



Women, girls and their children in a typical Karamojong homestead (marvatat) in Nandunget S/C

# Unveiling gender dynamics and domestic violence in karamoja



Article 21 of the Constitution of the Republic of Uganda provides for equality of all persons before and under the law. Article 33(1) provides for rights of women, where women must be accorded equal dignity of the person as that of men and the state has a duty to provide facilities and opportunities necessary to enhance the welfare of women to enable them to realise their full potential and advancement.

The National Gender Policy 2007, provides for gender mainstreaming in order to increase the participation of women in decision making, owning land, and among others compensation negotiations.

Uganda vision 2040 envisions a world where women and girls are free from gender-based violence, and inclusion of women in the development policies, which is in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), 5 and 10, whose objectives are to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.

Gender has significant influence on access to justice in Karamoja and it being a patriarchal society, men are considered decision makers and dominate both the domestic and public sphere. Women on the other hand are disempowered, considered inferior and must conform to traditional gender roles, which poses various challenges in accessing justice.

Gender equality refers to the equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities of women and men and girls and boys, as well as equal treatment of women and men in the laws and policies, equal access to resources and services within families, communities and society at large. Domestic violence is willing full intimidation, physical assault, battery, sexual assault and other abusive behavior as part of a systematic pattern of power perpetrated by one intimate partner against another.

Gender inequality and domestic violence are pervasive issues that affect societies globally, transcending cultural and geographical boundaries. According to Raj, 2019, it can be physical, sexual, verbal, emotional, and economic abuse against women by a partner or family member dwelling in a joint household., and notably 40% of women had been physically, sexually, or emotionally abused by a husband.

In the context of Karamoja, a region in the North eastern part of Uganda, issues of gender inequality and domestic violence are perpetuated by harmful cultural norms, inadequate protection of human rights, alcohol consumption and poverty that compels families to force girls into marriages at young ages 10 - 12years for dowry inform of cows. Young men who are warriors rape these girls as a way of acquiring wives, although the traditional practice is difficult to judge, rape being cited as common thus contributing into many girls getting married of as early as 10 years.

Despite the promulgation of laws prohibiting child marriage in Uganda, According to Section 2 of The Children (Amendment) Act, Karamoja still ranks amongst the regions where child marriage is so rampant, with districts of Moroto, Amudat ,Nakapiripirit and Napak being some of the worst hit. **"It is poverty driving us to marry off our children but if our households were also stable like in other parts of the country, we would not be forcing our children to marry,"** said by an elder and resident of Mogoth parish in Rupa sub county. In this male-dominated and most impoverished region of Uganda, women's burden is particularly heavy especially in terms of water collection where these resources are often far, increasing women's workload, hence putting them at greater risk of abuse such as rape or transactional sex in exchange for access to the resources. For example, in Kosoroi, Tapac S/C, Sarah Akello, an artisanal small-scale miner had this to say, **"some water points are polluted and a jerrycan of clean water costs about UGX 2,000 which most people cannot afford."** At Lubuniet mining site, Rupa S/C, the borehole that used to supply to the community was fenced off by the sunbelt mining Company leaving the community with no choice but to fetch water from the dams, often shared by their cattles.

Additionally, in most communities, including mining communities, women and girls are subjected to forced and early marriages, Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), a common practice amongst the Pokot and Tepeth communities. Women's inability to effectively participate in, and take advantage of available development opportunities is rooted in the unequal gender relations that define their social and production relations. Unequal control over productive resources, including land, results in women having limited control over the products of their labor. This has left the women disempowered and considered inferior.

<sup>1</sup>UNDP Uganda Equal strategy 2022-2025  
<sup>2</sup>National Coalition Against Domestic Violence  
<sup>3</sup>Raj 2019 Violence against women  
<sup>4</sup>Coffey 2016.  
<sup>5</sup>93.3kfm, radio talk show August 2015  
<sup>6</sup>ANARDE Activity report "Launch of state of Karamoja"

## Current state of gender equality

Looking at Education, girls in Karamoja have been faced by limited access to education. The primary school completion of girls in Karamoja was 45% compared to 54% for boys. Although efforts have been made to increase enrollment and retention of girls in schools through initiatives like giving bursaries, from Irish Aid through Straight talking foundation, most of the communities still lag behind like the Tepeth, Pokot and Ik. Education is the foundation for human capital development, gender empowerment and behavior changes.

SDG4 aims to ensure access to quality education and the opportunity for lifelong learning. However, among other challenges like access to resources, there are inequalities in attaining of education in Karamoja sub region. Research has shown that, in terms of school completion, only 3.5% of children from Karamoja complete primary seven, way below that of Kampala at 40%. Over 70% of the population aged (10+) ten years plus in Karamoja has never been to school, of whom majority are women, including 60% percent of the women unable to read and write.

Subsequently, the unequal control over productive resources, including land, has resulted women to have limited control over the products of their labor. Such cultural norms largely negate the rights of women to own land contrary to Article 26 of the 1995 Constitution of Uganda. For women, loss of land means loss of livelihood and decreased food security for their families. Even when compensation for land is awarded, recipients are typically male heads of households. Land laws and policies give women the right to own land but in practice, the mode in which communal land is managed excludes women from decision making and owning land.

Unless women are awarded replacement land of equal size & productivity, they lose their livelihoods and food security. Unfortunately, replacement land of the same quality is often not made available.

<sup>1</sup>UNICEF ,2020 Annual reports  
<sup>2</sup>Irish Aid Bursary Program  
<sup>3</sup>Situation Analysis of Child Poverty and Deprivation in Uganda, UNICEF, Uganda, Economic Policy Research Centre, Uganda, 2020.

Cultural attitudes towards gender have also limited the role that women can or aspire to play in public life, limiting the appropriateness of services to women's needs, their ability to engage in economic activities to improve their incomes, assets or capabilities, and to contribute to the well-being of the families and children, whereas men have control and access to resources, and often exercise great control over women, a fundamental aspect in community decision making.

Community decision making is the preserve to those men who have undergone initiation process **"athapan"**. During initiation, in the men gatherings **"akiriket"** rituals performed to hand over authority to men to join the council of elders is done to wield power and enforce justice to the communities. The council of elders known as **"ekokwa"** is composed of men who make important decisions in the community and women who attend have not to speak thus they are left out in the process even on issues that affect their wellbeing directly in that specific community.

In a communal setting like this, women are breadwinners in society, since men are polygamous and this is regarded as pride. Polygamy in the cultural setting fulfills a man and is claimed to be a way of expanding the clan hence leaving women with no option but double labor requirements, **as the man often sleeps under a tree shade during the day, in most cases drinking alcohol with a group of fellow men, and later demands for food and money that the lady has worked for.** To fill in the gap of buying food and taking care of children and him, a woman engages in activities like mining, cutting down trees for charcoal as an alternative source of income.

Gender inequalities stem from inequality in power relations and politics that govern the way people relate to each other. It has also been noted that men in the Karamojong communities without cows cannot marry or not worth a man which in the long run has impacted the masculine identity and behavior the in society.

## Domestic violence:

Domestic violence still remains as an issue in Karamoja. It is often exacerbated by the dissolution in society, loss of cultural identity and purpose and alcoholism. Nevertheless, Gender Based Violence (GBV) is a **"traditional"** act in Karamojong society, with some older women claiming that, it acts as proof for the husband's love to discipline his wife by hitting her.

Domestic violence remains as one of the silent problems hidden behind the doors in fear of cultural norms and stigma. **"Societal expectations can perpetuate silence leaving victims with recourse."** Women in Karamojong communities undergo physical abuse such as beating from their husbands, emotional and economic abuse. The Uganda demographic survey revealed that 56% of women in Karamoja have experienced physical violence and 35% have endured sexual abuse inform of rape. This happens behind closed doors and most of them die in silence. Furthermore, up to 53% and 13% of the girls in Karamoja and women in Karamoja respectively, have experienced physical and sexual violence since age 15. One of the factors behind the high prevalence rates is the widespread cultural acceptance of such violence. According to the UDHS 2016, 49% of women and 41% of men believe a man is justified in beating his wife in certain circumstances. This view is held by 57% of females and 48% of males aged between 18-24, demonstrating the prevalence of negative gender norms.

These acts of GBV are most likely to increase vulnerability to HIV and ill sexual reproductive health, which is often made worse by the inadequate health sector to provide GBV response services in the region. For example, in Nandunget S/C women and girls leaving in Lokeriaut village and kraals hardly access health care services and police response, which are far and hard to access like the Nandunget HC III. About 28% of the health facilities in the region are reported to have the capacity of clinical management of the GBV survivors.

The burden of maternal health has been worsened by the continued practice of FGM. In FGM, women are continually practiced amongst 64% of the girls from communities of Pokot in Amudat district and Tepeth in Mt. Moroto. This practice has diverse effects on the reproductive health of the young women and girls including child birth risks, which has accelerated school dropouts. Most of the violence happens in the bushes while women are in on process of collecting firewood, fetching water, at local dances **"adonga"** and local brewing places. In these places, they are sexually abused by **rape for marriage**, which leaves them so depressed after losing their virginity hence they get no option but to marry the perpetrator.

The understanding of the link between the gender inequalities and domestic violence with power relations, forms a basis of our gender issues in Karamoja. The position of women as family assets to be exchanged for cattle results into oppressive cultural practices such as forced marriage for cattle which is often a result from rape and widow inheritance. In such settings, **"fathers look at their daughters as a source of wealth"**. All this subjugate the silence of women and girls making them vulnerable in most case, thus an urgent call for action.

<sup>1</sup>UDHS 2016, Disability, Partner Behaviors, and the Risk of Intimate Partner Violence in Uganda: Further Analysis of the 2016 Demographic and Health Survey.  
<sup>2</sup>Empowering health workers on Clinical Management of Gender-Based Violence, UNFPA, 2021

## Efforts towards change:

Violence in Karamoja affects not only individual but communities as a whole and consequences can be far reaching. GBV is a traumatic event that people who experience it especially women find it hard to access support from their family, community, support groups, to be able to provide the best support towards the victims. It is very key for the different actors to understand GBV in Karamoja as a community vice and not an individual problem. One of the ways communities in Nandunget S/C have tried to root out the GBV vice by putting traditional justice court of elders which includes LC I, although this is informal by nature. It has however been so effective and widely acceptable and accessible to the communities.

Alongside establishing community support groups and awareness campaigns, the local residents in the communities of Karamoja have harnessed traditional conflict resolution where mediation and dialogues have taken a center stage, these age-old customs have not only provided pathways for resolving family conflicts and also emphasized on reconciliation, nurturing the culture of harmony. ANARDE continues facilitating and supporting a network of mediators within the region.

To date, women groups with some of these mining areas, have been formed and trained on land rights, Free Prior and Informed Consent, compensation, gender justice, environmental protection, and others. These were intended to empower women and girls to demand, defend their rights and seek redress and remedies through mediations, legal advice, counselling and legal representation.

ANARDE has for long supported women groups in Karamoja to strengthen their access to justice. Among their interventions, was supporting women in mining areas to present a petition on the gender inequalities, especially in the mining sector and ensure gender inclusion in economic policy formulation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

ANARDE also linked the women group in Nyadik, Rupa S/C to benefit the government program of **'Emyoga'** at the district level to which they are all now beneficiaries, this will help to increase their income to supplement on the money they get from mining.

There have been other coopted initiatives focusing on women empowerment, engaging men and boys in the discussions on healthy masculinity and collaborative work with community-based groups and government like police. The communities have woven nets, adorned with cultural events, further creating symphony of awareness that resonates with empowerment and respect, transforming Karamoja into a bastion against domestic violence.

Ultimately, gender equality and eradication of domestic violence are intertwined challenges that require concerted efforts from individuals, communities, governments and national and international organizations. While the progress has been made by different organizations, there is still more effort needed to challenge deep seated cultural norms and foster an environment where all individuals can thrive regardless of their gender by recognizing the potential of every person and working collectively. Karamoja can become a shining example of gender equality and eradication of domestic violence.

Efforts to pull Karamoja out of inequality should focus on building the capacity of communities, women, girls and young people to fully participate not only in the political, but in the planning, social and economic governance spaces. These will go a long way in fostering the spirit of public accountability and coordination in service delivery, efficient and effective use of public natural resources, and the empowerment of women, girls and young people to demand their rights.



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