

# Domestic Violence; An Unexpected Crisis in the Corona Virus Period: Implications for Ugandan Households

Luwemba Musa Maswanku  
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences  
Department of Political Science, Islamic University In Uganda

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## *Abstract*

*The year 2020 has seen a major pandemic known as Corvid 19(Corona Virus 2019) which has required governments to devise interventions to manage this new 'pandemic'. To this, Ugandan households as it has happened elsewhere have been forced to 'stay at home' so as to avoid free interaction which to health officials is a basis for the pandemic. This has not been free of costs. An evident cost is increased cases of domestic violence. It is only 'essential services' that have been allowed to move and work (say health officials, selected public service), legal, to mention but a few. The masses are forced to stay at home with their people which is good but also bad for people who are not used to staying at all for so long a time. The question is what this implies for third world societies like Uganda and how prepared such households are for this prevalent domestic violence. Violence against women tends to have increased in any emergency, including epidemics. Stress, disruption of social and protective networks, increased economic hardship and decreased access to services can exacerbate the risk of women suffering violence. Special consideration should be given to more vulnerable groups, including women living with disabilities, who are at increased risk of domestic violence and may face further barriers in reaching the services they need, such as social assistance and home care, due to curfews and social distancing or restrictions on movement. COVID-19 has uncovered the existing inequalities in families and society and exacerbated the structural factors that contribute to domestic and intimate partner violence. Displaced and refugee women, and women living in conflict-affected areas are also particularly vulnerable due to high population density, close proximity in living conditions; poor water, sanitation and hygiene; and limited health, social and protection services.*

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**Key words:** Domestic Violence, Pandemic, Corona virus, Household, Uganda

## **Introduction**

Corvid 19<sup>1</sup> took the world by surprise and has really affected the entire globe. What started as an unexpected pandemic from China ended up traversing the entire world. All societies, communities and households have faced the pandemic effect socially, economically and politically. Uganda has not been an exception. Movement restrictions aimed to stop the spread of the coronavirus may be

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<sup>1</sup> Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered coronavirus. Most people who fall sick with COVID-19 will experience mild to moderate symptoms and recover without special treatment. The virus that causes COVID-19 is mainly transmitted through droplets generated when an infected person coughs, sneezes, or exhales. These droplets are too heavy to hang in the air, and quickly fall on floors or surfaces. One can be infected by breathing in the virus if you are within close proximity of someone who has COVID-19, or by touching a contaminated surface and then your eyes, nose or mouth.

making violence in homes more frequent, more severe and more dangerous. Empirical data seems to suggest that domestic violence is on the rise capitalising on the conditions created by the pandemic. Domestic violence here implies the victimization of a person with whom the abuser has or has had an intimate, romantic, or spousal relationship and it encompasses violence that is done on both men and women as well as children. Domestic violence also includes a series of forceful behaviours used by an individual to establish and maintain power and control over person and this can among others include physical violence, psychological abuse, oral abuses, stalking, and non-consensual sexual behavior.

According to WHO (2020), Coronaviruses are a family of viruses that circulate among animals but can also be found in humans. At the end of 2019, a new virus strain that had not previously been identified in humans, was detected in the Chinese city of Wuhan (Hubei province). Corvid 19 can cause mild, non-specific symptoms, including fever, cough, and shortness of breath, muscle pain and tiredness. Under serious cases can develop severe pneumonia, acute respiratory distress syndrome, sepsis and septic shock that can lead to death. The virus is transmitted via respiratory droplets. The estimated incubation period is 2-14 days but could be longer. There is currently no vaccine to prevent the 2019 coronavirus disease (COVID-19), and no cure has yet been found. Much is still unknown, but researchers are working intensively to gain a better understanding about the novel disease. At global level, the WHO declared a public health emergency of international concern at the end of January 2020, as infections spread rapidly within China. The situation is evolving rapidly. An increasing number of cases have since been confirmed outside of the country, including Europe. For the first time (as of 25 February 2020), there have been more new cases reported from countries outside of China than from within China. The World Health Organization publishes daily situation reports. On 27 February 2020, there were 81 109 cases confirmed worldwide. The European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control publishes daily situation updates for the EU/EEA and the United Kingdom. As of 26 February 2020, 477 cases of infection and 14 deaths have been reported, of which 400 and 12, respectively, occurred in Italy.

A 2017 report from the United Nations Development Programme estimated that the Zika virus epidemic would cost about US\$7–18 billion in Latin America and the Caribbean for 2015–2017, with the poorest countries (e.g. Haiti) facing the highest costs as a share of gross domestic product (GDP). Moreover, the report noted that, while in the short-term, the biggest impact would be felt

in the tourism sector, in the long-term, the most substantial impact would relate to treatment and care for children. Similarly, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in the United States of America (USA) estimated that the average annual cost per patient of human immunodeficiency viruses (HIV) care through anti-retroviral therapy (ART) was estimated to be US\$23 000 (in 2010), which would bring the cost of lifetime HIV treatment to around US\$380 000.

Households have been taken by surprise. In this case, a household shall be looked at as a traditional Ugandan family consisting of all parents plus any close relatives or dependants. Cases of domestic violence seem to go up whenever families spend more time together. Imagine living in fear of the person who shares your home. Society must be quick to imagine that in households, every day is an unthinkable day and night of criticism, name-calling, control of what people eat when and how, wear and discuss as well as physical violence. This thus becomes tricky in situation when people are trapped in Corvid 19. The impact becomes immense. For countries like Uganda, the impact is immense as all people ranging from the parents to the children are affected in one way or the other. As people start to live together as one something they have not been used to, it creates a very unconducive environment especially since this kind of cohesion has been against their will. Social relations get tested in pandemic periods and home life becomes a test for many which test is likely to be failed by all.

Both Corvid 19 and its result in question which is domestic violence affects people of all statuses, religions, ages, genders, sexualities, cultures, economic statuses as well as ethnicities. Uganda is a multi-diversity society with religions ranging from Islam to Christianity and Protestantism amongst others, tribes ranging from Baganda to Bakiga, Basoga amongst others. This is in addition to many other identities like class, educational levels and income levels. This implies that such violence is not only tailored to women but also children and men as well. In the country like U.K. for example, it is reported that about 1.6 million women experienced domestic violence in the year ending March 2019. It was said that to a large extent, women were more vulnerable to such violence than men. The worst case is that such women are more likely to be killed at the hands of abusive partners or ex-partners, with at least 114 women losing their lives in Britain in 2019. According to WHO (2019), it states that globally, 1 in 3 women worldwide have experienced physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner or sexual violence by any perpetrator in their lifetime. Most of this is intimate partner violence. Violence against women tends to increase

during every type of emergency, including epidemics. Women who are displaced, refugees, and living in conflict-affected areas are particularly vulnerable. While data are scarce, reports from China, the United Kingdom, the United States, and other countries suggest an increase in domestic violence cases since the COVID-19 outbreak.<sup>2</sup>

This surge in domestic violence also has a direct impact on women victims. As noted by the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ESCR), the pandemic deepened gender inequalities because “the burden of caring for children at home and sick or elderly family members falls disproportionately on women”.

According to the Health Policy Watch (2020), it has been reported that In Eastern Uganda, where so far no child has been infected with COVID-19, lockdowns have led to an uptick in reports of child abuse, exploitation, and violence. In Mayuge district, 59 cases of defilement – or the sexual abuse of a child – have been reported since the national lockdown began two months ago, according to a qualitative study led by local non-profit Community Concerns Uganda. Some 58 cases have been recorded in Jinja district.

“Many girls have entered cross-generational relationships to access basic supplies like pads and soap, which has contributed to early pregnancies,” Brenda Doreen Nakirya, managing director of Community Concerns Uganda, a local NGO in Uganda told *Health Policy Watch*. Because parents, working as casual labourers or owners of small businesses, have lost their source of income since lockdowns began, many families are unable to feed their children regularly.<sup>3</sup>

According to XinHuanet.com, its reported that, Frank Tumwebaze, minister of Gender, Labor and Social Development told reporters on 2.4.2020 here that there has been an increase in gender-based violence (GBV) as the country is under lockdown to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Some of these cases have already claimed lives of Ugandans even before COVID-19 does so," Tumwebaze said, noting that between March 30 and April 28, a total of 3,280 cases of GBV were reported to police. This is in addition to 283 cases of Violence Against Children, according to the ministry. Tumwebaze said those found guilty would face the law. These acts of violence degrade the dignity of humanity and are therefore unacceptable. The perpetrators of this vice must be dealt

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/publications/emergencies/COVID-19-VAW-full-text.pdf?ua=1>

<sup>3</sup> <https://healthpolicy-watch.news/violence-against-children-exacerbated-by-covid-19-lockdowns/>

with decisively and in a timely manner in accordance with the law," the minister said. He urged law enforcement agencies like the police to act tough against GBV.”<sup>4</sup>

As social distancing measures are put in place as encouraged by the GOU and the MOH and in this case, people are encouraged to stay at home, the risk of intimate partner violence is likely to increase. For example: The likelihood that women in an abusive relationship and their children will be exposed to violence is dramatically increased, as family members spend more time in close contact and families cope with additional stress and potential economic or job losses. Women may have less contact with family and friends who may provide support and protection from violence. Women bear the brunt of increased care work during this pandemic. School closures further exacerbate this burden and place more stress on them. The disruption of livelihoods and ability to earn a living, including for women (many of whom are informal wage workers), will decrease access to basic needs and services, increasing stress on families, with the potential to exacerbate conflicts and violence. As resources become scarcer, women may be at greater risk for experiencing economic abuse<sup>5</sup>.

Amidst the COVID-19 lockdown in Uganda, cases of domestic abuse, as children and spouses are forced to shelter-in-place with their abusers (who have been parents, relatives or even the maids), have spiked. According to *the Global Status Report on Preventing Violence Against Children 2020*, one in four children under 5 lives with a mother who suffers from intimate partner violence. Nearly 75% of toddlers age 2-4 regularly suffer physical punishment and or psychological violence at the hands of caregivers and parents. There are a number of reports showing an increase in child marriage. These cases involve underage girls being sold off into marriage in exchange for money and other commodities. Uganda is seeing an increase in cases of defilement and rape. In some of these cases, the culprits abusing children are parents and close family members.

GOU has always noted with the concern the increasing cases of teenage pregnancies in communities across the country. In some of these cases, both the girl and boy are underage.

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<sup>4</sup> [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-04/28/c\\_139015384.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-04/28/c_139015384.htm)

<sup>5</sup> Jhumka Gupta, “What does coronavirus mean for violence against women?,” Women’s Media Centre, March 19, 2020, <https://womensmediacenter.com/news-features/what-does-coronavirus-mean-for-violence-against-women>

Looking at the statistics on child abuse since the COVID-19 period in March, some of the areas with highest number of cases include Kamuli, Gulu, Naggalama, Kiryandongo and the Jinja Road policing areas in Kampala. During the peak of the lock down between March, April, May and the Months of June and July, a total of twenty-one thousand, two hundred sixty cases of child abuse were reported to police, (21,260). Out of these more than half of them involved situation of children being abused from home. <sup>6</sup>

There has been a rise in cyberbullying and online exploitation of children, according to Audrey Azoulay, UNESCO Director-General. This is due to the increased use and access to social media by the children through forms like whatsapp, Facebook, twitter and the like which are all appealing to these children and thus cannot be. A third of students between the ages of 11 to 15 were bullied in the past month, according to the report. Cyberbullying affects 1 in 10 children worldwide. One can imagine how many children are victims of such violence.

Take for example a country like China where Corvid 19 is said to have originated, it is said that migrant women were particularly vulnerable to physical and psychological even before the pandemic; reports of domestic violence seem to have increased because people have been confined to their homes. In some areas, phone calls to various police stations have increased if compared to previous years. It's unfortunate if this happens when the Chinese police have a 'poor record of handling domestic violence and are even less prepared now that they are concentrating on lockups and household quarantine.

In South Korea, where an energized women's movement has been facing a renewed wave of misogyny, nearly 80 percent of men admitted to physically abusing their spouses in the past relationships when questioned. While data is scarce, reports from China, the United Kingdom, the United States, and other countries suggest an increase in domestic violence cases since the COVID-19 outbreak.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.newvision.co.ug/news/1524328/uganda-records-21-child-abuse-cases-covid-lockdown>

<sup>7</sup> Melissa Godin, "As Cities Around the World Go on Lockdown, Victims of Domestic Violence Look for a Way Out," Time, March 18, 2020, <https://time.com/5803887/coronavirus-domestic-violence-victims/>

45 cases of domestic violence were reported by the Albanian State Police in March. 89 were criminally prosecuted, with 33 offenders arrested and 141 protection orders issued. But the numbers may actually be higher, as reporting might be lower since many women must remain in self-isolation with the perpetrators of violence.

“The domestic violence that women and girls experience during emergencies can result in profound physical and psycho-social harm,” says women’s rights activist Marsela Allmuca. “The trends previously identified in the country indicate that during the COVID-19 outbreak, incidents of domestic violence — although not reported — are silently on the rise, given the fact that movement restrictions are put in place. At the same time, however, when many girls and women need specialized support services more than ever before, practice shows that services provided by Coordinated Referral Mechanisms at municipal level are likely to decrease, due to resources being diverted to dealing with the [COVID-19] crisis.”

It has been reported that

‘In fact, domestic violence reports increased by 46 % in Othello, Washington after the eruption of Mount St. Helens, along with increases in reported alcohol abuse, family stress, and aggression. After Hurricane Katrina, reports of psychological abuse among women by their partner increased 35 % while reports of partner physical abuse nearly doubled in the southernmost Mississippi counties. Similar significant increases in domestic violence have been reported following earthquakes, tsunamis, hurricanes, and many other catastrophic events around the world, including the 2009 “Black Saturday” bushfires in Australia and 2010 7.0 magnitude earthquake in Haiti.’<sup>8</sup>

Coordinated referral mechanisms are created at the local level from health, education and social workers, police and justice sector representatives, shelters and helplines to make sure that wherever a survivor seeks help, the protection mechanism is launched if the survivor agrees. It is also used to better coordinate support and services.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7152912/>

Many women reached out to UNDP Albania's social media platforms with "calls for help". Lack of work, money, security, safety, and even the freedom to go out are quoted as the main reasons fuelling domestic violence incidents.

A week after most countries declared lockdown (last week of March), UN Women reported that in France domestic violence increased by 30% since the lockdown of March 17<sup>th</sup>; and in Argentina 25% since March 20<sup>th</sup>. In Cyprus, it increased by 30% and 33% in Singapore. In others like Canada, Spain, Germany, the United Kingdom and USA, there were increased cases of domestic violence and increased demand for emergency shelters for victims running from their homes.

In Lebanon and Malaysia calls to violence helplines doubled. In Australia, search engines are seeing highest numbers of searches for domestic violence help in the last five years.

In Africa and in the Great Lakes Region, we are still gathering data, but tentative reports on SGBV are equally worrying. In Uganda for example, it is clear that there has been more cases of domestic violence since lockdown than we have had for corona virus. In fact, Uganda has registered several deaths due to domestic violence and no death from COVID-19.

ON 31<sup>st</sup> March 2020, media reports in Uganda indicated that "five people had died due to domestic violence since government imposed 'stay at home' measures in mid-March".

In addition, Uganda's Police spokesman Fred Enanga (who is the Uganda Police Force Spokesperson) reported that police noticed a raise in domestic violence cases including murder adding that police would before register one or two cases over same period of time. As expected, while domestic violence increased, other hitherto common crimes of fraud, house break-ins, obtaining money by false pretence, assault and attempted murder have significantly reduced, he said. One can realise that Uganda seems to be grappling with quite many cases of violence which have been reflected in form of physical, psychological or even mental violence.

There is this case I know of a woman in rural Buhweju (South Western Uganda) that happened on 8<sup>th</sup> April 2020. It was reported that;



“A husband was trapped in Uganda’s Capital Kampala by the lockdown that followed government commendable measures to contain the spread of Corona virus. The victim of violence was a wife and perpetrators were some of the victim’s in-laws. As the victim returned from Mbarara Regional Referral Hospital (some 50 Kilometres away), where she had successfully helped a relative to deliver a healthy child, she found the brother- in-law who was traumatizing her three children and the maid as the victims prepared for dinner. Upon the unexpected apprehension by the mother towards an in- law who was trespassing at that awkward time to torment her children in the absence of the parents, the perpetrator, as if to settle an old score with the children’s parents, unabashedly declared that *“Ninkwita nikwezikira-kasita turi omu karantini”*-loosely translated *as since we are in a quarantine, I will kill you and burry you without anybody knowing*. The threats continued to the next day. Given what had befallen other women before, the woman saw a clear misogynist in this in-law. She took protective measures. The victim recorded these threats on her phone. She almost violated “stay home” guidelines to report to police. A case was reported to Police and the suspect went into hiding.

The male perpetrator was certainly guilty; the reason he was running away from the police. The perpetrator was clearly in the know of what crimes can easily be committed during the lockdown. The woman and her children are currently not at home. It is not safe at her home for her and her children even with the police assurance simply because the husband is not at home and the police station is 7 Kilometres away. The tormentor shares a compound with the victim. She has sought refuge away from her home till her husband returns- possibly after relaxation of the lockdown. Such, and other similar or worse situations have taken place during the lockdown in Uganda and beyond.”

This and many other cases have come to limelight but one is not sure how many of such cases go unreported. It’s really a worrying situation and it becomes worse if the concerned institutions like the police and specifically the probation offices alongside the NGOS and other child protection and violence control institutions seem reluctant. The reasons for increased domestic violence during this period are varied. Some families have been tolerating abusive relationships and seeing each other for only six hours or less in a day has been buttressing the resilience in marriage. Now this has changed; many women or men are being forced to ‘lock-down’ at home with their abusers at the same time that services to support survivors are being disrupted or made inaccessible.

Then you have the hitherto happy homes that are stressed by the COVID-19 measures. Men who because of rational gender norms- where “men are supposed to be men” providing for the family under whatever circumstances. They now find themselves unable and feel humiliated to declare their inability. In whatever happens, instead they would blame their wives and children for being extravagant at home. They feel pressure in the face of economic hardships as a result of inability to work- causing tension and conflict in the household. The resultant stress, fear and anxiety always corrupt their cognitive thinking, belief and action; others develop maladaptive behaviours to cope with the situation. It can be worse in a lock down where a pandemic has taken on a community.

Social media has also been awash with stories of women complaining of excessive sex demands from their husbands during the lockdown. The Archbishop of Church of Uganda in his Easter message tipped couples to adopt more family planning measures to prevent unwanted pregnancies during lockdown-probably coming from unwanted sex in marriage or relationship (otherwise called marital rape).

How do we then cope from such situation? I have a few suggestions for individuals/ families and government (s).

First, have a positive attitude that we shall overcome this COVID-19. It must be clear to all members of the family that the pandemic is not anybody’s fault. We need to fight the pandemic and not each other. This realization comes from smooth, honest and transparent communication with all family members. If the big challenge is dwindling financial resources, discuss how best you can mobilize more and also adjust the budget together. The family will understand and provide options. If the problem is negative masculinity where the man still wants to show his power over women and children, it is time to adjust your attitude and realize that if you combine your power as a man with that of your wife and children you easily overcome the challenge together. You don’t need to pretend that you have the resources when you don’t. And the wife does not have to still expect the man to provide everything when it is clear he is unable even if he is willing. This is the opportunity to demonstrate that you can support each other for the good of the family.

It might be inevitable as people who stay together, to disagree and quarrel but never allow the disagreements to go beyond words to actions and torture both psychological and physical. Never

allow disagreements to degenerate into violence. Just walk in the compound, meditate, do press-ups, clean and walk around the compound to cool off. It works. Don't resort to drinking alcohol as a way of cooling off. In addition, move to your computer or smart phone, if you have one, and learn a new skill or read newspapers or other messages on your phone. Call friends to hear some good stories. Just do what you love most- it is a useful therapy.

In line of the government, our front-line security forces and health care systems must be skilled and sensitive enough to receive any disclosure of gender-based violence with respect, sympathy and confidentiality. This restores confidence, hope and sense of justice to the victim/survivor while assuring effective punishment of the perpetrator.

As part of the Standard Operating Procedures, keep referral pathways open for abused women, girls, boys or children so that they can freely access care services like hospitals and police stations even during the awkward hours of the curfew. Ensure that that referral pathways remain fully equipped, open and effective enough to even meet sexual and reproductive needs and rights of women and girls during the lockdown. Together, we can simultaneously fight COVID-19 and Sexual and Gender Based Violence. As the COVID-19 global pandemic continues to hit hard and disrupt the daily lives of women, men and children, governments are under immense pressure to curb further spread of the disease and offer a fast response to avert its devastating consequences to human life and the economy. As the government of Uganda progressively rolls out preparedness, risk reduction and response measures, it's imperative that critical attention is given to the different impacts COVID-19 like all other pandemics and disasters has on women and men. As already noticed in Uganda, amidst the implementation of the COVID-19 response that includes scale down of government and nongovernment services, movement restrictions and lockdown of businesses, women have continued to shoulder the burden of ensuring the wellbeing and continuity of their families and society at large through working to provide maternal care, child care, elderly care and health care.

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