

## Civil society wants govt support on gender-based violence

The Observer

While some stand tall, pick themselves up to a better future and get justice, many victims of Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV) have had their dreams shattered, lives ruined and taken ages without getting justice.

One such victim is Jane Ariokot (not real names). Two years into their marriage, Jane's sweet, loving husband turned into "a drunkard wife-beater" immediately after he lost his job.

The 25-year-old from Soroti district is now impaired with a fractured hand in a fight that finally broke their marriage, leaving their two children in the hands of their poor grandmother in nearby Kumi district.



*Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV) meant for national trainers*

"He came back drunk one day and asked for food yet he had spent three days without buying any. I had given all the remaining food to children that night and when I told him that, he rushed outside, brought a big stick and beat me so much. As I tried to protect myself from the stick, he hit me and broke my arm, it hurts me until now and I can't do any heavy work to look after my children," Ariokot says.

Whereas her husband was arrested and is currently on remand, Ariokot says she has never gotten justice since court keeps postponing the rulings.

## **HARD TO PROVE**

During a recent three-day regional conference on strategies for implementation of instruments on sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) by the International Conference on Great Lakes Region (ICGLR), it was revealed that about 65 per cent of inmates in Uganda's prisons have cases related to SGBV.

ICGLR acting director Nathan Byamukama said many of such cases are, instead, referred to things like assault, manslaughter murder or attempted murder, as is the case with Ariokot's husband.

This, Byabakama said, together with the fact that it is difficult to prove sexual violence in courts, is reason enough to make the vice thrive.

"Most cases are done in private and even if you arrest suspects, it's very difficult to prove in court because court is looking for evidence and some suspects run away and others settle issues out of court because they want money and fear embarrassment," he said at the conference held at the Commonwealth Resort in Munyoyo.

The ICGLR is an intergovernmental organization of African countries in the Great Lakes region that aims at ensuring security, stability and development between member states. Some of the member states include Uganda, Angola, Burundi, Central African Republic, Congo, Kenya, Rwanda, South Sudan, Tanzania and Zambia.

The conference brought together regional stakeholders on sexual and gender-based violence to share experiences and possible solutions to the vice. The forms of violence that have thrived despite several interventions by both government and civil society include rape, forced (arranged) marriages, defilement, sex slavery (human trafficking), and genital mutilation.

The violations, according to specialists, take place in schools, homes, town centers, prisons and conflict zones like refugee camps.

## **LEGAL HUDDLES**

Uganda's director of public prosecutions, Mike Chibita acknowledged that investigation cases of sexual violence have always given them a knock on the head.

"In cases of sexual assault, DNA should link the perpetrator to the survivor. In Uganda, the facilities are inadequate and expensive," Chibita said.

While Uganda has domesticated several regional protocols against SGBV into laws, the lack of implementation by government leaves a lot to be desired.

For example, Annet Bada, the legal head at The Uganda Association of Women Lawyers (Fida-Uganda) said many victims of human trafficking have gone through depressed circumstances and need protection by the anti-human trafficking law but it is not being implemented.

"The law on trafficking came in 2009 but, to date, there are no regulations to operationalize it.

There is need for these laws to resonate with the common person because they are the most vulnerable and they are the victims of human trafficking,” she said.

While many activists believe that Uganda’s weak legislation on SGBV renders both the police and the judiciary helpless in administering justice, deputy chief justice Alfonse Owiny-Dollo disagrees.

“We agree that there is room for improvement. The judiciary can reduce this without legislation. We can use the instruments that the constitution gives to the chief justice to come up with other procedures and practice dimension,” Justice Owiny-Dollo said.

He added that the judiciary has established special courts and sessions to expedite trials of such cases on top of a strategy to reduce case backlog.

## **EASE OUR WORK**

Civil society players who attended the conference said that government should put in place strong legal and policy frameworks to ease their work. It is mainly CSOs that are usually involved in handling SGBV cases and its victims.

Eunice Musiime, the executive director of Akina Mama Africa, said there should also be eradication of armed groups within and without the country, especially those with no political agenda.

“We should also have meaningful dialogue to address democratic deficiencies like impunity which make such vices flourish. We also call for services in terms of policy, medical and judiciary,” she said.