a wonderful vacation place, and still attracts visitors from all over Bosnia and Herzegovina. With these activities, we are telling the authorities that there is still hope for our beautiful country, and we will not let corrupt individuals destroy what belongs to all of us.’

The Council of the local community of Kruščica



Time to decriminalise sex work

Sex workers, a majority of them women, are at a high risk of physical and sexual harassment, and violence. With policies that criminalise their profession still in effect, the big question remains, will we ever realise the end to gender-based violence, when sex workers still face marginalisation and victimisation?



Mary Mulwa, advocate of the High Court of Kenya, during a legal awareness session at Amkeni Malindi

Since time immemorial Karumaindo, an old three-storey building, has served as a brothel in Majengo—a renowned crowded neighbourhood in Malindi known for always being lively. It has 27 rooms that were initially lodgings, but have been converted to rentals for sex workers to live in and serve their clients. At the time of our visit, all the rooms are fully occupied. ‘This place has existed even before I was born,’ Riziki Bondora, a forty-year-old sex worker, tells us.

She is currently advocating for safe spaces in the same industry. An influx of tourists to the coastal town serves as the bedrock for sex work, prompting a majority of sex workers to flood the town. Riziki takes us on a short tour of the major hotspots for sex workers in Malindi, a coastal resort town located in Kilifi County, Kenya.

‘I was born and bred in this neighbourhood. My home is right there, with an extra room that I have rented out to a colleague,’ she says, pointing it out to us. As the night unfolds, bearing a reward of rest for those who toiled during the day, it also marks the beginning of a busy and daring shift for these women as they try to eke out a living.

As we approach the building, we meet a lot of women loitering in strategic places and dressed skimpily. ‘These are sex workers. They position themselves strategically and wait to lure potential clients who are making their way to the bar. Just like in any other business, it is a competition of how many clients you can win based on your negotiation skills.’

As she leads the way, almost all the women we meet say hello to her, while others make special requests. She is like a matriarch to them. ‘Please bring us condoms. We are suffering because they are now scarce, so we are forced to buy,’ one of them pleads.

‘Occasionally, I have had to fight with clients who after sleeping with them refuse to pay,’ Sharon* admits. She left her two children with her mother—after walking out of an abusive marriage—to try

*not their real names

By Cynthia Omondi



Riziki Bondora at her office

and seek employment. Due to a lack of basic education and skills, sex work was probably the easiest means of survival.

‘This work is torture. Opening your legs to a stranger for one hundred or one hundred and fifty shillings—one dollar—‘per shot is more of slavery. With bills to pay, we need to have at least five to ten men a day,’ she laments. She tells us how some men become hostile, yet they have no one to turn to in case of an unfortunate event.

‘Some clients are rude and refuse to use protection, and proceed to forcefully sleep with you,’ says another female sex worker. ‘This has happened to me, but I am grateful we have the International Centre for Reproductive Health nearby. We always go there whenever we have such emergencies and require medical attention. The services are free.’

Their stories are disheartening. They bear wounds, physical and mental, that might take time to heal or probably never will. It takes us around three to four hours to manoeuvre through the alleys of the Majengo area, where most of the hotspots are located. It dawns on us that all the women we interact with are single mothers, each one having been violated in one way or another, but most opt not to report.

‘They fear going to the police, because, at the station, they are mistreated more. I was victimised sometime back, when I went to report. The police officer that I found on duty openly told me that there is nowhere in Kenyan law where “prostitution” is recognised as work,’ Bondora confesses.

She works at Amkeni Malindi (Wake up Malindi), an organisation with a mission to promote quality and healthy living for marginalised sexual minorities and groups through integrated health services empowerment, advocacy, and research. It is an organisation for the LGBTQ+ community and male sex workers, but Bondora has managed to create space for female sex workers so they can also benefit from the services offered—free medical care, condoms, and psychosocial support, among others.

During a legal awareness session, where beneficiaries of Amkeni Malindi get legal advice based on the various harassments they have experienced and how they can get help, Bondora invites a few female sex workers as well. Some of the cases we hear are saddening. ‘I met this man at the club I had gone to look for clients and when

‘The police officer that I found on duty openly told me that there is nowhere in Kenyan law where “prostitution” is recognised as work’

he realised I was a sex worker, he approached me. We had an unusual conversation as he showed no interest in having my services, but empathised with me for my line of work.

‘He sounded genuine and offered to give me what he called a “decent job,” and asked me to accompany him to his house. When we arrived, all hell broke loose. He said he wanted me for a wife and forcefully caged me for three days as I struggled to find a way out. He forced me to have sex with him and when I became stubborn, he released two huge dogs that attacked me.’

‘When I managed to escape, I went to the police station and reported him. He bribed the officers and twisted the story, exposing me as a prostitute,’ Rahma* narrates, as she breaks into tears. She shows us the scars she got from the dog attack. Six sex workers share their stories, five women and one man, and the feedback from the lawyer paints a grim picture.



Rahma showing scars she received from the dogs that attacked her

'In Kenya, some aspects of sex work are criminalised, such as "living on the proceeds of sex work." This has given it the perception of being illegal, therefore cases relating to the same are rarely heard,' Mary Mulwa responds. She is an advocate of the High Court of Kenya and works in Malindi. Sharing her personal view, she confesses, "These minority groups go through a lot. Some cases are serious human violations and for those, we always represent them to ensure justice is served."

'However, there is nothing we can do for those that involve their line of work, like a client not paying them, unless the law is changed to recognise sex work as a profession. We can only empathise,' she says dejectedly. Some of them have been trained as paralegals, and guide others on their fundamental rights.

'1 yearn for the day when sex workers will have a safe space, free of judgement or harassment, especially by the police. We suffer the most at their hands,' Riziki Bondora states.

According to a police constable, who handles the gender desk at Malindi police station, there were very few cases of gender-based violence reported by sex workers between 2020 and 2022. 'From the few cases reported, not all were recorded, because in most cases we wonder on what basis they will be taken to court.' He argues that sex work poses a threat to society, especially to those on the streets.

'When we find them loitering in the streets, we are supposed to arrest them, but we let them be, because we understand they are fending for their families. Sometime back, we conducted a survey and were able to track 329 sex workers located in Watamu, Malindi, Mareneni, and Gogoni, and discovered that all of them were single mothers. The question is, where are the fathers?' he asks rhetorically.

'They all admitted to having at least three men in a day. So, technically, we have more male "prostitutes" than women, only that men come, take, and go. What these women get themselves into is very dangerous. They work at night, in dark and excluded places. We had a case where one of them was killed around Alaskan Grounds. If things are to change, then it should be from the law, because for now whatever they are doing is wrong and illegal,' he emphasises.

Caroline Njoroge is the deputy national coordinator at KESWA, Kenya Sex Workers Association, an umbrella body of sex workers-led groups and organisations. She proudly identifies as a sex worker and argues that there is no law penalising the sale of sexual services in Kenya. 'According to the penal code, what is illegal is living off the proceeds of sex work. If we go by this, then it is third parties who will be affected; the bar that I will go to drink as a sex worker,



Caroline Njoroge, the deputy national coordinator at KESWA, the Kenya Sex Workers Association

the school where I will pay fees for my children, or the shop where I will go and buy something,' she explains.

She strongly believes that sex work is work just like any other, and should be respected. Through their organisation, they advocate for sex workers' rights as human rights, through awareness raising, capacity strengthening, organisational development, and national advocacy. 'The only way we can have a safe space for sex workers is by decriminalising sex work, which begins with the government amending the law,' she says.

'For instance, for a long time, we believed that masks should only be worn by doctors during surgeries. But when Covid hit, governments sensitised their citizens on the importance of wearing masks, and all of a sudden the whole world was doing it. It is the same with sex work, if governments sanction it, then we shall no longer witness cases of harassment, victimisation, or judgement. But until then, sex workers will continue having their human rights and dignity violated.'

Sex work as an occupation is often referred to as the oldest profession in the world. Yet centuries later, sex workers are still being victimized for their line of work. Most people who oppose its legalisation come from a place of morality by arguing that doing so will lead to the moral decadence of society. However, countries like the Netherlands, which legalised it more than twenty years ago, have proved this assumption wrong. Legitimising the profession will prove beneficial since it will enable governments to regulate the industry by coming up with policies that will protect sex workers from abuse and mistreatment. On the other hand, it will be a new source of revenue through taxation and will lead to a reduction in sexually transmitted diseases.



Riziki Bondora taking us to the room at Karumaindo

From the contributors



Eunice Mwaura

'I find it disheartening to see how many lives have been and continue to be ruined by gender-based violence. This menace has infiltrated every aspect of society. It knows no gender, meaning no one is safe. My challenge to you is to SPEAK UP against it! Moreover, MAKE IT YOUR BUSINESS! Silence is consent to the vice that is gender-based violence.'



Elizabeth Kameo

'As long as gender inequalities persist and women remain unempowered economically, driving change and fostering accountability alone as stipulated by the UN Call to Action may not address the increased risks of GBV, especially in humanitarian settings.'



Emmanuel Mandebo

'While we should speak out against GBV, we should also offer other viable solutions to survivors, including access to justice, which is the most critical. In this issue, I write about UWONET, a leading women's rights organisation that is at the forefront of ensuring that GBV survivors are accorded the requisite protection as well as bringing perpetrators to book.'



Cynthia Omondi

'Contributing to this special has been fulfilling and through it, I have learnt that shame does die when stories are told in safe spaces. Let us all create that safe space. Ending gender-based violence is everyone's responsibility. Make it count.'



Abdulwadud Bayo

'If you are going to fight GBV, it doesn't start with a fight between two people of opposite gender, but it starts with you. It's with how you speak and behave with those that surround you. I acknowledge that men and women are not the same and that they will never be. That doesn't mean that they can't be treated fairly and equitably.'



Nicera Wanjiru

'Every day they die of silence while the perpetrators walk freely on the streets. They were silenced by people they knew very well, and others by total strangers. As a survivor, it's high time we got justice. Civil society organisations and the government should work together to ensure we do not lose another soul because of gender-based violence. #UntilAllWomenAreFree.'



Patricia Kamene

'Her safety! Her future! As persons with disabilities, especially women, our safety is our future. We are assured of our security as the beautiful women that we are. Our future will be sweeter and free from bitterness when we don't have to worry about someone taking advantage of us the next minute. Our safety comes first; our safety will determine our future!'



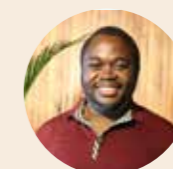
Mariejo S. Ramos

'Collective action can help women carve spaces of solidarity against gender-based violence and structural inequalities.'



Martha Nalukenge

'GBV affects all of us, and our power to speak about it changes the end of the story. As uncomfortable as it is walking around with sand/stones in your shoes, let us resolve not to let our lips stay glued together when we witness any form of violence. Open your ears to the victims' stories.'



Pius Okore

'The fact that there are women who also adhere to the culture that prevents men from speaking out against gender-based violence cannot be denied. But, as the dominant group with the power to either maintain or change this culture, men's voices will always be more impactful. It is time for us to stand up and be counted.'



Najuma

'Discrimination by gender is not natural, but a behaviour ingrained by societal norms. We must check such biases wherever and whenever we can, in any way that promotes harmonious living.'



Eva Nakato

'As journalists, the stories we write and the platform we give GBV survivors to share their stories are huge steps in the fight against it in the media. Tighten your seatbelts, and get ready to be inspired. Yes! Silence is golden, but when it comes to GBV, silence is violence.'



Florence Machio

'Until every woman and girl is safe, we are all not safe. Ending GBV requires all of us to ensure that women's rights are protected in all corners of the world. Women's bodies have faced a cold war and it is time everyone played their part in ensuring every girl and woman is protected.'



McWilliams Wasswa

'Through my lens as a photojournalist, I have realised that my ability lies not only in empowering and impacting society, but also in influencing individual lives as well. Let's do all we can to speak up against GBV using our talents.'



Pinkleen Oinokwesiga

'Women are getting raped, killed, silenced, and are still LIVING AT THE MERCIES of someone every day. This day should be a day where we FIGHT FOR THEIR RIGHTS, launch projects, and set up effective systems and mechanisms to protect them against TRIBULATIONS. On this day, we should review our strategies to stop this violence towards women. So, how many women have you helped, protected, or empowered? It all starts with you. And TOGETHER WE CAN!'

The Voiceless Victims of GBV

‘The world has been programmed to think of men as the perpetrators, leaving them with no room to air out their cries or opinions’

Male gender-based violence remains clocked in the culture of quietude. Many men are victims, yet society stereotypes them as the strong and superior gender, whose role is to provide, care for, and protect others. This leaves them vulnerable since they have nowhere and no one to turn to.

By Martha Nalukenge

GBV has been termed as one of the most persistent violations of human rights the world over. It has been revealed that violence against men, which has gone unreported for far too long, is gradually on the rise and demeans their sexuality, dignity, and biblical superiority complex. *Vice Versa Global* has taken it upon itself to highlight this plight by giving a few men a platform to air their views on the issue and the role they play.

JOHN ADAKU

A regional coordinator and advocate at Here Is Life, and a church and community mobiliser



‘We can’t deny the role some men play in GBV, which is a documented fact,’ he says. ‘However, let us not be blind to those who undergo the same, which might be physical, psychological, sexual and socio-economic. There have been instances where some of them are harassed and forced into marriages when they are barely out of their teens. We need to acknowledge that men need a voice too, identify those who are suffering from the scourge, and help them.’

JOHN MUGABI

The founder and CEO of Youth With a Vision



He works alongside boys and men to eliminate all forms of gender-based violence. He stresses that they often suffer in silence since most—if not all—GBV offices are run by women, feminists, and advocates of women empowerment. This leaves no room for them, which is made worse by the fact that they are regularly considered the perpetrators, never the victims. ‘Men can also be anti-GBV champions, if only they are given the right tools and equal platforms as their female counterparts,’ he stresses.

SSEKYEYAMA EZEKIEL

Journalist at Uganda Radio Network



‘Every time one speaks about GBV,’ Ezekiel says, ‘the blame automatically shifts to men as the perpetrators. This misconception has been perpetuated, in part, because we are living in a feminist country, and our societies have become too feminist. Even when a woman abuses a man, it is he who will be treated as the culprit, before the fact, by the first responders. This puts men in a perpetual victim state.’

‘We need to acknowledge that men need a voice too, identify those who are suffering from the scourge, and help them’

‘They are denied a voice to speak about these things when they happen, leaving them to suffer in silence. They suffer psychological traumas because society does not believe that they can also be abused, which may explain why some of them spend most of their time in bars and go home in the morning or very late at night to avoid distress. Even in homes where a boy reports a girl for battering him, he is never believed.’

‘Additionally, the punishments given to children are often based on gender—a boy will receive a tougher punishment as compared to a girl. Even with the police, how many cases have they followed and concluded where a man was the victim? You will find that the officers manning the Child and Family Protection department are women, so how are they supposed to handle such a case?’

‘The world has been programmed to think of men as the perpetrators, leaving them with no room to air out their cries or opinions. The fact is, what affects women directly doesn’t affect men. What society identifies as GBV against women is mostly battery, yet there are very many forms of violence that affect our communities. Some men are starved both sexually and physically.’

‘They are given tough conditions,’ Ezekiel continues, ‘that are beyond their capabilities, like taking care of their wife’s family on top of their own and if they refuse, there are repercussions. Some wives batter their husbands, yet they can’t speak out due to fear of being labelled inferior or their masculinity being questioned. They end up as victims of suicide due to the pent-up frustrations and no avenue to release them.’

‘Others are forced to marry and produce children for women who at times set a fee for sexual intercourse for them, something they can’t report. Most men are victims of deceitful parenting—they are made to take care of children who are not biologically theirs without their knowledge—so when the truth finally comes to light, how do you expect such a person to recover from that?’

‘It is about time we broaden the term, because it affects both genders—and as illustrated, men more than women. We can begin by addressing the former as victims in different forums and see how they can be helped, and also embrace dialogue among couples. For GBV to be viewed holistically, male victims can be brought to the fore which will help in breaking the notion that men are the stronger gender.’

‘Speaking about it openly and collectively can bring solutions, since the problem persists because many avoid talking about it openly due to the “what will society say and who will believe me” syndrome.’

Overcoming

a patriarchal culture



© Patrick Baz

Deyman Waata Campaign for 16 Days of Activism

By Cynthia Omondi

The global threat of GBV is present everywhere—from Indonesia, the largest island nation in the world, to Lebanon, and Uganda, the Pearl of Africa. Rutgers International, through its *Generation G* programme, has collaborated with different organisations from different countries to equip young leaders from patriarchal societies to address the root cause of gender inequality, and defend their rights in the face of rigid traditions.

Views on sexuality among most Indonesian Muslims tend to be conservative and patriarchal; husbands serve as breadwinners while women are the domestic players. 'I experienced gender inequality during my childhood,' Dian Novita narrates. 'This was before I could comprehend its impact from a broader perspective. I grew up in a family where my dad was the sole decision-maker.'

'He was very strict and always wanted his expectations met without question. When we did something wrong, both mother and children were physically punished. For instance, if I missed my prayers or came home late, I would be beaten with a belt. It was always heartbreaking to see my mother being beaten in front of us. This is a practice that had been normalised in our culture, which bothered me.'

Novita is currently the programmes manager at a non-profit legal aid organisation called LBH APIK Jakarta, based in the Indonesian capital. At the age of twenty, the now 37-year-old became interested in women's and gender equality issues when she began volunteering at the Women Crisis Centre, which provides services to victims and survivors of gender-based violence.

'I was exposed to the challenges that Indonesian women face. The domestic issues of gender inequality were escalating because of gender norms. My curiosity intensified as I dug deeper into understanding women's rights. It is clear that most of the gender inequality issues are emboldened by religion or culture.'

LBH APIK Jakarta focuses on providing legal services for women seeking justice. It seeks legal changes at substance, structure and culture levels to try and build a social movement for justice for all women. It is a partner of Rutgers International under the *Generation G* programme, which strives to create a world where everyone can be whom they want to be. Gender-just and violence-free societies where both women and men can live in their full diversity.

'The programme enhances what we do at LBH APIK Jakarta in our daily activities of providing legal aid,' Dian Novita continues. 'It also advocates for laws and policies to be more gender equal. What stands out for me is the fact that through it, we are reminded of the importance of involving young people. I began engaging in this space as a young person and the impact has been profound. Since we began the partnership there has been an increase in the number of youth being involved in advocacy for gender equality and human rights.'

Through her efforts, several young people have been able to engage with policymakers in parliament and local leaders in various provinces and regions. 'In 2004, I joined the demonstrations and advocacy campaigns that resulted in the domestic violence law being enacted officially by the Indonesian government. Since then, there has been a gradual positive change. Society slowly began to understand that men had been mistreating women, which was not okay. Even my father realised he was wronging me and my siblings. Back then, domestic violence was viewed as a private issue.'

However, women are now aware that they can seek help from the organisation or any other dealing with women and children issues whenever they are violated, even in their own homes.

'It took a lot of courage for me to initiate the conversation with my father, thanks to the feminism classes I attended that taught me the "how." His violent nature always made me furious and it was difficult to approach him. I was made to understand his behaviour, because he was also raised in a patriarchal culture and knew no better how to love and care for us. Though I wanted to view him as a perpetrator, I was able to understand that he was also a victim since that is how society shaped him.'

Indonesia's women's leadership in the public domain is not well promoted and sustained. The overlapping and intersecting layers of discrimination emanating from the legal, political, social, and economic structures make women the most vulnerable to oppression and discrimination. 'During my college year,' Eva Nurcahyani says, 'I witnessed bias when I vied for the topmost position as the head of the student organisation. My candidature was opposed simply because of my gender.'

'It was believed that the position could only be occupied by a male student—sad that this chauvinistic notion is still relevant today.' At only twenty-three, she, an undergraduate law student, has managed to create grassroots awareness in her community

Nobody understands a community's challenges better than its women and she believes that it is only through them that solutions will be found

for women and girls to take up leadership. Due to her experiences on campus, she joined the feminist collective called Lingkar Studi Feminis in Indonesia to educate more young people.

The feminist enthusiast comes from Tangerang Selatan, located in the province of Banten, on the western border of Jakarta. She is determined to ensure women get into strategic and political spaces that are currently dominated by men. She describes her place as a 'strongly masculine' and 'very conservative town, rife with negative social issues' like economic poverty among women and early child marriages. Nobody understands a community's challenges better than its women and she believes that it is only through them that solutions will be found.

As many transgender people still struggle to have their voices heard and fight for opportunities that seem dwindling, Ririn Sabani feels privileged and happy to be in a position to work freely without judgement. Besides being a part of the programme, the thirty-year-old is also involved in the community legal aid programme in central Sulawesi.



© Rutgers

Dian Novita

'I feel lucky that I can enjoy my rights,' she says. 'Coming from a community that is very conservative about gender identity, I am among the very few who are fortunate to enjoy comfortable spaces. Not many transgender people have this privilege, especially here in Palu, where there is a history of intolerance and non-acceptance of the transgender community.'

She believes she could be the only trans person in Palu holding such a space. She finds that to be very empowering as transgender people are the most common victims of sexual and gender-based violence. She adds that the exclusion of gender minority people in policy and decision-making is the major root cause of escalating SGBV cases.

'Society,' she says, 'should stop viewing us with "one eye." There is a fixed mindset rooted in how people are viewed according to their sexuality. We are often seen as the minority, since we do not fit into what is expected. Our voices need to be heard! We need to change that mindset.' She focuses on preventing the vice and promoting mental health among young people in Palu.

In retrospect, Indonesia has made a milestone in the fight for gender equality. Mega Puspitasari, of the Indonesian Women Coalition, applauds the efforts of campaigns and advocacy across different spheres that contributed to the successful passing of the anti-sexual violence bill.

‘It has taken us eight years to push for this bill,’ she says, ‘with the government coming up with reasons to have it postponed each year. We are glad that the bill was finally passed in April. The fight does not end there, though, we still have to ensure that the bill is disseminated to the regions and that all citizens are aware of it.’

‘The 16 Days of Activism are fast approaching. A major part of our programme will be building networks to promote this law that protects victims of GBV. We still have a long way to go.’ According to her, even though they have a network of forty-three thousand members in twenty-five provinces, access to information is still a major setback for them in their advocacy work and creating awareness. The goal is to reach all 37 provinces in her country.

Lebanon, just like Indonesia, has increased risks of violence against women. Amid war and instability, women’s rights become the first casualty. This is particularly true following the catastrophic economic crisis that began in 2019. This put the population’s livelihoods at stake, with citizens unable to meet their most basic needs—putting food on the table, access to healthcare and primary infrastructures such as electricity and potable water, the provision of medication and other essential goods such as fuel.

‘Women’s rights are pushed to the back banner or are still in the deep freezer with no one to defrost them,’ says activist Anthony Keedi of ABAAD, an organisation based in Lebanon. It is a resource centre for gender equality that began in 2011. From his point of view, political turmoil, economic challenges, and Covid-19, as well as religious sectarianism, has pushed women’s interests away from decision-making bodies.

The Generation G programme equips youth leaders and civil society organisations to address the root causes of gender inequality. It challenges patriarchal values and power structures, rigid gender norms and harmful perceptions that drive power abuse and violence by men, and encourages sustainable change.

Rutgers’ gender-transformative approach addresses the root causes of gender inequality and gender-based violence by amplifying young feminist voices and strengthening the role of young men as allies. This approach promotes human rights and youth agencies to address and reverse harmful norms and power dynamics around gender, ethnicity, disability, HIV status, socioeconomic status, and religion. Sexual and gender diversity is embraced

He advocates for equitable masculinity and is the gender advisor at ABAAD. He notes that due to religious sectarianism in Lebanon, women and girls are quite disadvantaged. ‘About eighteen sects came together and negotiated a cease-fire to end the civil war, but did not include women’s issues. Divorce, inheritance, and domestic violence issues are governed based on which denomination or sect a woman belongs to. So, a woman will wait for a religious court to determine her matter and most likely whatever ruling it is, will not consider her rights,’ he adds.

He believes that people are ready to make a change and the time is now. He applauds women’s organisations in Lebanon that push forward regardless of everything. Most that advocate for gender equality and work to end GBV have targeted two different spheres: working on socio-cultural awareness at the grassroots level, directly engaging communities, and increasing their readiness to accept change. They also mobilise within decision-making spaces to create sustainable infrastructures at the institutional level.

ABAAD, for instance, has recently begun collaborating with several key stakeholders such as the National Commission for Lebanese Women (NCLW). They have produced the revised *National Action Plan* on UN resolution 1325, in addition to the *National Strategy for Women in Lebanon*, both imperative pieces of policy to advance and optimise women’s roles. ‘They “sing louder than thunder,”’ he says, and true to this, they will eventually be heard.

‘If harassment is normalised and the community is not even aware, then this becomes a hindrance to the change we anticipate’



Karin van der Velde

© Rutgers

Society slowly began to understand that men had been mistreating women, which was not okay

Referring to Indonesia, Karin van der Velde, a programme officer at Rutgers, points out that it is imperative to transform the dynamics of gender norms. ‘When addressing gender-based violence, it is pertinent to not only support victims and survivors, but also to work with the perpetrators. Rather than focusing on whom this happens to, we engage men and boys as well to look at the entire picture and explain what harmful masculinities are.’

‘There are a lot of gender norms that are harmful that we constantly watch or listen to, from commercials to television shows, which have been normalised. If harassment is normalised and the community is not even aware, then this becomes a hindrance to the change we anticipate.’ She advocates for sexual and reproductive health and rights, and gender justice for youth at the United Nations in Geneva and New York.

According to her, sexuality education is the key component in the quest to achieve a world free from gender-based violence. ‘I cannot stress it enough, we must teach children and young people about consent and boundaries. We should normalise their ability to express how they feel about certain things and say no when they want to. We should enable young people to navigate their autonomy and respect it. If this is achieved in our societies, it will make a huge difference.’

She concludes that the information children receive needs to extend beyond just the risks of engaging in sexual acts. Instead of teaching only about risks and getting pregnant or being infected with diseases, schools should be teaching about pleasure and consent. They should cover all aspects of sexuality and relationships, not just the risks.

The promotion of sexuality education through film has been a remarkable achievement for Uganda. Reach a Hand-Uganda (RAHU) developed the first Pan-African television series, called *Kyaddala*, Luganda for ‘It’s real.’ It was inspired by its work on youth empowerment programmes with an emphasis on the sexual and reproductive health and rights of young people aged twelve to thirty, including HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention.

‘Having worked with young people for over ten years,’ Herman Namanya, the production manager, says, ‘we thought of something that they could easily relate to and learn. Since entertainment is their main interest, a movie came to mind. We had many issues to tackle around reproductive health, safe sex, abortion, and gender-based violence. We could not achieve this in just one episode of a movie, so that is how we settled for a series.’

The popular series, currently in its second season, premiered in 2019. It has since garnered up to 45 million viewers as of March 2022, according to DSTV. Its excellent content about sexuality education has inspired universities like Makerere, Ndejje, and Kampala International University to screen it during student panels. ‘They



A sex education class in a rural school in Uganda

often see themselves in characters which helps them to resonate with what they are experiencing.

‘They watch and learn from it because these are issues that they face daily. They are also able to share with their peers and give solutions that they learnt from the series such as safe abortions and having healthy relationships,’ he explains. The reception was remarkable, as many people sent in reviews requesting more episodes. He confesses that the secret behind this was engaging cultural icons, influential personnel who are engaged as champions advocating for young people’s rights and SRHR, in the cast.

Youth are always moved by them. ‘If they see a celebrity on TV saying that they are planning to use a condom before having sex, they will take up the advice. This is because they believe in them. They act as role models.’ The Pan-African series was made with young people at the forefront, reflecting their realities and the sexual and reproductive health and rights issues they navigate daily. It continues to address GBV, harmful gender norms, and the challenges youth go through.

Herman Namanya and his team are not stopping here, as he confirms to us that they will keep producing more series. This is just one form of how sexuality education can be incorporated into our daily lives, as we strive for a world free of GBV. We need more creative ways that will help us achieve more equitable and just communities across the globe. And just as Karin van der Velde emphasises, it will only take sexuality education, especially among children and youth, to fight gender-based violence. ▽



'We are not

invisible'

The rights of indigenous people in the Philippines are enshrined in their constitution and backed by international law, yet they still face discrimination, human rights violations and dispossession which represses their basic rights. Filipino rights defender Judy Pasimio is addressing this injustice directly, from the women's perspective, since they are the ones who suffer the most.

By Mariejo S. Ramos

Locating the faces and voices of indigenous women has become an existential prompt for Filipino human rights defender Judy Pasimio. As the coordinator of LILAK—Purple Action for Indigenous Women's Rights—her long and fruitful journey in activism began with two questions: Where are the indigenous women? Which issues are important to them that are not being discussed?

In the case of indigenous women of the Dumagat-Remontado tribe in Southern Tagalog, resistance is anchored in their desire for peace and harmony with nature. Faced with the threat of a Chinese-funded multibillion-peso dam, they have one clear message, 'We should not be rendered invisible.'

Their government's 18.7 billion peso (317 million dollars) New Centennial Water Source-Kaliwa Dam Project is meant to be built in the Rizal and Quezon provinces to solve Manila's water shortage. It is one of the big-ticket items under the *Build Build Build* programme of former president Rodrigo Duterte.

The Dumagat-Remontado, who live within the Kaliwa River Basin, are opposed to it, because it encroaches on their ancestral domain and poses severe flood risks to around three hundred hectares of forested area. Aside from its significant threat to ecosystems and livelihoods, environmental degradation will result in food insecurity, poverty, displacement, loss of traditional knowledge, and violence.

'I am afraid of the threats thrown at us on social media while they have actual guns pointed at them at every corner'

Left: Judy Pasimio leads a protest against Terror Law in the Philippines

Three years ago on International Women's Day, the world witnessed Dumagat women standing at the centre of resistance. A leader offered soil and mama (betel nut) to express her kindred's opposition to the dam, while other women sang a song—as if in prayer—to not let their precious land drown in water. They were among the key partners of LILAK, a collective of feminists, activists, indigenous women, and advocates who act in solidarity, against threats to indigenous people's rights to land and environment.

It has been a long and constant quest for Pasimio tracing back to Sagada, a town in the Cordillera mountains in Northern Luzon. As a young environmental defender, she was among the few non-lawyers who were working with the Legal Rights and Natural Resources Center (LRC), which was instrumental in crafting the landmark *Indigenous People's Rights Act* of 1997. 'In Sagada, there is a physical structure called a dap-ay, which doubles up as a political structure for the council of elders,' she recalls.

Being a woman, she was asked to sit outside the circle, while her male colleagues were allowed in. 'That triggered me and made me wonder where the women were. So, I started seeking them out each time I went on a community visit,' she says. This made her view the nuances of land rights and environmental struggles of indigenous people (IP) from the perspective of women.

She recalls a time LRC asked some IP women elders to relate their issues with mining and logging practices in their community. They raised gender-specific issues that often hide behind well-established narratives. For instance, when talking about deforestation, they went beyond land grabbing and spoke about gendered particularities.

'Most of them spiritualists, they proclaimed that they get their strength and wisdom from the forest. But now with the forests gone, where do they go?' Among the key issues raised, were access to basic social services and the lack of support for their health issues. Pasimio continues: 'For them, it is not just about not having free health service, but accessibility. Their geographical isolation, compared to the urban and rural poor, really underpins their political and economic isolation.'

Working with them and other environmental defenders in LILAK, particularly in Southern Tagalog and Mindanao, allowed her to witness various forms of gender-based violence against vulnerable women. According to a report by IUCN, on the link between the environment and GBV, 'it'—gender-based violence—'can be rooted in discriminatory norms and laws and shrouded in impunity,' being used 'as a means of control, subjugation and exploitation that further reinforces gender inequality.'

Many indigenous women who were primary caregivers in the family, but had little capacity to comply with state requirements, were deprived of access to government aid when the pandemic

struck. Lockdowns also prevented them from seeking medical attention which was located far from them.

For Pasimio, the pandemic also highlighted a contentious and discriminatory policy on women, the 'no home birthing' ordinances that exist in several local government units. They prohibit mothers from giving birth in their homes. 'Time and again, indigenous women have testified that there is a very small percentage—if any—of deaths due to their birthing practices. Another issue to consider is the distance and inaccessibility of birthing centres. The government has no "meet halfway" policy on this.'

At LILAK, she is helping open up spaces for sharing and solidarity, especially on gendered issues, among indigenous women and environmental defenders. When they looked at the situation of women in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), an area marred by armed conflict, they found displacement, violence, and discrimination rooted in religious and gender biases.

A study published this year by Plan International and the Women's Refugee Commission found that displaced girls from the conflict-affected areas of BARMM are 'more vulnerable to child marriage, which can severely affect their physical, mental, and psycho-social health, as well as make them prone to stigma, isolation, school dropouts, and extreme poverty.' Pasimio notes that displaced groups were forced to settle in makeshift evacuation areas because no municipality would accept them.

'[Accepting them] would somehow legitimise the violence in the community, and when [local officials] legitimise it, they need to make a stand. But they're afraid of doing that. Access to justice has been very difficult, especially for indigenous women, so they are left on their own.' Gender-based violence also exists within the community. In some indigenous groups, the issue of rape was being settled by having the perpetrator marry the victim.

Young women in other IP groups can also be victims of incest, 'and it's the tribal leaders who are hunting the women protecting the survivors,' she says. But her work with LILAK has sparked a ray of hope. 'Now I can speak for the Teduray, who are pushing for



School children walk with posters protesting the construction of the Kaliwa Dam



A dam in the Philippines

a more just and favourable response to victims and survivors of GBV. Thanks to the activism of their women leaders, they can open indigenous justice system mechanisms for gender-based violence within their community.'

Violence against Filipino environmental defenders, including indigenous people, has also been tied to their economic conditions. When Duterte lifted the nine-year moratorium on new mining permits in the country, the government promised to employ members of the indigenous communities. 'When we looked at the jobs and looked for women, there were very few of them who were in the mining work!'

Their jobs were extensions of their domesticated roles—laundry, cooking and entertaining the miners, most of them men. 'There's no space for development, while the contractual nature of their job and the places they work renders them more vulnerable to violence,' she adds. For her, what makes the Philippines one of the worst countries for environmentalists is the state-sponsored social injustices and violence against environmental rights defenders, especially women.

She laments how the Duterte administration had institutionalised 'red-tagging,' the malicious blacklisting of individuals and

organisations critical of their actions. In the latest report by the NGO Global Witness, the Philippines remain the deadliest country in Asia for land and environmental defenders, with 270 of them killed in the last decade.

Of this, over forty percent—114—were indigenous people campaigning to protect their land and environment, with nearly eighty percent of attacks taking place on the island of Mindanao. 'The challenges I experience are nothing compared to what our women partners encounter. I am afraid of the threats thrown at us on social media while they have actual guns pointed at them at every corner daily. This became more pronounced under the Duterte administration.'

Like many women's rights defenders, she was labelled a communist and a drug lord. They even posted a photo of her with her daughter on a Facebook page of supporters of the ex-president's daughter, now vice president Sara Duterte. 'That kind of threat is enough to give you several sleepless nights. The government has actively tried to silence us through red-tagging, labelling us terrorists and rebels, and the killings of activists and community leaders.'

'Sadly, impunity for these acts of violence is being institutionalised through the anti-terrorist law,' she asserts. With her colleagues, they challenged the administration by filing a petition

to the Commission on Human Rights against the sexist and misogynist campaign statements and actions of the then-president. 'He was firing tirades against women activists and women's rights advocates, mostly online, but you got the feeling that it could easily result in physical threats.'

GBV, according to IUCN, 'can also be employed as a means to maintain power imbalances between men and women, and their rights and roles in accessing, using, and managing natural resources by violently reinforcing socio-cultural expectations and norms, and exacerbating gender inequality.' Under the Philippines' law on indigenous people, free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) is a specific right that pertains to indigenous people's self-determination and participation in decision-making on any activity that affects them.

It is protected by international human rights law. In the case of the Kaliwa Dam, the military employed a 'divide and rule' strategy. 'Before the pandemic struck, the communities were united. Almost six clusters said no and per the rule of the FPIC'—under the IPRA—'that's a resounding no,' she says. However, the pandemic prompted governments to impose lockdowns, so civic organisations and other support groups could not meet with the indigenous people. State groups and the military took advantage of this to intimidate them to reverse their decision on the project.

Some of them had been red-tagged by the country's anti-insurgency task force and forced to surrender to authorities for five thousand pesos. 'They faced hunger and could not enter the forests, not only because of the lockdown, but the military had set up camps in the vicinity, creating fear,' she adds. With state-sponsored red-tagging that threatens the lives of women and rights defenders, where do they go for safety?

The Commission on Human Rights were the first responder and helped them amplify cases of violence and harassment. Except for a few local judges who can still stand up to red-tagging, there was 'no other recourse' for rights defenders. Together with her colleagues, they reached out to international legal mechanisms,

'It is important we collectively reflect on how to analyse our situations at the community level, and connect these to the regional and international level'

including the United Nations Human Rights Council.

LILAK continues to share a strong partnership with women leaders and advocates who form a robust and diverse network of rights defenders. They initiated the *ReSisters Dialogues*, a regional workshop where women community leaders and activists from South Asia join together. 'It is important we collectively reflect on how to analyse our situations at the community level, and connect these to the regional and international level,' she explains. It strengthens them to know that they are not alone in this.

Even though more Filipino women leaders are finding their voices, amplifying their causes and asserting their rights, Pasimio fears that most women's voices are being drowned out by a lack of representation. 'The search is not yet over,' she affirms. 'We always look beyond the data, and scan for the women's faces.'



IUCN NL is part of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the largest and oldest union for nature conservation in the world. It works with civil society organisations in multiple countries in Asia, Latin America, and Africa, and it advocates for gender equality: women's rights are fundamental rights. In addition, women—in all their diversity—play a central role in nature conservation. However, they continually face discrimination and remain marginalised when it comes to decision-making processes around their forests, waters, and lands. Moreover, women and other marginalised groups often face gender-based violence linked to the environment.

IUCN NL applies a gender transformative approach, addressing the root causes of gender inequality. It supports women's networks and feminist organisations like LILAK, among others, in its campaign work and by linking them to international mechanisms to ensure a podium on which their voices are amplified

LET ME SPEAK!

A POEM ON GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

By Patricia Kamene

With or without a watch

on the left hand
I feel like it's right about that time to address these issues.
You see!

Two wrongs don't make a right—
But! When a right is left, it makes it wrong.

Studies by the national gender and equality commission show that one in every three ladies experiences gender-based violence and thirty-nine percent of women experience GBV. There is no clear percentage for men
For it is sad that some never live to tell the story and those that do, are silenced by society.

These are not numbers, percentages, or words.
These are humans
The cost per survivor per family adds up to more than thirty thousand,
with a loss in productivity adds up to more than two hundred and twenty,
the perpetrators further spend two hundred thousand and two hundred and fifty
with probable jail terms
But the question is, do we have to spend this?

Even with our mouths shut these figures are telling things they are shouting for our attention.
On the scales of measures of humanity, we are all equal but any time we direct violence to a person based on their gender we defile equality, sidelining our humanity.
I believe that our differences should make us equal and this is not a late-night conversation
This is a wake-up call, the phone is ringing
We all need to answer!

You see! If we do not speak out
That little girl
That beautiful sister
That special cousin
That charming nephew will be caught up in these shoes and it might be too late to tie the laces
or probably too late to walk away.
These issues are our daily headaches and we cannot stomach them.
I believe it is that time when we left the little cones to silence equality
and work for bigger changes
For I believe that bitter truths make better lives.

And today I want to speak,

For that young girl who is growing to become a lady scared of bleeds
for the pain that she had to endure for that cut,
that went past her flesh deep into her soul
for a culture that has no respect for female dignity.

Today, I want to speak,
For that young woman ignoring the comment battle
That she has received from the community with so many images in her own gallery
but none to picture herself in.
Her clothes have become skeletons in her closet scared of wearing that beautiful dress
That hugs her tight for the fear of the loose men with flaming horns in their pants.
That woman,
Scared of chasing her dreams
From her weakened beliefs and toxic working environment
That unlicensed her self-drive.

Today, let me stand up!
For that young man and lady living with disability
Living in a courtroom where the teachers, the coach, and the community
that judges them by their inabilities
denied the freedom of expression,
freedom of participation,
freedom of education
and tell them that I believe that their abilities
makes them special and they are people of standard,
So, they must attend those classes and excise on books

Patricia Kamene (26) woke up blind at the age of nine. She is currently an activist, poet, and a dancer, pursuing a degree in Leadership and Management. She won the Miss Culture Contest at her university, the Tangaza University College, in Nairobi, which gives special attention to students with disability—financially supported by the Liliame Foundation, from the Netherlands. It focuses on their strengths, not limitations. As a young girl who was trying to adapt to this new way of life, Patricia escaped defilement from her pastor, uncle, neighbour, and sadly even her father. This situation resulted in an escalation of domestic violence at her home.

She decided to share her experience through poetry.

Today, let me speak

For that woman who was forced into marriage before she could even know herself

That woman in that relationship where violence is like a cup of tea served like a prescription in the morning, then with a double dose in the evening.

Well, you see!
that slap hurt her ear,
that punch broke her ear,
that kick tore her ear.
She is afraid of closing her eyes
never to open them again living with a death wish.

Let me speak for that woman
Who is full of values but tied to worthlessness!
The Mekatilili wa Menza rendered powerless
—the helpless mother Teresa.
That woman
Chained to dependency on her children
The mirage of love quoted apologies,
Seductive promises, fading hopes of a change of a better tomorrow
That is not promised.

Today, let me speak

For that boy, who is dragging his feet to school
Carrying a backpack full of pains and sorrows
from his father, stepfather, his uncle
That man scared of trusting people with his back.

Today let me speak
For that man who is not a soldier
But every single night is fighting battles in his head,
That man struggling to fit in
and make it out in a society that is full of itself and full of criticism
Let me speak
For that man who was silenced by the community

Today, let me speak
For that man who was humiliated by his wife
That man who has seen it all but did not leave long enough to tell it.
See, it is that time when we the young people
do away with our seats and stand up for ourselves.
For, telling the truth is a tall order, and those standing for it are shot.
Cause this one! We cannot autocorrect
We need to put away our phones and put in programs that save the present and secure the future.

It is that time

When we young people attend sexuality classes
without intercourse in mind,
It is that time when parents invest in equal education for their young ones
for it is the key to success with knowledge and skills
being the master keys for young ones,

It is that time when these words are connected to the speakers of the government and the community
for our cries for equal opportunity and a legal framework to protect against gender-based violence to be heard.
For I believe that on the scales of the measures of humanity

We are all equal.

Fight for human rights in the extractive industry



By Pinkleen Oinokwesiga
Artwork by Najuma

Nowadays, more nations are shifting towards natural resource extraction as a means of spurring growth and reducing poverty. Unfortunately, these benefits usually come at a great cost, causing environmental and social harm. To rectify this, the *Count Me In!* consortium has come up with initiatives in the Global South that will strengthen women's capacity to defend, organise and advocate for themselves and their lands.

Since the year 2000, the extraction of natural resources has more than tripled, leading to an increase in the development of extraction projects. This has resulted in the loss of land and livelihoods and created climate emergencies and crises that affect gender and class. However, a group of women and girls have been proposing and leading feminist solutions against this, centring on social justice, human rights, and care for all people and the planet.

They have applied their ancestral knowledge of land regeneration, thereby strengthening their communities to saying no and resisting such projects. These women land defenders act as guardians of the environment, yet they are still vulnerable to specific gender-based risks. Sadly, it is estimated that one in ten is killed annually, with the highest number (212) occurring in 2019.

Luckily, a consortium came up and proposed critical initiatives around GBV, economic justice, and sustainable resourcing for women's rights in policy-making spaces. They use popular education materials to speak against injustice, take action against violence and inequality, as well as build movements for transformative change by using their collective voice to raise issues on the global stage.

The *Count Me In!* consortium (*CM!*) is a network of feminist funders, educators, and movement builders working to achieve human rights and equality for women, girls, and trans people worldwide. It constitutes organisations like the Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID), CREA, Just Associates (JASS), Mama Cash, Urgent Action Fund-Africa and Urgent Action for Women Human Rights Defenders, Red Umbrella Fund (RUF), and WO=MEN, the Dutch gender platform, as their lobbying partner.

Countries such as the Philippines, Zimbabwe, Malawi, Indonesia, Honduras, and Mexico have especially benefited from the work being done by the consortium and its constituent partners. I had a chance to discuss with Ronald Wesso and Connie Nawaigo, who work with the *Count Me In!* extractives working group, about their popular education tool that was developed to enable land defenders to investigate the individuals funding extractives projects and how with it, women land defenders can protect themselves from violence and GBV.

Wesso is a popular educator and freelance researcher in Johannesburg, South Africa, who has written widely on matters of labour, land, community, and feminist movements. Meanwhile, Nawaigo is a human rights lawyer and women's advocate in Zimbabwe and Uganda. She works to lobby for and evaluate human rights, democracy, and governance through different organisations like Human Rights Network-Uganda, Urgent Action Fund-Africa and Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights.

According to her, the consortium works with female human rights defenders on land defence. It is an integral part of their work since the group works with structurally marginalised and excluded groups. In addition to evictions, loss of land, destruction of eco and biosystems, highly securitised zones, rape, intimidation, and assassinations, they also face gender-based violence.

Governments and advocates of the status quo sometimes monetise patriarchal stereotypes to target women activists—such as land defenders. They are often labelled enemies of progress and other derogatory terms, which are used to attack and weaken their resistance against extractives. This is their everyday life. Nonetheless, there is support by the consortium for those in desperate need, such as grants for relocation, which are available through Mama



Ronald Wesso

Governments and advocates of the status quo sometimes monetise patriarchal stereotypes to target women activists—such as land defenders

Cash and UAF-Africa.

This applies to those who feel they are no longer safe in their current location. They also ensure their anonymity, to protect them, so that the extractives do not direct their resources to silence dissenting voices. Despite the challenges, these brave women continue making gains in the fight for their rights to land and homes. One equivalent is collective protection within the movement, where every member knows how to look out for their safety and of others, since they are all integral to the movement.

It is imperative to point out that the consortium avails support to ongoing resistances and does not, in any way, bring resistance where none exists. That way, it strengthens women's capacity to defend, organise and advocate for themselves and their land by creating awareness of the risks and how they can be mitigated. They have put in place different strategies, like popular education by JASS, which works with communities and movements, and focuses on three issues—identifying the problem, discovering what you want, and what you want to do.

Wesso explains that there is always a need to describe what happens behind the scenes and understand how the projects are financed and abled through laws and policies. Interestingly, research carried out in Honduras, Zimbabwe, and Indonesia discovered that the law was actually in favour of extractive projects, fronting those interests over the local community's.

When the lockdown was imposed on South Africans, he used his experience, research, and discussions, and together with the team from the *CM!* extractives working group formulated a toolkit. It has fifty-three exercises with different aspects of resistance against extractives and their related problems, how to deal with violence against women, and complicated tribunal laws.

He confidently explains that it is very user-friendly, as long as the community has the patience and commitment to see change and does not need any special qualification. He further states that it is open-ended, allowing for innovation and modification, and dissects several issues. He assures that it can be used by land defenders and their allies, without the need for an academic or lawyer.

To illustrate, he gives the example of an investment chain exercise. A group of defenders are taken through a series of activities, putting them in a position of developing strategies that will confront investors in an extractive project. This is done through a strategy that concentrates on 'pressure points,' areas in the extractive and political industry which support the former, that people can focus their resistance on to achieve the change they want.

The toolkit provides tools that people take, step by step, until they achieve their objective. It is usable across communities and has revolutionised and proved successful in the resistance struggle in

To do things better, people on the ground like Nawaigo assert *the need to listen to communities during policy formation*

communities where such activities are prevalent, with reports from South East Asia, Indonesia, Honduras, Latin America, Malawi, and Zimbabwe supporting this. To Nawaigo, the toolkit has demonstrated its usefulness as people acquire knowledge on how they can advocate and resist better. She emphasises that anyone can use it as it helps one understand the individuals funding these projects.

With its help, individuals have been helped to actively resist in an organised manner against financiers of such projects in their communities.

However, there are several challenges and obstacles to the great work being done by *CMI!* in regards to its usage, Ronald Wesso points out. It is a written toolkit for communities where information is usually disseminated orally. Therefore, it requires someone to read and share it verbally, which at times is difficult because it incorporates several exercises. But as earlier explained, it takes patience to achieve the desired results, and different communities have shown this.

He admits that it is unfortunate communities have to deal with a toolkit written in a foreign language. This requires translation into the local languages, which can be problematic when trying to find the right people who can immerse themselves in it. Popular educators like Wesso and Nawaigo have been employed by the consortium, through their different partners, since by nature it requires one or two individuals to disseminate the contents to the local communities. It helps that it is a written manual for oral processes, so communities are easily trained.

Land defence continues to take centre stage globally. Activists for climate change are now being brought on board through the toolkit with the view that it (land defence) is the solution to the climate crises. To do things better, people on the ground like Nawaigo assert the need to listen to communities during policy formation. She emphasises that consultation with key stakeholders is vital in ensuring people's innate rights are protected such as the right to say no and what it means.

Wesso seconds, in regards to GBV in extractive communities, as this would create a free and peaceful society. Nawaigo conclusively urges that communities should be heard, development should be looked at differently and most importantly, alternative economic systems that do not need continuous extraction until communities are impoverished should be put into consideration. Perhaps, more sustainable practices would garner less resistance from locals.



Connie Nawaigo

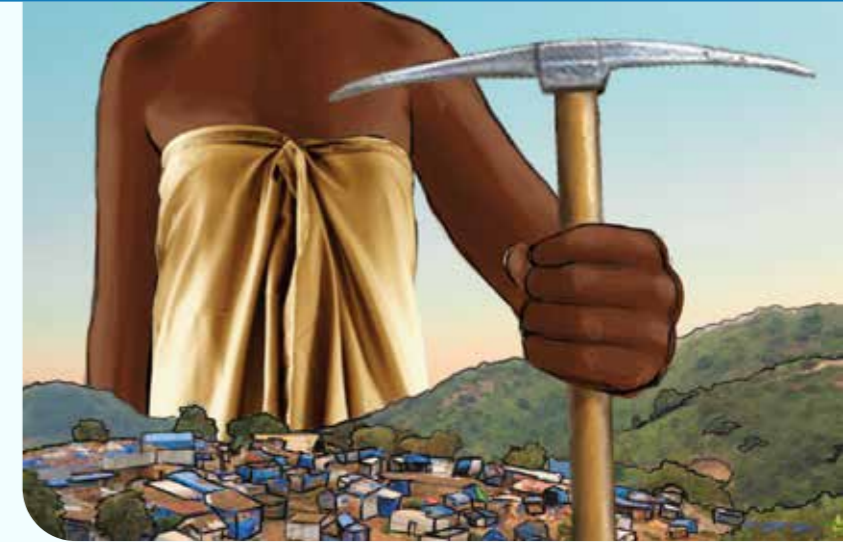
Indisputably, the extractive industry is a billion-dollar industry, capable of propelling a country from a developing one to among the wealthiest in the world. Unfortunately, most developing countries that are rich in these resources are marred by weak governance structures which promote corruption and conflict. In the end, they have become a source of conflict rather than an opportunity. Worse still, it is the women and children who always seem to bear the brunt.

The assassination of a feminist land defender spurred the Count Me In! consortium to embark on research to better understand and reveal the financial drivers and enablers of extractive projects. Based on that, they developed the toolkit to support women land defenders and their communities in their efforts to fight extractive projects. It provides tools and analysis that enable them to map what is impacting their lands and develop stronger strategies in response.

Living at the mercies of a gold mine

In 2017, more than ten thousand miners were evicted from their land, by the same government that was meant to protect them, in favour of mining companies. This led to protests which eventually had them reinstated after they acquired the necessary documents.

By Pinkleen Oinokwesiga
Artwork by Najuma



Mubende, located 110 kilometres west of Kampala, was a typical rural settlement until someone discovered a gold nugget on Kagaba Hill, leading to an influx of prospectors. By 2014, gold rushes had become common in the sub-region. People migrated from other places to become miners, washers, refiners, middlemen, buyers, and even exporters, increasing the number of artisanal miners—small-scale subsistence miners who are not officially employed by a mining company, but work independently using their resources.

Three years later, over ten thousand illegal artisans were evicted. It was alleged that they were encroaching on the legal mining areas the government had given to AUC, a foreign gold miners company meant to advance the sector in the country. They were then required to process and own mineral location licenses to operate. In the aftermath of their ruthless eviction from the gold mines on the third of August 2017, the president claimed he had not given the directive but rather had told the soldiers and other security agencies to be on 'standby.'

The miners were adamant that he had betrayed them, yet he had often made verbal pledges that they were safe and would continue to work without interference. This triggered them to put up a fight to keep their land under their umbrella association, Mubende United Miners Association (MUMA), which brings together 22 associations. The chairman selected chairpersons from each association within the mining area to join hands and achieve their desired goal.

One of the chairpersons took me through the series of events that transpired. They were facilitated by different organisations, like Global Rights Alert and ActionAid Uganda, as they fought to get the rightful documents and licenses that would reinstate them to their former areas and allow them to operate. As more organisations like Human Rights Defenders Network came on board, the women had undergone training and learnt how to speak out for themselves as mine workers, defend each other, and become resilient.

This network has also helped them to interact and grow their circles, and other key strategies, to reinforce resistance against any form of discrimination. It should be noted that women within the Kagaba mining area encounter numerous GBV incidences that include domestic violence, rape, sex work, and verbal violence.

They are also excluded from communal work, and key decision-making processes, and are underpaid due to gender inequality.

But as a chairperson, activist, miner, and leader of all women in her area, who is also part of the Women Human Rights Defender Network Uganda, she seeks to ensure that these women's rights are respected and upheld.

She voices their needs any chance she gets, makes sure medical check-ups are done monthly—especially for sex workers—and ensures the creation of savings groups among them since men tend to be in control of money. She also counsels couples in case of domestic squabbles and makes sure that women are involved in communal work by creating opportunities for them, like communal cooking projects, which they earn from.

Through the joint effort of human rights defenders and women, the issues of GBV are gradually being tackled with the help of the *Count Me In!* consortium and Human Rights Defenders Network and its projects where women speak against the perpetrators and their unfair acts. Extractive companies are still on the increase, which potentially means more displacement and eviction of people, which will affect settlement and work. But it takes patience, passion, and commitment to either, stand and fight for your rights, or another person's. It all starts with you.

This network has also helped them to interact and grow their circles, and other key strategies, to reinforce resistance against any form of discrimination



Tribulations of the Salt Miners of Katwe

By Pinkleen Oinokwesiga
Artwork by Najuma

As a minority group that earns from mining and fishing, they were concerned since their sole source of income was being taken away from them, and their freedom would be, too, over time

The salt mining sector in Lake Katwe is very lucrative and employs many people, including women. Unfortunately, many of them still live as paupers because of the deeply entrenched patriarchal system which seems keen to subdue them. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that they often encounter incidences of GBV and land grabbing. Fortunately, the situation appears to be gradually improving.

Salt mining remains one of the major sources of livelihood for the people of Kasese residing around Lake Katwe. The infamous lockdown that was imposed by the government at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic aggravated the abuse and dangerous working conditions for the women who worked in those mines. During that period, an unforgettable incident occurred which remains prevalent in the mouths of the residents of the Katwe-Kabatoro town council to date.

A Chinese company developed an interest in acquiring the community salt pans when the government offered surface rights to the Chinese. This did not go down well with the residents of the area. A few elites took the initiative to read, dissect, and fully comprehend the contract that had been signed and after, search for and craft out possible solutions. As a minority group that earns from mining and fishing, they were concerned since their sole source of income was being taken away from them, and their freedom would be, too, over time.

The lake employs over six thousand people in the Katwe-Kabatoro town council—single mothers, widows, and orphans—who own the salt pans. Therefore, having foreigners in possession of this land would be disadvantageous to them and their community, besides the subsequent environmental degradation that would result from letting them operate the pans.

‘The locals were not considered or consulted, which made the situation unpredictable since our security was not guaranteed. The project seemed like it was meant for personal gain rather than communal benefit,’ someone retorted.

The residents, therefore, decided to resist this injustice and fight for their land. Surprisingly, some leaders in the area did not like the fact that this group of elites had chosen to stand against their ‘progress’ and were ‘hindering development.’

They branded them enemies of progress and had them arrested—thirteen men and one woman. However, this turned out to be a blessing in disguise. Their brave act brought on board partners, supporters, and organisations who shared their vision of protecting and defending human rights.

Twerwaneho Listeners Club, based in Fort Portal, and the Women Human Rights Defenders Network also came on board and supported the team in creating awareness by making the necessary noise. Eventually, it paid off, because the company left the site.

Through some of those organisations, people have learnt where, how and to whom they can run in similar situations. Some people, especially young mothers, received skills training and protective gear to use when mining.

In a world where toxic patriarchy is deeply entrenched, women and girls have consistently found themselves in the brunt of its harsh consequences. The unequal balance of power has manifested at home in the form of domestic violence, and at work where they get little to no pay and no space to speak on the issues affecting them.

This has seen them cower whenever issues that affect them are raised, as they are afraid it may lead to their expulsion. Additionally, their lack of involvement in leadership spaces has seen a lack of articulation of women’s issues.

They face numerous risks and challenges while working in the salt mines, like lack of enough protective gear which affects their bodies, especially the skin, causing dryness and irritation. There is also no market for their goods, and an inability to budget for their hard-earned money since the financial aspect has been reserved for men, denying them financial autonomy.

There have been cases of abandonment by their spouses who go on to remarry, after acquiring the money, leaving them with the overwhelming burden of fending for their families.

Usually, the men go for those who do not work in the mines,

Usually, the men go for those who do not work in the mines, since they claim that their women have low libido due to the dehydration caused by the salt

since they claim that their women have low libido due to the dehydration caused by the salt. Those that try to fight for their basic rights are often abused, humiliated, intimidated, stereotyped, and, in some cases, arrested. A founder of Women with a Vision and the Katwe Salt Pan Owners and Workers Association felt there was a need to fight for their rights and be the voice of the victimised salt pan owners and workers.

She is passionate and, with the full support of her husband, has created a safe space for women to air out their issues during their weekly meetings. She established herself by standing up against all the stereotypes towards women by promoting inclusiveness through the associations.

She recruits more women into this space, creates awareness and sensitises women about their rights, ensures peace through couples counselling, encourages a saving culture amongst them, and promotes backyard farming.

These women sometimes give back to the community by cleaning the salt pits that get clogged with polythene or bottles. Since women are more vulnerable to specific gender-based risks, she has encountered challenges as she tries to give solutions and be the voice for women in different families facing GBV.

From being nicknamed Mandela and bush lawyer, to being slapped, and getting constant threats to her and her family. ‘He said, “I want to cut you into pieces and if that is not achieved, I will go to a witch doctor and bewitch you,” she was once told.

After a series of workshops and training in the community, many women have learnt to speak out against violence and fight for their rights. They work in groups with the motive of being the voice for all by leaving no woman behind and empowering each other to stand against intimidation.

They aim to involve the police, partner with organisations, and watch each other’s backs despite the hostile environment. There is a fire that is always ignited and instilled in them as these challenges arise, but with support from their families, persistence, and passion, they can strike a balance between work and family.

This supports and fuels the continuity of human rights defenders. At the same time, land defenders voluntarily perform their duties in partnership with the police, lease out their land, and ensure that people in the community have the necessary and right documents for land ownership. In turn, this increases how they protect their land and territories (as a community) from extractive projects that might be detrimental to them. ▽

Sextortion: The Emerging Pandemic

In Kenya, sextortion has taken on a different form. Women and girls are being pressured into sex in exchange for a basic necessity—water. Kenyan politician Cecilia Ayot decided to fight for the rights of her constituents by confronting the cartels who were perpetuating this vice. Unfortunately, it came at a cost; her political seat. But she vows not to relent until sex for water is no longer a thing.

By Nicera Wanjiru

I meet Cecilia Ayot, a former county assembly member of Nairobi County, in Kibera. The informal settlement, also known as ‘Chocolate City’ due to the rusty brownish iron sheets, experiences perennial water issues like most slums—leading to a scramble for the precious commodity. It is a natural resource that is not only essential for the preservation of all life, but for human socioeconomic growth as well.

Unfortunately, it has become a constant source of anxiety, trauma, and psychological distress due to rising demand, and cartels that are only interested in making profits, without any regard for human life. The so-called water cartels have remained a tough nut to crack for successive administrations. Worst of all, their water points have become havens for ‘sextortion.’

‘The term refers to sexual exploitation in which abuse of power is the means of coercion, in this regard in exchange for water, yet it is a necessity that the government should be providing for free,’ Ayot says. ‘Since the cartels are aware that these families are not well-off, they ask for sex instead of money, from both school-going

girls and married women. The scarcity of the commodity usually results in very long queues, so the woman who can sleep with the water vendor or cartel is given priority.

‘This dehumanises these women, as it adds to other socio-economic challenges that they face, while also affecting the girls’ performance in school, who may end up in early marriages or abusing drugs. Due to the influence and power that these cartels wield, anyone who dares try to expose them usually ends up relocating—due to threats. In our community, you will be lying to yourself if you think you will get police protection, because nothing ever happens when you report to them.

‘This leads to the destruction of many lives, since most of these girls are being infected with HIV at a very young age, something that is becoming a common occurrence. Almost all water points in Laini Saba are in the hands of cartels who determine the cost, leading to high prices, especially when there is scarcity. Apart from the expense, these water points have become havens of sexual exploitation.’

‘It started long ago. I know of people, close friends and relatives, who have gone through it. I see the effects every day; some were infected with HIV and died. Even as we speak, the rate of girls and women being infected is still very high. I usually don’t like talking about this topic,’ she says, trying to hold back tears.

‘When we were young, we used to fetch water at night from the golf course, since it was the only time that you could get water for free. During that time I witnessed terrible things. Young girls would be raped, and as we speak today, some died while others are drug addicts. Only a few ever overcame the trauma.’

When asked how to deal with the cartels, the former legislator admits she may not have the solution, but she has some recommendations. ‘There is a need to approach this differently, starting with positive parenting and putting the government to task. The question is, why don’t we have water? They keep saying we don’t have land, but when they want to construct roads they demolish structures and make way. Why can’t they do the same and build water points? Water in Laini Saba is more expensive than in any other place in Kibera!’

At the height of the pandemic, the Nairobi Metropolitan Service drilled boreholes in every community, including Ayot’s, though she suspects there may have been vested interests in the projects. ‘We must understand why they were made,’ she says, ‘because that was not the solution. They were made because there were people who wanted contracts. For instance, in Laini Saba where one was drilled the area’s leadership was not involved, so for me, that was a half-baked solution.’

‘The Nairobi Water Company is a wholly-owned subsidiary of the County government of Nairobi. If the latter wants to solve the water problem, why don’t they just lay pipes, put a few water points, and continue doing so over time to enable a continuous supply of water at very affordable rates? I think all these problems are by design, with all fingers pointing to the government before anyone else.’

‘Sextortion refers to sexual exploitation in which abuse of power is the means of coercion, in this regard in exchange for water, yet it is a necessity that the government should be providing for free’

Left: a teenage girl carrying water in a jerry can back home

‘Since they are not taking any action, development partners have the opportunity to partner with local organisations to realise this,’ she continues. ‘When we go to the community, we can also ensure we have victim support centres and counselling, because most of our girls have lost livelihoods due to what happened to them when they were young.’

It is ‘a very difficult question,’ she says, when asked about her achievements as a legislator. ‘The Members of the County Assembly are just legislators, so the things most people expect from us are different from what we do. We have a ward development fund of fourteen million shillings—one hundred and sixteen thousand dollars—‘though sadly it is at the discretion of the government that is in power and involves a lot of bureaucracy.’

‘I participated in a lot of motions which include the budget increment, and we passed many bills, but they are yet to be implemented. MCAs should be rated according to their successful



‘However, the fight against gender-based violence must continue through the implementation of tougher laws which will ensure violators are punished’

legislation policies. For instance, the bill on sextortion that I was pushing for was still in the early stages of drafting with the relevant organisations, then Covid hit and everything ground to a halt.

‘For your information, passing a bill is not easy, you need money for networking and lobbying. I will love to be a part of this particular one so I will connect those organisations to other legislatures to make sure it succeeds. It is for the benefit of our people and future generations.’

In her struggle to defend her people’s rights, she has to battle the cartels as well. ‘When a well-connected health centre in Kibera was destroyed, an entire neighbourhood was left without water. I arranged for a water truck to come in and salvage the situation, but it was stopped and turned back by the cartels since it posed a threat to their interests and power.’

‘They ganged up and sponsored one of their own to contest against me for our party’s nomination ticket. They feared my activism would eventually lead to the closure of their businesses, which are hubs for sextortion. I managed to outsmart them, though I won with a margin of only three hundred votes. On seeing this, they regrouped, mobilised more funds, and advised my opponent to vie for the seat on an independent ticket which our law allows. Unfortunately, I lost in the general elections to the cartel-backed opponent.’

‘My fight was against the cartels. Don’t forget that these violators usually threaten the victims, so being a woman who is also an activist was a very big threat to them and their activities. I was threatened and called a prostitute, which is a rite of passage for most women in politics...’

‘Due to my activism and the fight against cartels, I was the runner-up in the elections. However, the fight against gender-based violence must continue through the implementation of tougher laws which will ensure violators are punished.’

‘I plan to take a small break from politics and go back to work on my projects at the DADA Foundation. I want to continue working with young women, and issues of insecurity. If I—an Honourable Member—could be stoned, what of that voiceless young lady? Collaborating with partners with similar objectives is also in my plans. I believe that we need to make sound economic-empowerment policies, because people are languishing in poverty and undergoing emotional distress.’

‘I am trying to come up with home-grown solutions for my community since I am still connected with them. I have plenty of time at the moment and am more focused, so it is easy to take on individual cases and see them through. Above all, the fight towards freedom from water cartels continues, and I will not relent until the day water will be safely accessible to our women and girls. One day water will be free for all, sextortion will have been neutralised, and there will be zero cases of sex for water.’



Cecilia Ayot in solidarity with students community and the civil society during a demonstration against an alleged rape case at a girls secondary school

Women and girls should be able to enjoy their right to water without having to fear for either their physical or emotional well-being. In most informal settlements, they are forced to leave their houses in the darkest hour of the night, walk long distances and queue for hours at the few available water points, just to get this precious commodity.

Unfortunately, these places are managed by men and boys with an unhealthy sense of power over them, and they proceed to ask for sexual favours from them in exchange for water. Keep in mind that the distance between their homes and these places is not that safe, either during the day or at night. These are all risk factors for women and girls; the risk of being harassed, raped, abducted, or pressured into having sex for water.

Simavi has been raising awareness of this problem by performing research in Uganda, Bangladesh and Nepal to provide solid evidence on the underlying causes of violence against women and girls in the context of water and sanitation. Prevention is a structural element of all the programmes that they work on. They ensure this by making sure that facilities and services are safe to use for women, providing a safe space for them to discuss their challenges, discussing gender roles at household and community levels, and making sure that girls can say ‘no’ to sextortion.

For more information, go to: simavi.nl

SEX FOR WATER

CORRUPTION’S NEW CURRENCY

Safe drinking water, sanitation and hygiene are an integral part of human health and wellbeing. Yet, for some vulnerable groups, especially women and girls, gaining access to these fundamental rights has opened up a new avenue for corruption —trading sex for water. This new phenomenon has not only stripped them of their dignity, but it has also affected their health and livelihoods, among a myriad of other issues.

By Eunice Mwaura and Nicera Wanjiru

We meet Sareen Malik at the Ikigai, a beautifully designed co-working space in a commercial building at the heart of Nairobi, and settled in one of the several office spaces available. It is a serene place to evaluate the current state of affairs with a woman whose contribution to the WASH sector has raised the alarm on the need for essential reforms that leave no one behind.

‘We are not there yet in terms of the right to water and sanitation. There is still a lot of work to do, now more than ever, because of the effects of climate change,’ she asserts. She follows this with an analysis of what is currently happening, especially in the Global South.

‘Water is a daily struggle for women and girls from low-income background communities. We are still in a deeply gendered society where the onus of roles is attributed to women. In a majority of households, women have been designated as the main water providers. On average they have to walk approximately four miles a day, just to fetch water for their daily needs.’

‘This exposes them to all sorts of vulnerabilities, especially sexual and gender-based violence. In some instances, they go home empty-handed after finding the wells have dried up. It is such roles that have given rise to another avenue for corruption, but this time, money is not the currency of bribe.’

She brings out a clearer perspective of the daily struggle which women and girls go through, describing an occasion when she had to line up for three hours at a water point in one of the urban informal settlements in Nairobi. She wanted to analyse how long, on average, women and girls take to access water. Even though she was there by five o’clock in the morning, she still found a long queue of women with jerry cans waiting for their turn.

Some might have walked for miles to get there; others were young girls who probably got late to school because that water is



Water is collected from sources such as boreholes and springs like the one shown here

needed at home. There have also been cases of some not having money to purchase it, even after queuing for long hours, which is also another challenge. Whoever pays the piper plays the tune, and in this case whoever controls the resource calls the shots. Women have been made to trade sex for water, a survival tactic they had to employ so they can acquire this precious resource.

What do you see happening concerning water and sanitation in different areas?

Malik: 'The WASH sector holds very strong gender dynamics. Six years ago, in the Kibera and Mukuru informal settlements, we found that women were trading sex for water, because the burden of fetching water is on them. We then conducted a study that was geared towards making sure that we put this issue out there.'

Sextortion or sexploitation is not a new phenomenon in the WASH sector in Kenya. It is the price women and girls pay to access their fundamental basic rights like fetching water, using a public latrine, or accessing menstrual hygiene supplies. For girls, appropriate WASH facilities are an important part of ensuring their safety and health. The facilities have both a push and pull factor towards their education.

'Water is a daily struggle for women and girls from low-income background communities. We are still in a deeply gendered society where the onus of roles is attributed to women'

They struggle to attend school if they do not have access to safe and hygienic facilities, and are within proximity. This is essential in managing their menstrual hygiene. Some have been exposed to sexual and gender-based violence, resulting in them dropping out of school.

'We are trying to do the work at the community level,' she says. 'The WASH sector is putting up a safe space, which will have counsellors and doctors, where victims and survivors will get treatment and counselling after such occurrences. But it is complicated, especially when the laws are not in place. Our policies are not yet responsive since women are still being assaulted and asked for sex, because they can't afford water.'

She hopes that a recent meeting with the Kenya Law Reform Commission will bear fruit and an amendment bill to the Sexual Offence Act to include sextortion will be formulated.

How has the climate crisis in Africa affected WASH?

'Water scarcity, caused by climate change, has led to its increased demand. Water sources, including boreholes and springs, are drying up. The result is inequitable access, which deprives homes of the opportunity to collect the water required for regular hygiene. This has serious health outcomes, with menstrual hygiene management for women becoming an issue.'

'In the Horn of Africa, camels have been dying because of lack of water, demonstrating how severe the situation is. The search for water has seen a mass exodus towards urban centres, putting even more pressure on the existing systems, which subsequently leads to a rise in the level of conflicts at the existing water points.'

'A couple of months ago, we managed to get women community members from Mali, in the middle of the Water Week, to come and speak about their challenges. Their accounts dominated the entire session, but we were more than happy to have their voices heard at that level.'

'They informed us that as a result of the shrinking water spots due to climate change, their lives had become more difficult. They are now more exposed to assault and other forms of violence in their quest to find water. There is also an effect on their health, since carrying a jerry can for hours on end is bound to have serious implications.'

'The average person needs one hundred litres of water a day. We are seeing people trying to make do with just twenty litres, or even less, due to the cost. This has had an adverse effect on their dignity, so obviously, climate change coming in is only going to make things worse.'

Why is it important to tap into indigenous knowledge and solutions?

In her experience, she insists that it is very important for organisations to understand the socialisation of women from different countries, or else they will not have an impact, which is what gender mainstreaming is about. Using a targeted approach, for example, it is easier to engage women in their group circles when they come together for economic empowerment.

'Having them give you their time can be very difficult as they are responsible for most household duties. Most of the meetings we had happened during the weekends. They also can't be too long as this will be telling them to drop everything to come and sit. During some of the pre-conferences we held, I noticed that some women never spoke, only the men did. So what we would do was to have a meeting with the women first. Unless this is understood, then all the efforts put in will not yield any fruits.'

'A woman-centred approach is the rights-based approach. It is a huge shift in terms of policies and the way systems are currently built. It places women at the centre of how systems and facilities are built and designed to respond to certain segments of society like girls, children and people with disabilities.'

'Societies, where women are not protected, are the ones that are not advancing. One of the initiatives we have been pushing for is for women to be at the point of sale, since they are rarely the water vendors. Evidence-based reports reveal that water points managed by women have few cases of violence and SGBV. So, we encourage them to get involved or be given more chances to be water vendors.'

'It is also the same thing in terms of the setup. Most of them are built through the lenses of a man. A woman would have probably designed it differently. We are trying to advocate for that and are doing so at all levels, from the planning to design, and encouraging more girls to take up the study and get involved in the sector.'

'We have managed to explicitly include women, girls, and people with disabilities, though it required policy trade-offs and compromises. It is a huge milestone when big political and continental entities open the space for civil society organisations, because the latter represent voices while governments represent people.'

'We have been working hard to ensure that governments open that space for civil society to come in and table the issues. On the ground, we are seeing more women coming in.'

Sareen Malik sits as the Executive Director of the African Civil Society Network on Water (ANEW), an umbrella organization of water and sanitation NGOs in over fifty African countries. With over fifteen years of expertise in water governance and reorganizing WASH NGOs, she has contributed immensely to the sector. Her focus is on assisting NGOs to meaningfully engage in the water and anti-corruption sectors, and mobilizing voices around the call to action that good water governance is critical to improved sector performance. On invitation of Simavi, last summer Sareen Malik attended World Water Week in Stockholm to meet with key players in the water sector to bring grassroots voices to the table.

Simavi and ANEW have a long history of cooperation to mobilise support for the human right to water and sanitation. Simavi works as a development organisation towards a world in which all women and girls enjoy their human rights to water and sanitation, with a strong focus on climate justice and gender equality.

What are your demands on countries that cause the climate crisis?

'More Southern voices need to be amplified. I believe that they are the ones who should sit at the Northern tables to bring the experience home in terms of what is happening; a depiction of how people are suffering and which mitigation efforts are being employed. We are seeing a bit of that shift, with their voices gaining traction in terms of having them speak on the latter's floors and forums, regardless of whether they are in cabinet or parliament, with support from their global partners.'

'There also needs to be more investments to build the resilience of communities and countries. There is disempowerment and disenfranchisement that is taking place within communities, whose cause needs to be known. Beyond both the climate and water and sanitation sectors, we need to provide adequate support to build resilience, so that communities can be empowered to tackle these issues head-on.'

'They should be able to sit at the table when decisions are being made and ask the tough questions. However, even the language used is not inclusive enough. It comes off as only reserved for a select few when everything is shrouded in heavy and complicated terms. We need to simplify things so everyone can understand and be sensitised.'

Sareen Malik believes that there is hope; if more documentation around WASH is done, and if stakeholders continue to work with vulnerable groups to secure their land rights. 'My agenda is to see no jerry cans on the streets, because, without them, we will have empowered more women.'



Sareen Malik

'We are human beings, not ROBOTS'



Cleopatra tells her story with a smile as she sips on lemonade

By Eva Nakato

Photos by McWilliams Wasswa

Cleopatra Kambugu made two very bold decisions that not only changed her life but also made history. She came out as a transgender, then went a step further and got legally recognised—the first one in Uganda. She admits that the journey is far from over and encourages her fellow trans people to come out proudly and accept themselves for who they are. Only then will society do the same.

We decided to meet at a beautiful spot in Kampala for a one-on-one interaction about her life as a transgender woman. She, Cleopatra Kambugu, certainly stands out with her admirable sense of fashion; a maroon velvet bandage dress (knee level), with a leather jacket to match, white sneakers, a little posh nude bag and navy blue headsets. Her white braids lay on the side of her shoulder. She has a beautiful bright smile that is warm and gentle.

As an intelligent transgender woman, Kambugu says the beauty of her story is that people always have assumptions about the genesis; it is either she 'learnt it' somewhere, went to a single-sex school, or it is family-related. On the contrary—she tells me—the first time she travelled to a foreign land was in her twenties, she has attended mixed-sex day schools all her life, and was raised in a home with both parents who were always present.

The 36-year-old is the first transgender in Uganda to be recognised by the government when she received her passport and national ID, reflecting her new gender. She was born Caesar, after the Roman emperor, but felt the need to change her name to Cleopatra when she transitioned. 'Cleopatra had an interesting love life. She was Caesar's lover who led Egypt as pharaoh at a time when that was unheard of.'

'In my opinion, she is one of Africa's most renowned feminists after Nefertiti. Many speak about her sexuality, but forget how she stopped the Roman conquest of her people and laid her life in service to her people. We do not speak enough about Africa's "she-ros" in our "his-story" books. This is why it is important that as transwomen our presence is not trivialised. We can learn from our past on how to paint a fairer, just, and inclusive feminist presence.'

Raised and schooled in Uganda, Kambugu understands her culture and language very well. She speaks fluent Luganda, Swahili, English, French, and a bit of Rutooro. She studied Molecular Biolo-

gy and Genetics at Makerere University and, at the time of discontinuation, had a CGPA of 4.99 out of 5. Her interest in biological sciences arose out of the need to understand her origin and that of life. She was awarded a World Bank scholarship to conduct research into the molecular virology of the cassava mosaic disease, which undermines the production of the key food security crop.

After making her contribution to the field of research, her studies were discontinued when she woke up one morning to find her face in a then-popular tabloid, *The Red Pepper*. She believes if she had continued with her studies, she would have contributed more to Uganda's fight against Covid and Ebola, both of which she had a keen interest in. She spent the past eight years convincing people that she exists, not as behaviour but as biological, which deserves to be recognised. She had to choose between keeping it a secret and staying unhappy or choosing happiness by going public but losing her friends, family, and education.

'I still have most of my longtime friends and family, whom I thank for accepting me for who I am, because there is a stigma in having any form of association with a transgender person.' She continues to keep in touch with some of her university colleagues who believe the country lost an intelligent person, because it could not accept and accommodate a trans person.

She insists that they are not robots, but human beings like everyone else, so people should come to terms with the fact that they exist. 'The question is, can we live with each other? People don't have to understand how you have sex for them to appreciate you. We should have a society that is accepting of more diverse people, not just a few, which is the problem with the world today. My concern is that it is society that loses when we deny people the chance to be themselves and apply their knowledge.'

'Most queer people are not allowed to display their true potential and prove that they are more than just their gender or sexual preference,' she states. She asked her mother, who was born during the Second World War, how it felt like when it started. Her mother recalled how people started hating each other as intolerance grew, just like now. That hatred has never been dealt with and is disguised as simple standup comedy and jokes on social media, which might seem harmless, but could morph into something worse. When they point this out, they are labelled petty and egocentric.

She had to choose between keeping it a secret and staying unhappy or choosing happiness by going public but losing her friends, family, and education

She believes the binary male-female gender system is obsolete. It renounces others while rationing and limiting their access to certain spaces, creating separate ones 'for people like us' in the name of 'protecting people.'

'For example, in our homes, we have common toilets but no cases of sexual violence because of sharing them. Is there a need to separate men and women when it comes to public places as if we can't tolerate each other, yet we live with people of different genders in our homes?'

What puzzles her is how some people perceive trans people as perverts and rapists, and wonders where the correlation arose from. 'Do they honestly believe that we have to force ourselves onto others to get sexual gratification?' she asks. She believes part of the issue with any form of gender-based violence is the belief that you are deserving of violence and undeserving of love and care.

'If women knew their worth and value, they will never be mistreated by anyone or anything that makes them feel less important. I am at a point where I have come to appreciate myself more, and it is not pride, I just can't let anyone question either my womanhood or origin.' She admires princess Bagaaya of the Toro kingdom for paving the way for people like her when she acted in the Hollywood movie *Sheena*.

'I felt so happy watching her. She was very futuristic and liberal for her time. She was forward-thinking in how she expressed and pushed herself by acting in movies where princesses couldn't. She dressed in what she felt was comfortable, not as was demanded of a royal. She exemplified the phrase "don't think outside the box, kick the box out of the way."'

She advises all trans people to know themselves enough so that the validation they seek doesn't come from anywhere else but from within. That is why she doesn't walk around in a white lab coat for people to know she studied medicine. 'I am more than just my books and gender. To know me, you need to read the whole book, not just the cover.'

Since many people in the LGBTQ+ community are afraid of using the right means to get recognised, she decided to follow the due process to the end. She met and spoke to the commissioner, explaining her case in detail, and then submitted all the required documents for review. After twenty-one days she was given an expedited passport, which is what she had asked for, to go to work.

She went through the same procedure when it came to her national identity card. She carried the medical documents that had her medical procedure and was ready for scrutiny. Luckily, she was never subjected to any physical examination, which was very respectful, though her documents were given a thorough review. Having legally changed her gender, her ID now reads 'female' after she swore an affidavit.

'If women knew their worth and value, they will never be mistreated by anyone or anything that makes them feel less important'

She reveals that being transgender gave her an open template to define herself. She thinks that most trans people, out of fear, have never actually said 'let me go and have this conversation with my government.' She admits that being the first was like a crown of thorns since it is not a first that was celebrated.

She is at a point in her life where she is comfortable in her skin and with her life choices. She is open to the right person who feels they can 'handle her awesomeness' and are confident in their masculinity and not intimidated by hers. 'If something doesn't make sense to you, leave. You have nothing to lose and no one to impress. Don't get married because women should get married; no one is concerned about your marriage situation.'

She feels super proud that she has experienced two genders. She has had the privilege of walking in dark places knowing that she can't get raped due to her then-male privilege, and now she is scared because of the same. She now understands why women say walking at night is unsafe since she has to communicate with her loved ones whenever she leaves the house after dark. And just like any other woman, she also requires an accurate diagnosis when she goes for an OB/GYN in any reproductive health care programme because she suffers the same things that they do.

Her call is to attain diversity through having honest conversations instead of biased, moralistic arguments about people's lives and futures. Conversations on how we can rebuild our country regardless of who we are and where we come from. People should appreciate and accept each other for who they are, emphasising the potential that the LGBTQ+ community holds. 🐾

*Cleopatra Kambugu made history as the first transgender person to be recognised by the Ugandan Government. She is a human rights activist advocating for equality and social justice for sexual and gender minorities. She is the director of Programmes at Uhai Eashri, Africa's first indigenous fund operating in seven countries which supports the rights of sex workers and sexual and gender minorities. She has been recognised for her advocacy and was featured in *The Pearl of Africa*, an award-winning feature documentary that talks about her journey of transition, and work as a Ugandan LGBTQ+ activist.*

UHAI EASHRI is part of the Love Alliance, a partnership that is based on an unwavering commitment to protecting, promoting and fulfilling sexual and reproductive health and rights globally, unifying people who use drugs, sex workers and LGBTQ+ movements, and amplifying the diversity of voices in these communities.



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