**COVID 19 Pandemic Exacerbates Violence Against women; DOMESTIC VIOLENCE RESULTING FROM LOCKDOWN IN UGANDA**

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**Introduction**

Globally, as COVID 19 hits hard on world populations, women and girls are more vulnerable than ever before. With the world lockdown and families staying at home, reports in rise of domestic violence are worrying. Women and girls are facing a double pandemic where domestic violence increasingly continues to harm and kill its victims, thus, calling for immediate attention as COVID 19 does (Mwesigye-Byamugisha, 2020).The COVID 19 pandemic is a global crisis that has exacerbated domestic violence, with women continuing to bear the brunt of emergent risks to public health, safety and human rights. The implementation of world-wide COVID lockdown policies have trapped victims of domestic violence with their abusive husbands, isolated them from their support networks, jobs and unable to access essential services or justice. Mwesigye-Byamgisha (2020) noted that a week after most countries declared lockdown ,mostly in the last week of March, UN Women(2020) reported that in France domestic violence increased by 30% since the lockdown of March 17th, and in Argentina 25% since March 20th. In Cyprus, it increased by 30% and 33% in Singapore. In other countries 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 Uganda, according to Mwesigye-Byamgisha (2020) on 31st March 2020, media reports indicated that five people had died due to domestic violence since government imposed 'stay at home 'measures in mid-March. Amanda (2020) acknowledges that movement restrictions that are meant to stop the spread of coronavirus have increased violence in homes. Lockdown imposed by countries world over, have forced partners to spend more time confined together at home, with reduced distance, leading to increased domestic abuse cases. Domestic abuse is flourishing in conditions created by COVID 19, yet victims have limited opportunities where to report the abuse due to lockdown. Governments are concentrating on health measures aimed at combating COVID pandemic while ignoring the safety of women. Global causes of domestic violence during the COVID 19 lockdown include uncalled for arguments between partners, existing conflicts, stress, poverty, redundancies, drunkenness, failure to provide for family, and other family mannerisms that erupt into fights, psychological torture, physical mistreatment, and murder. Quarantine caused by COVID 19 has isolated victims shattered their support networks, making it difficult for victims to get immediate help /justice or escape from the abusive situation

In Uganda, homes in which people should stay and which are meant fight COVID 19 are increasingly becoming unsafe for some partners. Matovu (2020) points out that in Uganda, by April 17, 2020, the police had registered 328 cases of domestic violence within the lockdown period. The police spokesman is quoted by Matovu (2020) saying;

We are having an increase in domestic violence cases in the country .We have seen this across the globe but particularly for Uganda, we have seen these cases of domestic violence drastically on the increase during the COVID 19.

Ministry of Gender, Labor and Social Development (2020) noted that by May, 2020, Uganda had recorded increasing domestic violence caseload against women and children since the coronavirus pandemic shutdown was announced on March 30th 2020. At least 3,280 cases of gender-based violence and 283 cases of violence against children between March 30th and April 28th had been reported to police. The Monitor News Paper Uganda (2020) reported that the major causes of increase in domestic violence during COVID 19 lockdown among others include; lack of communication, mistrust, lack of money or food, sexual dissatisfaction, disputes over money and redundancy at home. Perpetrators are locked at home with their victims monitoring how they cook and how much, cleanliness and how they care for children. Perpetrators are violent in the wake of personal crisis, including loss of jobs, businesses and financial setbacks caused by COVID 19 lockdown. Reports of domestic killings have been registered in various police centers .The majority of women in abuse of relations have nowhere to escape to due to quarantine and lack of transport, which increases fighting and killings. Media reports indicate that In Abako Sub County a woman was cut with a machete by husband over food, while in North Kyoga a woman committed suicide by taking pesticide following a domestic quarrel over finances. In a similar incident, a woman killed her husband for selling her hen to raise money for drinking. Media reports also revealed that a man killed and locked his wife in a house, while he threw away the kid miles away from his home then went into hiding, while another man in Banda Zone, Nakawa division, killed his wife and two children, packed them in polythene bags, locked them in the house and run away. Institutions that are supposed to protect women from domestic violence are pre-occupied with people who break laws to do with COVID 19 lockdown, thus, are strained to respond to the increased cases of domestic violence.

Whereas the government of Uganda imposed lockdown, it did not make provisions for domestic abuse, yet, victims find it difficult to walk to police stations which is quite a distance to report abuse. Victims who are unable to walk to police stations suffer in silence and mostly those who are abused in the hours of curfew equally are at a high risk since walking at night is more dangerous than the violence experience at home, thus, suffer victims in silence in their lockdown homes . There is a helpline for child abuse (116) but domestic violence does not have such facility, the victim has to report to local councils or nearby police stations or take refuge in neighborhood.

Reports from various media forums indicate that no sooner did the lockdown that began in early March 20202, than reports of domestic violence began to rise, yet the victims had nowhere to report the abuse, because the government concentrated on mitigating the effects of COVID 19. It was in this context that the President of Uganda, in a live televised address to the nation, 4th May 2020 on COVID 19 and lockdown warned couples on the rising cases of domestic violence;

I hear there is a lot of domestic violence because you are not used to staying with one another. You have been avoiding each other but now you are locked down together, you are quarreling over petty issues leading to fights, learn to live together using dialogue instead of fighting. You don't have to agree, however, you do not have to fight. I want to remind you that families are the purpose of life .All other things, jobs, foods and education are the facilitation of life

Similarly, the Archbishop of Church of Uganda, while giving his first church service on televised church service to a lockdown community had this to say to couples;

The lockdown is a testing time. Some women have been buying food in take-away restaurants deceiving their husbands that they have cooked that delicious food. Now that you are locked together and restaurants are closed, you have to prove yourselves that you can actually cook.

The statement from the President and the Archbishop of Church of Uganda reveal that COVID 19 has forced families or couples to come closer and know each other than ever before. It is time to know each other’s weakness and strengths, and this spousal closer examination sometimes results into domestic violence. In line with this, one female lady whom I came across during the COVID 19 decried the prolonged lockdown that was keeping her longer in a closed home with husband had this to say;

My husband is a secondary school teacher but he spends his salary on alcohol. He cannot even feed himself as he depends on what I earn from petty trade. The bars are now locked, the school does not pay him since he works in a private school, and therefore, he tried to sell my radio which I bought with my own money. I had to fight with him to save the radio. Sometimes, he demands for meat for a meal, yet, due to lockdown and lack of work, I have to prepare simple meals for survival. The man has never bought even salt or paid fees but he abuses me every day because we're are now locked together. Before the COVID 19 lockdown, whenever he went to bars to drink we felt relieved because he returned home late in the night after we had slept.

It was established lockdown and restrictions on movements to curb the spread of COVID 19 isolated survivors of domestic violence, trapped in their own homes with their abusers which put them at the risk of further abuse. The majority of the victims feel relieved from abuse when they are separated from their abusers by daily routines of work and meet home at the end of the day. The lockdown caused by COVID 19 isolated victims from people and resources that could help them. Victims of domestic violence found it difficult to access police, health systems, and local council courts due to limitations caused by the lockdown and the curfew to curb the pandemic.

Whereas the Uganda government cannot allow women victims of domestic violence to be exempted from the lockdown and strict measures that confine them home to prevent the spread of COVID 19, acts of domestic violence that have escalated during the fight against COVID 19, degrade women and therefore are challenged and unacceptable. During this period of COVID, perpetrators are sometimes not punished because victims cannot walk long distances to police stations since transport means are also lockdown in addition to victims being a lineament to them since they stay in their homes without working or depend on them for a living.

During COVID 19, Uganda Police respond to cases of domestic violence but courts of laws are also on lockdown to provide justice to the victims. Whereas health centers remained open, some hospitals have no staff due to transport means and even when victims may run to health centers for treatment, most of the doctors and nurses fear touching patients due to lack of protective measures against COVID 19.

The major obstacles encountered to prevent and combat domestic violence during COVID 19 lockdowns among others include; Confinement of the victim and the abuser in the same house for a period of time, all transport is a lockdown, save COVID 19 Vehicles that have cards, victims' dependency syndrome on the perpetrator, failure to work so as to have personal income, hunger, there is a curfew, even when one is beaten if the victim dares to walk or drive in the night, she will not miss harassment and even worse mi- treatment from police and army patrols in the night, the police may take long to respond because the priority is fighting COVID 9.Due to these obstacles, some victims are killed, others endure the pain.

The best measures to combat domestic violence in the Ugandan environment among others includes; putting in place helplines to call in case of any attack, provide vehicles or allow victims to drive to centers where they need help. Whereas the government of Uganda has invested a lot in fighting COVID 19, it should also look into the possibility of putting women's safety first including pregnant ones as they respond to the pandemic. The government should also avail online services where women can report abuse and even get justice immediately. The best results regarding domestic violence will be compiled after the lockdown and an intensive study needs to be carried out for women to tell their experiences of being lockdown with their partners for a long period of time. We are still lockdown till 18th of May, 2020, when we shall be informed of the next step. Due to social distancing and fear of contracting COVID 19, I have not gone beyond my village to ask women of their stories. I tried to visit my nearest police post for reports of domestic violence, but the person in charge told to go back after the lockdown.

Conclusively, looking beyond the pandemic lockdowns, there is need to fight for policies that protect women from domestic violence and other violences in times like these of COVID 19.These policies can also provide women with economic and social support so that victims do not depend on their abusers for survival. The government should put in place facilities where those who are abused can be protected in times of ermegencies. Couples should demonstrate the capacity to fulfill their family obligations and resolve conflicts without applying violence. The government should ensure that during the lockdown, referral pathways are open for abused women so as to access services during awkward hours of the curfew. There is need for a deep research after lifting the lockdown to establish the actual level of domestic violence during and after COVID 19 pandemic.