

Children and Domestic Violence in Uganda: Finding from an Exploratory Study

FINAL REPORT

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To Erisa, who was tragically killed while protecting her mother.

Also, to all the children, mothers and professionals who made this research possible.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This exploratory study is the first of its kind to be undertaken in Uganda and was intended to generate evidence about children and domestic violence in Eastern Uganda. It was also intended to create a springboard for a larger in-depth exploration of the issue, to feed into the development of interventions for children. The research sought to assess the prevalence of domestic violence in children's lives and to explore in-depth the issues for and the needs of children known to be living with domestic violence through their own perspectives, through the perspectives of their mothers and the key professionals children are in contact with. Conducted between August and October 2013, the study utilised a multi-method approach which included: a prevalence survey with 100 children aged 11-15 years in schools in five districts; focus group discussions with 12 children aged 11-15 years; in-depth interviews with 10 mothers living in a shelter; interviews with five 13-17 year olds; discussions with five staff from the Police Children and Family Protection Unit, six senior teachers from three primary schools, and with three MIFUMI staff.

Key Conclusions

- 38.7% of children reported their parents fighting. Girls were more likely to report fighting between parents than boys, as were those aged between 12-14 years. The largest number said this had occurred for four or more years.
- The largest number of children reported their father hurting their mother with a knife, gun or object and breaking or destroying something on purpose. Even where fighting between parents was not reported, a tenth of children said their father broke or destroyed things on purpose.
- Hitting, punching, kicking, choking and pulling hair were the most common forms of abuse against women reported by their children. A significant number of children said they tried to get away by hiding or leaving the house when their father was hurting their mother.
- Just over a third of the 38 children who said their parents fought reported their father had done something to hurt them at the same time, including hitting, kicking and beating. Overall, a fifth of children were being directly physically hurt by their father.
- Almost two-thirds of the 38 children reporting fighting between parents said another adult in their family had done something to hurt their body, including hitting, kicking and beating. Even when there was no fighting between their parents, children reported an adult in their family hurting them through hitting, kicking and beating. Combined, these figures indicate that 56% of all children who responded to the survey had been hurt by an adult in their family, and for over 10% (1 in 10) this was a common occurrence.

- Sixteen children reported sexual abuse, where those reporting stranger sexual abuse was slightly higher than those reporting sexual abuse by a family member. Girls were significantly more likely to report sexual abuse than boys.
- Almost two-thirds of children reported emotional abuse from an adult in their family.
- Of the children who reported an adult in the family physically hurting them and emotional abuse, almost twice as many females reported both forms compared to males.
- All of the children in the focus group and those interviewed individually spoke at length about their father's violence towards their mothers. Many risked being hurt themselves – being hit with stones or being beaten – when trying to intervene to separate their parents. Physical, verbal and emotional abuse of children was also reported to be common and prolonged and, where it occurred, sexual abuse was mainly aimed at girls. Regular violence in the home created fear and anxiety within children.
- Women and children reported the ways in which abusive men frequently undermined the relationships between mothers and their children as part of the abuse strategy.
- The effects of domestic violence on children included mental distress, stress and anxiety; feeling unsafe and being fearful; physical ailments and poor physical development; poor educational performance or dropping out of school; resorting to negative behaviours such as consumption of alcohol and drugs and engaging in crime. Those who had lived with domestic violence for many years and had suffered abuse from multiple perpetrators had greater mental health issues.
- Children most frequently obtained support from MIFUMI, security officers in the village, neighbours, police, LC1 and relatives. Once children had left the abusive context, they were all extremely positive about their life away from violence and abuse. They all reported feeling safer and being able to do things they had not done in the past.
- There was a broad consensus in the views of all professionals about the ways in which children are affected by domestic violence. This also coincided with what mothers and children themselves said about the impact of domestic violence.
- Professionals reported that children who witnessed domestic violence between adults were often neglected, psychologically tortured, and beaten. Overall, all professionals believed that girls were worse affected than boys.
- All professionals encountering children affected by domestic violence said they were ill-equipped to respond to such children's needs. Given that there is currently no dedicated support work taking place with children, this results in a

huge gap in support for children affected by domestic violence. Professionals voiced the need for training to build skills and knowledge to respond to children and the need for specialist support services to address the lack of resources currently in existence.

Recommendations

- Given the lack of knowledge and understanding among professionals about children affected by domestic violence, comprehensive training for key professionals should be developed and delivered to build their capacity and knowledge about the effects of domestic violence on children, their support needs and how to strengthen professional responses.
- In the absence of dedicated agencies working with children exposed to domestic violence, agency/professional responses could be developed through strengthening: systems of identification, reporting and referral; co-ordination and networking among key agencies; enhancing police investigations.
- Services for children affected by domestic violence are virtually non-existent. This gap needs to be addressed if the issue is to be tackled and the long term negative effects on children prevented. Further research is needed to feed into the development of appropriate dedicated services. In particular, the feasibility of developing the following should be explored: a specialist service for children which incorporates a dedicated centre offering emergency assistance; individual and group therapeutic support; play and learn activities; skills development, training and mentoring programme; advice and advocacy.
- Given that mothers need support to help their children deal with the effects of domestic violence, and to understand these effects on their children themselves, and recognising that domestic violence can undermine the mother-child relationship, a programme of group work for mothers as well as joint mother-child work should be explored.
- Recognising the high levels of children affected by domestic violence and the lack of information about this, the possibility of developing a community awareness campaign on the effects of domestic violence on children as well as prevention work targeted specifically at children through schools could be explored.

1. Background

Context

Violence against women (VAW) has globally been recognised as a serious social and human rights issue, which affects all societies and communities (WHO, 2013). Its consequences for victim-survivors are immeasurable, not only in terms of personal injury, disability and death, but also in severely limiting their contribution to social and economic development. For many women in Uganda, as in many other African countries and elsewhere in the world, domestic violence is not an isolated and abnormal act, but is sadly an everyday experience. The Uganda Demographic and Health Survey (2006) indicate that two thirds of Ugandan women experience violence from their partners. The Uganda Police Reports (2011) and UWONET Periodic Reports (2012) show that sexual offences against women and girls top the list of crimes in Uganda. The most common forms of violence include beating, pushing, dragging, forced sex, arm twisting, threatening, insulting and choking. A study on gender based violence (GBV) by PLAN (2011) showed that 78.9% of respondents had experienced at least one form of GBV in the 12 months preceding the survey.

Women and girls in rural areas who are less educated, with no direct income, are at greater risk of violence in the form of beatings, insults and denial of food than those in urban centres, who are educated and employed. The high dependence of women on their spouse for economic wellbeing, in particular, has been identified as a key driver for domestic violence. The African Child Policy Forum indicated that up to 95% of Ugandan girls are sexually abused during their childhood, 16% are married by the time they are 15 years and 53% by the age of 18. Also, 59.6% of women from the age of 15 have ever experienced physical violence while 39% of women have experienced sexualized violence, compared to 11% of men (MGLSD, 2008).

A study by the Centre for Domestic Violence Prevention showed that of the people interviewed, 70% of men and 60% of women said a man was justified in beating his partner under certain circumstances. Similarly, a report by Amnesty International (2010) reveals that more women than men in Uganda think that violence is justified and this is highly attributed to the patriarchal system of families. Bride price has also been identified as a major vehicle for perpetuating the unequal status of men and women within households, since through the payment of bride price men presume indefinite ownership over women. Despite this evidence of high levels of violence against women and girls, Uganda's response to GBV has been criticized for falling short of national and international obligations in ensuring that girls and women access justice (UNFPA, 2011).

Exposure of children and young people to domestic violence has attracted increased attention among researchers, practitioners and policy makers in many high income countries though interventions there still remain largely under-developed. In low and middle income countries, both the evidence base and the development of interventions to address the effects of children's exposure to domestic violence remain scarce. This is partly because they are not viewed as the primary target of domestic violence though ample evidence now highlights the numerous deleterious effects on children. The impacts

of domestic violence on children are wide ranging, with research showing these to be age and developmental stage related. These include premature births, birth defects and disability; an increased risk for younger children of being injured indirectly in violent episodes; and higher likelihood of being directly hurt when intervening to stop the fighting among older children. Children who live with domestic violence have been shown to have poorer health and physical ailments such as anxiety and fear, stomach aches, sleep disturbances and physical injuries. They are also at risk of developing behavioural and emotional problems, such as low self-esteem and confidence, anxiety and depression, symptoms of PTSD, confusion, anger and guilt, poor social skills and lack of trust in others. Children's educational achievement is shown to be affected, as well as school attendance and dropout rates, though for some children school can be a source of respite and confidence (Campbell, 2011; Edleson, et al., 2008; Jaffe et al., 2012; Mullender et al., 2002; Thiara and Gill, 2012). If left unidentified and unsupported, these effects have enormous consequences for the health and well-being and the personal and social development of large sections of the future generation.

Methodology

This pilot study aimed to generate evidence about children and domestic violence in Eastern Uganda. It sought to assess the prevalence of domestic violence in children's lives in order to gain some insight into the level of children's exposure. It also aimed to explore in-depth the issues for and the needs of children known to be living with domestic violence through their own perspectives, through the perspectives of their mothers and the key professionals children are in contact with. The study adopted a mixed method approach and included the following data collection methods:

- A *prevalence survey* with 100 children aged 11-15 years in schools in five districts (Tororo, Masaka, Mbarara, Moroto, Bukedea) was administered to ascertain the prevalence of domestic violence in children's lives.
- *Interviews* with five children and young people (four male and one female) aged 13-17 years. They had lived with domestic violence for between two to 10 years and as a result of MIFUMI interventions, three were resettled with their parents and two had moved on with their mothers to new locations.
- *Focus group* discussion with 12 children (six female and six male) aged 11-15 years who had lived with domestic violence for between one to over five years. Children were accessed through one of the schools where they had volunteered to take part in the focus group. They were all living at home and for 11 of them the violence was on-going.
- In-depth *discussions* were held with 10 mothers living in a MIFUMI refuge who had escaped domestic violence. The table below provides an overview of the women interviewed.

Table 1: Details of 10 responding mothers

Number of mothers	Age	Length of time lived with DV	Number and ages of children	Sub-county of residence
1	54	20 years	8 – 5 boys, 3 girls – 11-25 yrs	Osukuru
2	28	4+ years	4 – 2 girls, 2 boys – 1-12 yrs	Rubongi
3	39	12+ years	7 – 4 girls, 3 boys – 2-21 yrs	Mella
4	37	1+ years	4 – 3 girls, 1 boy – 9 months-9 yrs	Central ward
5	42	12+ years	6 – 3 girls, 3 boys – 7-22 yrs	Naluweerere
6	47	10+ years	5 – 2 girls, 3 boys – 9-24 yrs	Agururu
7	42	13+ years	5 – 2 girls, 3 boys – 9-23	Amagoro
8	27	2+ years	5 – 4 boys, 1 girl – 1-15 yrs	Rubongi
9	41	24+ years	7 – 6 boys, 1 girl – 8-18 yrs	Merikit
10	38	3+ years	8 – 5 boys, 3 girls – 7-23 yrs	Merikit

- *Discussions* were held with five staff from the Police Children and Family Protection Unit (CFPU) to gain their views about the issues they encounter when dealing with women and children escaping domestic violence.
- *Discussions* with six senior teachers from three primary schools (Pasindi, Rock view, St. Jude) to explore their views about the issues presented by children in school.
- *Discussions* with three MIFUMI staff (refuge and advice centre) about their experiences and knowledge about supporting children affected by domestic violence.

All of the respondents were asked for their views about the needs of children affected by domestic violence as well as the support interventions that are required to meet these needs. Data from all aspects of the research was triangulated and is used to present the findings in this report.

The report

This exploratory study is the first of its kind in Uganda and is intended to create an evidence base for the development of interventions for children affected by domestic violence, as well as to create a springboard for a larger in-depth exploration of the issue. The first section reports the prevalence of domestic violence in children’s lives. The second section presents the views of professionals in contact with children and young people to highlight the issues faced by children exposed to domestic violence and the wide-ranging effects of this on them. The third section outlines the perspectives of children and young people and their mothers in relation to the impact of domestic violence and the support and services that are needed.

2. Prevalence of Domestic Violence among Children

This section presents the findings from the survey administered to children in schools. The survey aimed to ask all children about domestic violence between their parents, and about any direct physical, emotional and sexual abuse towards them. It was conducted to establish the prevalence of domestic violence in children's lives.

Profile of children

All of the 100 children were aged between 11-15 years, with girls (n=52) comprising the greater number compared to boys (n=45). The table below provides a gender breakdown by age of the children who completed the survey.

Table 2: Age of responding children

Age Group	Female	Male	Total
11 years	6	6	12
12 years	12	12	24
13 years	12	13	25
14 years	17	6	23
15 years	5	8	13
Total	52	45	97*

* 3 missing responses

Children had a range of living arrangements, as shown in the table below, with the majority living with both parents.

Table 3: Children's living arrangements

Who children live with	Number of children
Both parents	53
Both parents and grandmother	11
Mother	9
Both parents and grandparents	8
Sister	4
Grandmother	3
Father	2
Father and stepmother	1
Mother and stepfather	1
Aunt	1
Stepmother	1
Uncle	1
Mother and grandfather	1
Mother and grandfather	1
Sponsor	1
Total	98*

* 2 missing responses

The overwhelming majority of children had siblings, with the largest number having fairly large families of seven and more siblings. Only one had no siblings. The table below provides further details about this.

Table 4: Number of siblings

Number of siblings	Number of children
7+	37
6	9
5	13
4	12
3	8
2	6
1	9
None	1
Total	95*

* 5 missing responses

The majority of children lived in poverty, with 78.5% (n=77) stating their family did not have enough money for the things they needed, with 19.3% (n=19) stating they had enough money.

Fighting among parents

Children were asked how often their mother and father fight and given three possible responses – never, sometimes, every day.

Table 5: Fighting among parents

How often parents fight	Number of children
Never	60
Sometimes	36
Everyday	2
Total	98*

* 2 missing responses

As the table above shows, 38.7% (n=38) of children reported their parents fighting. Given the number of other siblings in the households reporting fighting, it is likely that over 200 children were exposed to domestic violence. Girls (n=21; 40.3%) were more likely to report fighting between parents than boys (n=17; 37.7%), as were those aged between 12-14 years.

Children were asked when the fighting between their parents had started. Of the 38 who reported fighting, the largest number said four or more years (n=11; 30%), equal numbers said it had started this year (n=8; 21%) and two to three years ago (n=8; 21%), while nine said they could not remember.

Questions were asked about whether the abusive parent (father) had broken or destroyed something on purpose, done something to hurt mother's body or actually hurt mother with a knife, gun or other object. The responses from the 38 children who reported fighting between their parents are presented in the following table.

Table 6: Forms of abuse

Form of abuse	Never	Sometimes	Often	Total
Broken or destroyed something on purpose	26	10	2	38
Done something to hurt your mother's body	1	37	-	38
Actually hurt mother with a knife, gun or object	32	6	-	38

The largest number of children reported their father hurting their mother with a knife, gun or object and breaking or destroying something on purpose. Even where fighting between parents was not reported, 10 children said their father broke or destroyed things on purpose.

Further details of how father had hurt mother’s body give an insight into the types of abuse women were subjected to by their abusive partners. The following table provides an overview of the forms and range of abuse against their mothers reported by children, all of who said this was ‘sometimes’.

Table 7: Range of abuse

Range of abuse	Number of children
Hitting her	4
Punching her	8
Hitting her; punching her	1
Hitting her; punching her; kicking her	4
Punching her; kicking her	7
Kicking her	2
Hitting her; kicking her	4
Punching her; choking her	1
Hitting her; punching her; kicking her; choking her	6
Kicking her; choking her; pulling her hair	1
Total	38

It is evident that hitting, punching, kicking, choking and pulling hair were the most common forms of abuse against women reported by their children. A significant number of the children said they tried to get away by hiding or leaving the house when their father was hurting their mother, with 64.1% (n=24) stating they did so sometimes while only a small number did so often (n=3).

Abuse towards children

Physical abuse

Just over a third of the 38 (n=13; 34.2%) children who said their parents fought reported their father had done something to hurt them at the same time as hurting their mother, including hitting, kicking and beating.

Seven children who had *not* reported fighting between parents said their father hurt them in this way, suggesting there are some children who are being abused by the father even when there is no domestic violence or that these children were reluctant to report it. This suggests that a fifth of children were being directly physically hurt by their father. Concerningly, when asked if another adult in their family had done something to hurt their body, including hitting, kicking and beating, almost two-thirds (n=24) of the 38 reporting fighting between parents said this had happened to them, as the following table shows.

Table 8: Children reporting being hurt

Adult in your family hurt you – hitting, kicking, beating	Number of children reported parents fighting	Number of children not reporting parents fighting
Sometimes	16	27
Often	6	4
Almost always	2	-
Total	24 (63.1%)	31

As the above figures show, even when there was no fighting between their parents, 31 children reported an adult in their family hurting them through hitting, kicking and beating. Combined, these figures indicate that 56% of all children who responded to the survey had been hurt by an adult in their family, and for over 10% this was a common occurrence.

Sexual abuse

Children were asked about sexual abuse (touched your private parts when you did not want them to; made you touch their private parts; forced you to have sex) by a stranger or a family member. Sixteen children reported sexual abuse - nine reported stranger sexual abuse (2 were living with domestic violence, 7 were not) and seven reported sexual abuse (3 were living with domestic violence, 4 were not) by a family member. Girls were more likely to report sexual abuse (n=13) than boys (n=3). In three of the 16 cases, both types of sexual abuse were reported by girls.

Emotional abuse

Children were asked how often an adult in their family hurt their feelings by making fun of them, calling them names, threatening them and/or saying things to make them feel bad. As the following table shows, almost a third of all children reported emotional abuse from an adult in their family.

Table 9: Emotional abuse towards children

Adult in family hurt your feelings	Number of children
Sometimes	47
Often	11
Almost always	5
Total	63 (64.2%)

Twenty-two of children who reported emotional abuse were living with domestic violence. Girls (n=35) were more likely to report emotional abuse as compared to boys (n=27).

If we combine those children who reported an adult in the family physically hurting them and emotional abuse (n=34), almost twice as many girls (n=22; almost two-thirds) reported both forms when compared to boys (n=12; just over a third).

Favourite family activity

Children identified the following activities as their favourite family activity.

Table 10: Favourite family activity

Family activity	No.	Family activity	No.
Washing dishes/clothes	20	Cooking	22
Digging	11	Growing crops	5
Fetching water	11	Tethering goats	1
Sweeping compound	5	Selling fish	1
Growing crops	5	Rearing turkeys	1
Grazing animals	4	Keeping hens	1
Mopping house	2	Looking after cows	1
Collecting firewood	1	Reading books	3
Football	2	Playing	1

3. Professional Perspectives

Almost all of the institutions do not do targeted work on children exposed to domestic violence but generally all issues that affect children and this leaves the whole subject matter not well attended to. (Teacher)

The Child and Family Protection Units (CFPU), teachers and MIFUMI are among the key professionals that come into contact with children living with domestic violence. As part of this research, discussions were held with staff from all three sectors to elicit their views about their experiences as well as issues for children in such situations.

Child and Family Protection Units (CFPU)

CFPU frequently encountered children through a range of ways, which included children themselves reporting domestic violence to the CFPU or accompanying their mothers to report the violence; children being escorted by leaders, duty bearers or neighbours to report the violence; and staff being alerted through community members about children being exposed to domestic violence.

Typically, the CFPU see around 28 children living with domestic violence each week; for September 2013, a total of 112 children had been in contact with the CFPU (60 of these were female and 52 were male). It is safe to assume that around 1,344 children in contact with the CFPU every year, though this figure is likely to be a considerable underestimate.

In response to reports, CFPU staff broadly provide counselling (mainly in the form of talking) to children; talk to the parents; transport the children (either back to their homes, other relatives or helping organisations); undertake investigations to ensure justice; refer to other organisations; and rarely provide food for them.

CFPU staff stated that they felt ill-equipped to support the needs of children affected by domestic violence, primarily because of limited funds and a lack of shelter for children. They most often referred to other organisations such as MIFUMI (domestic violence specialist), probation offices, justice centres, and other NGOs which do not carry out specific work on domestic violence.

Teachers

Teachers from three primary schools (children aged 6-11 years) reported seeing up to three children a week who were affected by domestic violence. However, since dropout from school is one of the most common consequences of domestic violence, it is likely that affected children do not attend school.

The most commonly reported response from teachers to children living with domestic violence was to talk to perpetrators about their behaviour; refer children to duty bearers such as local council leaders; provide guidance and counselling; do follow up home visits; and occasionally provide school materials and food from their own personal finances. However, the teachers felt ill-equipped to respond to children in such situations, and

often did so at a risk to themselves. Teachers also found the parents to be 'stubborn' in response. Limited resources, financial and human, were a barrier in responding to the many identified gaps for children exposed to domestic violence. Importantly, teachers said they lacked the skills to respond effectively and had inadequate information about the best approach to use when doing this. Teachers referred children to local councils and clan leaders who have the clan mandate to decide the fate of children, the police, probation, and NGOs like MIFUMI.

MIFUMI staff

Staff from the MIFUMI refuge (n=266) and advice centres (n=9,674) reported seeing a total of 9,940 children in the 21-month period, January 2012 to September 2013.

The MIFUMI refuge offers accommodation to women and their children and provides emergency practical help (medical, food and clothing). It also offers counselling and referral to other services. With the exception of accommodation, MIFUMI Advice Centres provide the same services, and additionally offer a monitoring and follow up service for each case. As part of supporting women, MIFUMI offers some support to children including sponsorship, resettlement, referrals, gender and karate training, shelter, and finding homes through adoption. However, the work with children is not done systematically.

MIFUMI staff did not feel equipped to support the needs of children exposed to domestic violence. The main reasons offered for this were limited skills, knowledge and expertise about children, lack of services to meet the needs of children with specific needs – sexually abused children or those with a disability - limited funds and tailored service provision through centres or rehabilitation homes and children's programmes.

MIFUMI referred children to other NGOs providing generic support to children including Plan International (community sponsorship), Smile Africa (shelter to street children), Save the Children (children's rights), World Vision (community sponsorship and nutrition), and Share opportunity (children's needs). However, it was found that these organisations tended to refer back to MIFUMI for cases that involve domestic violence.

Effects and consequences of domestic violence

There was a broad consensus in the views of all professionals about the ways in which children are affected by domestic violence. This also coincided with what mothers and children themselves said about the impact of domestic violence.

Professionals reported that children who witnessed domestic violence between adults were often neglected, psychologically tortured, and beaten. The consequences of domestic violence was most frequently children dropping out of school; becoming homeless and living on the streets; child labour, often as a result of having to take on all the household and related tasks; grievous physical injuries; disability; suicide attempts and even death. Many of the children became malnourished and some stole food from their peers when at school because of their hunger.

Some gender differences were also mentioned, with girls being subjected to sexual abuse (defilement) by relatives, becoming pregnant with unwanted pregnancies and having children at an early age, being forced into early marriage (often as a way of the fathers securing bride price for them), engaging in early sexual relationships or prostitution and becoming heads of households. Concerningly, girls became more vulnerable to further abuse by people outside of the home, including other relatives. Boys were reported to become aggressive, steal, gamble, resort to alcohol and drugs and pornography, to join bad peer groups, and to live in isolation. However, some boys engaged in positive activities to sustain their livelihood, including brick-laying and other work. Overall, all professionals believed that girls were worse affected than boys.

Teachers provide an important insight into the everyday effects of domestic violence on children. The following were reported:

Dull in class; worried all the time; withdrawn; violent and aggressive; rude; using abusive words they hear at home; sleepy in class; have poor concentration; distracted; late for school; poor and dirty clothes; have no school materials; bold; miss class; isolated; undisciplined; gloomy; stubborn; lazy; tired.

Moreover, children were described to be demoralised and their performance at school reported to suffer, while some repeatedly changed schools. Finding the situation at home difficult, many children were considered to find comfort outside, some showing reluctance to leave the school whilst others engaged in more negative activities such as gambling, prostitution and drinking.

As the only dedicated organisation working on domestic violence, though primarily with women, MIFUMI staff offer an interesting perspective about the effects of domestic violence on children from families who have sought help and support. Although many of the effects on children observed by MIFUMI staff were the same as other professionals, some additional issues were noted.

Feeling insecure; rejection of themselves – dislike of themselves; low self-esteem; hatred; divided loyalties; move from one relatives to another to find a safe place; display sudden behaviour changes – mood swings; sexually transmitted infections; lack of direction - hopelessness; fast physical development for girls – development of breasts due to early sexual activity/abuse; physical health issues – swollen abdomens, bad odours, prolonged menstruation; deformities at birth; low brain development.

4. Children’s experiences

This section draws on mothers’ and children’s accounts to outline the issues for children exposed to domestic violence and the support needed to address these.

Seeing and hearing the abuse

They were with me, they saw the violence but later I took them to the grandmother. (Mother, 28 years)

They were with me at home and heard and saw the violence. (Mother, 39 years)

In order to ascertain children’s exposure to domestic violence, we asked mothers where the children were when the abuse was happening and if they saw or heard the abuse towards their mothers. The 10 mothers reported that of the 59 children, all witnessed the violence and the overwhelming majority were subjected to direct abuse themselves.

Table 11: Children’s exposure to domestic violence

No. of mother/ children	Who was abusive	Heard/ witnessed violence	Physical abuse	Sexual abuse	Verbal abuse	Mental/ emotional abuse
1 (8)	Father	yes	yes	No	yes	yes
2 (4)	Father	yes	yes	No	no	yes
3 (7)	Father	yes	yes	Yes	yes	yes
4 (4)	Father	yes	no	No	no	no
5 (6)	Father	yes	yes	yes	yes	Yes
6 (5)	Father	yes	yes	no	yes	Yes
7 (5)	Father/step children	yes	yes	no	yes	Yes
8 (5)	Father	yes	yes	yes	yes	Yes
9 (7)	Father/step mother/ uncles	yes	yes	no	yes	Yes
10 (8)	Father	yes	yes	no	yes	Yes

Even though women reported high levels of exposure (hearing and seeing) to domestic violence by their children, some minimised the impact on children and did not view this as an issue for them.

All of the children in the focus group and those interviewed individually spoke about their father’s violence towards their mothers and what they saw and heard.

*Mother would be locked out of the house if she returned past 6pm from work.
 Father used to chase mother away often from home. He didn’t look after us after mother had been chased. I almost fell in the pit latrine.
 We were beaten without reason.*

*I heard alarms from mother when she was being beaten.
Father would chase us out of home without a reason.
Daddy abusing mummy that she is a stupid woman and
her children are as stupid as herself.*

When asked what they particularly remembered about the violence, children's most enduring memories/experiences are captured in the following:

*When mother was pregnant and father kicked her stomach.
When we were locked out at night.
Father would threaten to kill mother at night.
Father would beat mother all the time and one time we had to call the
police and father was arrested.
Mother sleeping in the cold.
Me and my brothers and sisters going without food.
Daddy said that we are not his children.
Father beat mother until she was admitted in the hospital.
Mummy being thrown down by daddy.
Mummy beaten by a chair by daddy.
Mummy being locked out of the house and refused to get her clothes and
drugs by daddy.
Mummy sleeping out of the house throughout the night.*

When seeing and/or hearing the abuse towards their mothers, children's responses were inevitably varied. The most frequent responses reported were to scream, cry, attempt to separate their parents, run away from home, hide, worry, ask to be taken to grandparents, call relatives or neighbours for help, ask questions, protect younger siblings, hide mother from father, talk to father to stop, and grab the object from him (knife, iron bar).

Regular violence and abuse also created anxiety and fear for children, not least because they were fearful of what the abusive parent would do next. When trying to intervene to separate their parents, children often risked being directly hurt themselves. This could involve being hit with objects such as stones as they tried to rescue their mothers, being beaten, and being chased out of the house.

Direct abuse towards children

Mothers reported high levels of direct physical abuse towards children from their abusive ex/partner stating that children had experienced direct abuse for anything between a few months to over 10 years. The physical abuse towards children included beatings and assault, being hit with stones or other objects such as a stool which resulted in the child losing his hearing, having food poured over them or having their food stepped on, being made to dig all day, being denied food all day, being threatened with a knife or a *panga*,

burning their clothes, being locked out of the house so they live on the street, and burning the house with them (and mother) inside.

Verbal abuse experienced by children involved being told they were stupid and generally being put down and being likened to their mothers in negative ways.

He would tell them that they are stupid like the mother (Mother, 39 years).

He abused my daughter that she cooks bad food like the mother (Mother, 42 years)

Mental and emotional abuse of children included frequently 'chasing them away', denying them food, denying them essential materials for school, preventing them from going to school, not providing basic necessities, and threatening them. It was evident that children were often subjected to a denial of the basics of life – food, shelter and the means to access education. Even babies were affected, as mothers found themselves unable to breast feed because they had to hide them in order to protect them from violence.

Although sexual abuse was reported to be less common, where this occurred it was mainly aimed at girls and they had been subjected to it for many years.

He would pat the buttocks of my daughter and would tell her that he would 'fuck her' instead of the mother. (Mother, 39 years)

He would share a room with the daughter and would actually sleep with her, have sex with her. (Mother, 42 years)

At times, the threat of sexual abuse was used to control the mother and children, as shown in the following:

He would tell the girl child that she will share with the mother the same husband' and 'he undressed in front of girl child whenever she intervened on behalf of the mother. (MIFUMI worker)

Mother-child relationships

It was evident from women's and children's accounts that men often undermined the relationships between mothers and their children or subjected children to negative comments about their mothers, often using this to justify abuse towards women and children themselves.

He would tell the daughter that your mother hit me with stones. This was to try to actually make them believe that their mother is bad. My daughter would come back to me in disbelief to try to confirm if I did that. (Mother, 37 years)

He tells my young son not to listen to the mother. (Mother, 42 years)

*Daddy said children who support mummy will not be helped.
Daddy saying that mummy is teaching children bad manners.*

In a minority of cases, children were reported to be so manipulated by abusive fathers that they testified against their mothers claiming everything was the mother's fault.

Effects of domestic violence on children

Children and mothers mentioned a range of ways in which both exposure to domestic violence and direct abuse affected children.

Sad and angry. Father said that my sisters on Anti-Retroviral Treatment for HIV/Aids should be left to

They do not love and they lack trust.

They have a lot of hatred and blame on the father.

They are traumatised by the home and they stay away from home until late.

Children mentioned the following when asked how they felt when they were living with domestic violence:

*Bad; sad; lonely; scared; exhausted; miserable; vengeful;
rejected; stressed; saddened; helpless; powerless;
oppressed; tortured; hungry; unsafe.*

Mental distress, stress and anxiety

*I was uneasy and on tension all the time. Stressed.
They no longer care about anything.*

Children were said to be 'worried all the time', 'tensed up', and stressed as a result of living with domestic violence. They were reported to be sad, withdrawn and 'miserable' and experience hopelessness, signalling obvious effects on their mental wellbeing. A minority were reported to have taken poison in an attempt to commit suicide. Greater

mental health issues were reported for those who had lived with domestic violence for many years and had suffered abuse from multiple perpetrators.

Feeling unsafe/ being fearful

Frequent domestic violence left children fearful for their own and their mother's safety. Children said they were scared when living with domestic violence. Feeling unsafe was a common effect for children, and to such an extent for some, that they had run away from home. Women also felt guilty for not being able to provide a safe and homely environment for their children.

Women having to leave the abusive home had resulted in homelessness for children. Where they had been sent to live with grandparents, children had been separated not only from their mothers but also from other siblings, with the obvious repercussions of this for their emotional wellbeing.

Health issues/problems

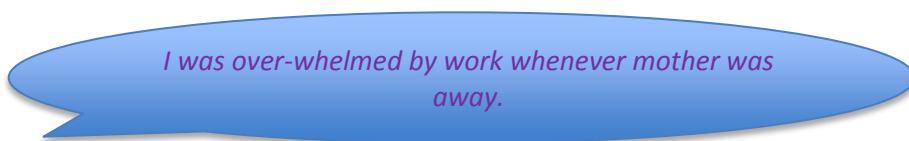
Alongside the resulting emotional and mental distress, some children were reported to develop physical health problems. For one child, this meant becoming deaf as a result of being hit with a heavy object when trying to protect their mother. For another, being locked out of the house during bad weather had resulted in skin irritations, and many others had developed blood pressure, ulcers, and pneumonia.

Children were also reported to become malnourished as a result of being denied food by the abusive father or through a lack of means for the mother to buy food for the children. Some experienced a loss of appetite and consequently suffered from a loss of weight, with obvious implications for their physical growth.

Impact on education

Apathy, poor concentration and poor performance at school, and absent-mindedness were some of the most common effects noted on children. Some children had dropped out of school.

Assuming responsibility



I was over-whelmed by work whenever mother was away.

All respondents talked about children having to carry out the housework and other attendant tasks when their mothers were forced to be away from the home because of violence. It is not surprising then that many children living with domestic violence had to drop out of school or, if they continued to go to school that their school work suffered.

Adopting negative behaviours

As already noted, many children, especially boys, were reported to adopt negative behaviours such as stealing, violence, drinking and taking drugs, and engaging in other criminal activity.

Children a factor for women leaving abuse

Seven of the 10 women said that children were a key consideration in their decision to leave the abusive home. However, it was clear that this was not an easy thing for women and whilst all of them had concerns about their children, they also wanted them to grow up with both parents. Where girls were subjected to sexual abuse, mothers worried about what would happen to the *'girls alone without me'*.

Talking to children

Six women said they had talked to their children about their experiences of living with domestic violence. In these conversations, children were reported to request they be sent to live with grandparents; to give encouragement to their mothers; to console their mothers – *'they will buy for me meat when they get money since their father eats his alone'*; to keep quiet; to get angry and emotionally break down; tell the mother to leave the violent home and get own house in a new environment; and say they will not behave like their father.

Once they had left domestic violence, some children had become hard working in their attempt to make a better life for their mother and for themselves:

They feel they want to work hard so that they will not fall in such traps as the mother and also hope to resettle their mother to a better future life.

In relation to where children obtained support and help, the most frequently mentioned were MIFUMI, security officers in the village, neighbours, police, LC1 leader, and relatives – maternal uncles.

After domestic violence

In the individual interviews and focus group, children were asked how they felt about their life after leaving the domestic violence. All of them said that *'life is better'* or *'life is good'* and *'I am happy'* because there were *'no quarrels and fights at home'* and *'I am not beaten'* and that they now had *'no stress'*, had a *'free and calm mind'*, felt *'peaceful'* and *'settled'*, *'we can access help'*, *'I feel free'*, and that they could go to school and now had all the basic needs – *'I am given money for feeding at school'*. In addition, children mentioned feeling *'loved'* and *'uplifted'*.

All of the children and young people did not miss anything about their life in the past, except for *'digging'*, and all of them said they felt safer. Things that they did now that they were not able to do before included eating a balanced diet; studying well – *'revise my books without disturbance'*; worshipping freely, having basic needs met; doing housework willingly; *'crack jokes'*; have a positive relationship with their mother – *'I can now interact freely with my mother which daddy used not to allow me to do before'*; and enjoying leisure time – *'can play freely after work and don't over dig.'*

Children 's needs

Mothers

Women were asked what help and support children needed to deal with the effects of domestic violence and mentioned the following:

- Education, scholarships, school materials
- Job opportunities during holidays
- Basic needs – food, clothes

All of the women stated they felt unable to give the support children required to deal with the effects of domestic violence – *'I am overwhelmed'*.

When asked what help and support they needed to be able to support their children with their experiences of domestic violence, women mentioned the following:

- Shelter
- Income generating opportunities
- Financial support and resettlement
- Skills in guidance and counselling
- Understanding children's needs and development

This is not surprising in the face of not only generalised poverty but also the denial of money by abusive partners and the absence of any financial means for women. MIFUMI staff reinforced the views of mothers, suggesting women were unable to support the needs of their children for a range of varied reasons, including women being deeply affected by domestic violence themselves; their economic disempowerment; having large families; high illiteracy rates; being over-whelmed by domestic chores; and general weakness due to a lack of food and no medical attention. In order to be empowered to meet their children's needs, women required interventions that enabled their economic empowerment; skills development; nutritional education; income generating activities; reproductive health services; education about child development; and information about the effects of domestic violence on children.

Professionals

When asked about the needs of children exposed to domestic violence, professionals mentioned that they required love and care and encouragement as well as more formal counselling and psychosocial support. Medical care was thought to be necessary for those who had been physically and sexually abused along with emergency provision of food and clothes. The protection of children was also considered important, since many are threatened by parents and other relatives not to report, and especially to preserve evidence so that prosecution could be strengthened. As children live in rural and often inaccessible areas, the provision of transport to undertake follow up work was also seen to be important.

Work needed to help and support all children exposed to domestic violence

There was a consensus among all respondents – professionals, children and mothers – about the work and services that were needed to support children exposed to domestic violence. This included direct work with affected children, awareness and attitudinal (prevention) work with all children, and work with agencies and professionals.

Services needed for children and young people

Direct work

Given the consequences of domestic violence for children and the absence of any focused work currently taking place, a range of priorities were identified by all respondents:

- Counselling and helping to overcome trauma (psychosocial services)
- Focused programmes and empowerment work (including awareness of domestic violence)
- Reception centre and shelter for children
- Direct advocacy for children
- Advice and guidance
- Medical and health services
- Emergency practical assistance – food, clothes, school materials
- Resettlement into violence free life - safety
- Education – scholarship schemes/subsidized schools
- Recreational activities
- Vocational training/ skills development centres/ career development programmes
- Exchange visit programmes for children to have role models and mentoring

Universal work

In the face of high levels of domestic violence and the lack of information about this, prevention work with all children and young people was highlighted:

- Sensitisation programmes targeted at children about domestic violence (prevention work)
- Community awareness campaign about the effects of domestic violence on children

Work with agencies

With the exception of MIFUMI and CFPUs, there is an absence of dedicated agencies working with children exposed to domestic violence. In order to strengthen agency/professional responses, the following were identified:

- Training and capacity building for staff to deal with children's issues
- Strengthening referral systems among agencies
- Creating avenues for identification and reporting
- Enhance police investigations (medical evidence, prosecution)
- Strengthening co-ordination and networking within all key agencies (including judiciary)

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

This exploratory study is the first of its kind to be undertaken in Uganda and was intended to generate evidence about children and domestic violence in Eastern Uganda. It was also intended to create a springboard for a larger in-depth exploration of the issue, to feed into the development of interventions for children.

Key Conclusions

- 38.7% of children reported their parents fighting. Girls were more likely to report fighting between parents than boys, as were those aged between 12-14 years. The largest number said this had occurred for four or more years.
- The largest number of children reported their father hurting their mother with a knife, gun or object and breaking or destroying something on purpose. Even where fighting between parents was not reported, a tenth of children said their father broke or destroyed things on purpose.
- Hitting, punching, kicking, choking and pulling hair were the most common forms of abuse against women reported by their children. A significant number of children said they tried to get away by hiding or leaving the house when their father was hurting their mother.
- Just over a third of the 38 children who said their parents fought reported their father had done something to hurt them at the same time, including hitting, kicking and beating. Overall, a fifth of children were being directly physically hurt by their father.
- Almost two-thirds of the 38 children reporting fighting between parents said another adult in their family had done something to hurt their body, including hitting, kicking and beating. Even when there was no fighting between their parents, children reported an adult in their family hurting them through hitting, kicking and beating. Combined, these figures indicate that 56% of all children who responded to the survey had been hurt by an adult in their family, and for over 10% (1 in 10) this was a common occurrence.
- Sixteen children reported sexual abuse, where those reporting stranger sexual abuse was slightly higher than those reporting sexual abuse by a family member. Girls were significantly more likely to report sexual abuse than boys.
- Almost two-thirds of children reported emotional abuse from an adult in their family.
- Of the children who reported an adult in the family physically hurting them and emotional abuse, almost twice as many females reported both forms compared to males.

- All of the children in the focus group and those interviewed individually spoke at length about their father's violence towards their mothers. Many risked being hurt themselves – being hit with stones or being beaten – when trying to intervene to separate their parents. Physical, verbal and emotional abuse of children was also reported to be common and prolonged and, where it occurred, sexual abuse was mainly aimed at girls. Regular violence in the home created fear and anxiety within children.
- Women and children reported the ways in which abusive men frequently undermined the relationships between mothers and their children as part of the abuse strategy.
- The effects of domestic violence on children included mental distress, stress and anxiety; feeling unsafe and being fearful; physical ailments and poor physical development; poor educational performance or dropping out of school; resorting to negative behaviours such as consumption of alcohol and drugs and engaging in crime. Those who had lived with domestic violence for many years and had suffered abuse from multiple perpetrators had greater mental health issues.
- Children most frequently obtained support from MIFUMI, security officers in the village, neighbours, police, LC1 and relatives. Once children had left the abusive context, they were all extremely positive about their life away from violence and abuse. They all reported feeling safer and being able to do things they had not done in the past.
- There was a broad consensus in the views of all professionals about the ways in which children are affected by domestic violence. This also coincided with what mothers and children themselves said about the impact of domestic violence.
- Professionals reported that children who witnessed domestic violence between adults were often neglected, psychologically tortured, and beaten. Overall, all professionals believed that girls were worse affected than boys.
- All professionals encountering children affected by domestic violence said they were ill-equipped to respond to such children's needs. Given that there is currently no dedicated support work taking place with children, this results in a huge gap in support for children affected by domestic violence. Professionals voiced the need for training to build skills and knowledge to respond to children and the need for specialist support services to address the lack of resources currently in existence.

Recommendations

- Given the lack of knowledge and understanding among professionals about children affected by domestic violence, comprehensive training for key professionals should be developed and delivered to build their capacity and knowledge about the effects of domestic violence on children, their support needs and how to strengthen professional responses.

- In the absence of dedicated agencies working with children exposed to domestic violence, agency/professional responses could be developed through strengthening: systems of identification, reporting and referral; co-ordination and networking among key agencies; enhancing police investigations.
- Services for children affected by domestic violence are virtually non-existent. This gap needs to be addressed if the issue is to be tackled and the long term negative effects on children prevented. Further research is needed to feed into the development of appropriate dedicated services. In particular, the feasibility of developing the following should be explored: a specialist service for children which incorporates a dedicated centre offering emergency assistance; individual and group therapeutic support; play and learn activities; skills development, training and mentoring programme; advice and advocacy.
- Given that mothers need support to help their children deal with the effects of domestic violence, and to understand these effects on their children themselves, and recognising that domestic violence can undermine the mother-child relationship, a programme of group work for mothers as well as joint mother-child work should be explored.
- Recognising the high levels of children affected by domestic violence and the lack of information about this, the possibility of developing a community awareness campaign on the effects of domestic violence on children as well as prevention work targeted specifically at children through schools could be explored.