

Unending tales of violence against women in Uganda

By Patience Ayebazibwe

On the streets of Kampala, songs on violence against women were heard and whistles blew and all the streets were painted red. No surprise, it were women from all over the country and men human rights activists/advocates turning their anger into action showing the whole world that there exists a crisis that has continuously affected women as potential victims and needed an immediate action from the government.

Women in Uganda have continued to experience violence both in public and private arenas. These include; marital rape, domestic violence, harmful customs and traditional practices, conflict and post conflict violence, forced marriages, early marriages among others.

Despite of all these forms of violence, there are no specific laws in Uganda protecting women against these crimes. The pending laws in regard to Domestic Violence are the Domestic Relations Bill that has spent over 40years being debated on, the Sexual Offences Bill, Equal opportunities Act, the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa among others. These have faced stiff opposition to their enactment because they address issues such as marital rape, women's ownership of marital property, sexual Rights and reproductive Health Rights, divorce and polygamy among others. In the absence of these, the police and courts of laws rely on the penal code that covers assault and homicide. Basing on this scenario, a battered woman can only file a case based on assault and often the police ignore the depth of the crime regarding it as a domestic and a private issue which should be sorted at home. Because of this most cases on violence are not reported for lack of confidence in the legal system and fear to be stigmatized for exposing family matters to the public. The situation becomes worse in cases of rape where the victim is tasked to prove the crime beyond reasonable doubt. Such a task has always proved hard for women because in most cases they don't go for medical examination after they are raped because they can't afford the

examination fee. This thus leads to the delay to carry out investigation by the police hence delayed justice; and in most cases the perpetrators get away with it.

Recently, rape, murder and defilement cases are on a rampant increase but the government is silent about these acts. Local news papers almost on a daily basis report on these atrocities but the government has kept mum. Some of the few cases that have led to the loss of lives of our sisters include;

- Maureen Ampaire in November 2007 was murdered in cold blood by her husband in front of her children in Kinawataka a Kampala suburb, because she was HIV negative and the husband positive.
- Allen Mutari from Mbarara district –western part of the country was battered and killed in March 2008 after she had refused to have sex with her husband after suspecting he was unfaithful;
- Madina Nakamya died after her husband poured acid on her because she refused to have sex without a condom.
- The DPC of Mukono in April 2008 shot his wife dead on allegation that she had a private affair; but as I write, the perpetrator is out of prison; he is a FREE man.
- In May 2008, a woman doctor was gang raped by robbers who broke into her house at night, the case was reported to police but the process of getting the medical examination was too slow. It took her over 12hours to be examined and yet she could not bathe for fear to erase the evidence.

All these and many more led women from all over the country came out on 10th June 2008; marched from Kololo Airstrip to the Parliament of Uganda demanding the government to put an end to violence against women. The petition urged the government to pass all the pending laws that address violence against women. The petition was presented to the deputy speaker of parliament Hon. Rebecca Kadaga.

We were all happy thinking the biggest battle had been won not knowing what the police had for us in store. It was barely 2 hours after the march when Hon. Nabila Nagai Sempala Member of Parliament Kampala was humiliated by none other than the police in broad day light and in the presence of the media, in her own constitution seeking the

views of her constituents. In fact, one police officer tried to strip her naked, beat her up, it was such an embarrassing and dehumanising situation to all the women of Uganda; so sad and a **BIG SHAME** to the police that should be protecting the citizens. This scenario has instigated fear in all of us Ugandan women. If this happened to a Member of Parliament, how would it be like if it comes to the common woman?

Two days before Hon. Nabila's incident, Hon. Susan Nampijja from Lubaga South was also tear-gassed by police while officiating at a function in her constituency, a day after she was again beaten up while trying to settle the market wrangles in her constituency. One wonders how the government wants the MPs to work for their constituencies if they are not allowed to consult people they do represent! Despite of all the intimidation from the government, women won't lay down their tools. We will fight up to the end.