Research Articles and Essays

On the Margins:

Examining Violent Experiences of Women and Girls with Disabilities in Uganda

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Abstract

This article explores the violence experienced by women and girls with disabilities (WGWDs) in Mayuge District, Uganda. Utilizing the social model of disability and a qualitative research approach, the study uncovers pervasive sexual violence, economic exploitation, denial of political and social rights, psychological violence, and low self-esteem faced by WGWDs. In Uganda, many WGWDs who have survived violence are economically disadvantaged and disempowered due to various factors that exacerbate their vulnerability. An inclusive rights-based approach is essential, where communities recognize the rights of marginalized WGWDs and protect them from all forms of human rights violation. Furthermore, the involvement of WGWDs in decision-making processes on issues affecting them must be promoted, regardless of the severity of their disabilities. This upholds the principle of "Nothing About Us Without Us."

Keywords: sexual violence, women, girls, disability, Uganda

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This article seeks to ensure that the complexities of violence against women and girls with disabilities are appropriately understood and addressed. Women and girls with disabilities are those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairments that may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others per the National Policy on Disability in Uganda (Government of Uganda, 2006a), Persons with Disabilities Act (Government of Uganda, 2006b), and the National Council for Disability Act (Government of Uganda, 2003). Women and girls with disabilities face ongoing challenges such as discrimination, marginalization, social exclusion, stigmatization, and routine neglect of their social inclusion and effective participation in public life. They experience more stringent social hardships compared to men with disabilities or women without disabilities. Their difficulties are exacerbated by societal attitudes toward women and girls with disabilities.

Uganda has a supportive legal and policy framework concerning disability. The government has developed policies and enacted laws to ensure the human rights of persons with disabilities (PWDs) and their participation in development programs. The 1995 Constitution of the Republic of Uganda prescribes affirmative action to address the imbalances affecting socially marginalized groups, including people with disabilities. It provides the basis for enacting laws and policies that address their concerns. Furthermore, it mandates fair representation of marginalized groups on all constitutional bodies and indicates that individuals with disabilities should be treated with respect and dignity.

The rights of people with disabilities are also addressed in several government acts in Uganda. For example, The Persons with Disabilities Act (Government of Uganda, 2006b)

prohibits discrimination against PWDs in all forms, including those related to access to education, health, and employment. Other policies include the National Policy on the Elimination of Gender-Based Violence in Uganda and its Action Plan (Government of Uganda, 2016), the National Referral Pathway for Prevention and Response to Gender-Based Violence Cases in Uganda (Government of Uganda, 2013), and the Uganda National Gender Policy (Government of Uganda, 2007).

Despite these disability policies, studies show that women and girls with disabilities continue to experience gender-based violence more frequently than their non-disabled counterparts (United Nations, 2006b). Eighty percent of women with disabilities are victims of violence and are four times more likely to experience violence than those without disabilities (Martin et al., 2006; Valenciano, 2004). People with disabilities are at a heightened risk of domestic, economic, physical, psychological, and sexual violence due to social stigma and power imbalances in their communities.

Scholars agree that gender-based violence against girls and women with disabilities is a critically understudied topic, leaving many of their unique challenges and experiences inadequately addressed (Hassouneh-Phillips, 2005; Curry et al., 2001; McFarlane, 2001). This lack of research and understanding has significant consequences, as it contributes to the continued vulnerability and marginalization of this group. The urgency of addressing this issue is underscored by global acknowledgments. For instance, the United Nations General Assembly meeting held on October 1, 2020, dedicated to the anniversary of the World Conference on Women conducted in Beijing in 1995, highlighted that one in three women worldwide is exposed to violence over their lifetime (United Nations, 2020), while about one in five women worldwide is a woman with a disability (UN Women, 2016).

This study interrogates the violent experiences of women and girls with disabilities in

Mayuge District of Eastern Uganda. Like many others in Africa, these district women with disabilities live in a patriarchal and cultural context in which perceptions and attitudes shape public mindsets toward women and girls. This partly explains the inequalities and injustices that girls and women with disabilities continue to experience. These perceptions and attitudes not only deprive women and girls of their right to human dignity but also fosters gender-based violence and discrimination. Women and girls with disabilities experience dual layers of discrimination because of their gender and disability.

To promote the rights of women and girls with disabilities, the U.N. General Assembly adopted a resolution (A/RES/54/134) designating November 25 as the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. Governments, non-governmental organizations, and civil societies are encouraged to organize events on this day to raise awareness and address this pressing issue. The campaign runs annually from November 25 to December 10 (Human Rights Day), during which various stakeholders engage in activities to increase awareness (Peterman et al., 2020).

Similarly, the International Day of Persons with Disabilities (IDPD) is observed on December 3 to promote awareness and mobilize support for the inclusion of persons with disabilities in society and development initiatives.

Method

In-depth interviews with 48 women and girls with disabilities were conducted for this study. The research participants were women between the ages of 18-45 and girls 15-17, all with long-term disabilities. Out of the 48 research participants, 30 had a physical disability, 10 had sensory impairments (visual or hearing impairment), and eight had a combination of these. The 2006 United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006) recognizes these individuals as part of the disability community and

acknowledges the barriers they face in participating fully in society. The interview guide for this study was created based on the lessons learned by the authors from various disability trainings.

Theoretical Framework

The social model of disability serves as a foundational theory for understanding and ensuring the rights of individuals with disabilities, including women and girls. This model views disability from a socio-political perspective, exploring how societal structures affect the participation and contributions of people with disabilities (Oliver, 2009). The Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS), an organization originating in the United Kingdom during the 1970s amidst political activism by disabled individuals, asserted that society imposes disability on people through oppressive and discriminatory institutional structures (Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation, 1976). Influenced by Marxist thought, scholars like Michael Oliver developed the social model, arguing that disabilities are the result of societal restrictions rather than individual impairments (Barnes & Mercer, 2010).

The social model emphasizes the collective experience of people with disabilities, advocating for the removal of societal barriers to ensure full and equal participation. It differentiates between impairment and disability, suggesting that while impairments are biological, disabilities arise from social oppression and cultural constructs. Essentially, it asserts that societal structures disable individuals, and impairments should not limit their participation or opportunities.

To ensure the rights of women and girls with disabilities in society, an inclusive approach is essential. This involves engaging women and girls with disabilities in all phases of social and political initiatives, including planning, implementation, monitoring, and

evaluation (Reiser, 2012; Ainscow, 2005). Achieving equality requires addressing the root cause of discrimination against people with disabilities. By aligning the social model of disability with inclusive participation, it becomes evident that the exclusion and mistreatment of women and girls with disabilities stem from social structures that fail to accommodate and value them. Therefore, communities must be restructured to respect and uphold the rights of people with disabilities. The social model of disability emphasizes the need for societal changes to promote inclusivity, allowing women and girls with disabilities to prosper without violations of their rights.

Data Collection

This study employed a qualitative, narrative approach to explore the experiences of violence faced by women and girls with disabilities in Uganda. Forty-eight individuals with hearing, visual, physical, or combined impairments participated in in-depth interviews. This design allowed researchers to gather rich, personal narratives, providing a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of abuse and exploitation within their home and community environments (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Riessman, 2008; Webster & Mertova, 2007). The interviews were conducted in a natural setting, with researchers prioritizing participant comfort through rapport-building and flexible scheduling. All participants provided informed consent and gave permission to record their interviews. Researchers actively engaged with participants, establishing personal and professional connections while maintaining confidentiality. Probing questions were used to gain a deeper understanding of the context surrounding participants' responses.

Findings

This study explored the experiences of violence faced by women and girls with disabilities (WGWDs) in Uganda. Key findings include relationships and social challenges,

economic hardship, legal barriers, and sexual violence.

Relationships and Social Challenges

While some research participants were married, cohabitation was more common, particularly among those aged 23-35. Married research participants often faced relationship challenges, and some were divorced or separated due to physical and psychological abuse from their spouses. Most girls aged 15-17 were single, with 11 being pregnant and living with parents or legal guardians. Some research participants also reported abuse by their husbands' other wives (polygamy is still practiced in some parts of Uganda) and community members. Research participants reported various forms of violence, including psychological and emotional abuse, rape, sexual harassment and assault, forced marriage, and denial of resources or opportunities. While discrimination and marginalization were widespread experiences for WGWDs, the *degree* or *type* of vulnerability to these experiences varied based on individual factors, such as the severity of a disability, social support, and intersectionality.

Economic Hardship

Denial of resources and opportunities was frequently reported. For example, some women were restricted to growing short-term crops on small plots of land. Their husbands feared that allowing them to grow perennial crops like coffee would lead to permanent land ownership. Economic violence was also prevalent. For example, a visually impaired research participant, who sold goods and produce, described being defrauded by a customer who paid with counterfeit money, highlighting the challenges WGWDs face in economic interactions. She explained:

I am a visually impaired market woman and my companion is my daughter aged 12 years. When she is away and has gone to school, I experience challenges. One day, a

male customer came and bought tomatoes, onions, and a tray of eggs from my stall. He gave me a fake note of UGX 20,000 (an equivalent of $5 in U.S. dollars). I only noticed when he had already gone. Two months later, the same customer returned and gave me a note of UGX 50,000 (an equivalent of $14 in U.S. dollars) and told me he wanted two trays of eggs. I then wanted to go to my neighbor to find change and return to him the balance. This customer insisted that he already asked my neighbors and they did not have change. He said that I should not go there but instead, I should give him the eggs and he will find change at a later time when he returns to the market. I knew that was a fake note basing on his arguments and from previous experience. I found a way of alerting two of my friends who called a police officer from a nearby police station. When this police officer arrived, he asked me for fuel for his car in order to take this fraudster to police. I gave some money to the police officer and the man was arrested. I went in the same car with one of my friends and I made a police statement. I was requested to keep reporting to police. I did this several times once a week. I gave up after six months because it required a lot of transport.

Legal and Political Barriers

Negative community attitudes toward people with disabilities hindered their ability to report violence and seek legal action. This aligns with research indicating that such attitudes increase the risk of sustained injuries due to difficulties in seeking help (Dunkle et al., 2018; Watson & Vehmas, 2020). WGWDs were often discouraged from participating in community development and political life. For instance, a deaf research participant shared that she was discouraged from running for a local political office exclusively because of her disability:

When I stood to compete for the position of Vice Chairperson at sub-county level, many people in my community said that I cannot compete with an able-bodied person

who is 'normal.' Some of them had to swear before me in a crowd as many times as possible that I cannot make it. They went to the extent of saying that they have gifts to themselves if I ever manage to win. This really discouraged me. I feel pain not being trusted and not accepted by my local community members. This is violation of my political rights simply because at village level we are accorded less respect as disabled people.

Sexual Violence

Many WGWDs experienced unwanted touching of private parts. Underreporting of sexual violence is common due to stigma, shame, and fear. A research participant in her teens who was forced to give birth because of rape by her neighbor shared:

One evening, as I was going to collect water from the well. Our neighbor called me. I branched to their home and sat outside. The family head gave me *chapati* [flatbread], yellow bananas and I enjoyed eating. As I stood to leave, they pulled me and locked me in one of their rooms with their *shamba* [small farm] boy. A month later, I found myself pregnant. I had to disclose the shamba boy who made me pregnant. He then said that I should not report him, he will take care of me and the child when I produce. Now the child is six months. He has not provided anything.

Research suggests that perpetrators can include family members, neighbors, and service providers, with the potential for violence leading to new disabilities (Dunkle et al., 2018). WGWDs with visual, hearing, and physical impairments were particularly vulnerable to sexual violence, facing challenges in identifying attackers and defending themselves. A visually impaired research participant described being repeatedly harassed and sexually assaulted, with her report to local authorities dismissed and trivialized.

Access to Justice and Services

Many cases of violence were handled informally at the local level, often through the local council chairperson. Barriers to movement and communication prevented further reporting. WGWDs often lacked knowledge of formal reporting procedures and community support. Negative community attitudes further hindered their ability to seek justice. Access to healthcare services was also problematic, with WGWDs reporting discriminatory treatment, long wait times, and a lack of special consideration, even when pregnant.

Awareness of Rights

While many WGWDs had knowledge of their rights, they faced significant barriers to exercising those rights. Sexual violations were commonly reported by women with visual and hearing impairments, while women with physical disabilities were vulnerable due to their limited ability to defend themselves. Overall, the study revealed that violence against WGWDs often occurs within the context of family or neighborhood relationships, encompassing emotional, psychological, physical, economic, and sexual abuse.

Discussion

This study further reveals the numerous challenges faced by women and girls with disabilities in Uganda, with significant implications for government and community programs. Existing research highlights the social problems they encounter due to cultural beliefs and a patriarchal society. As Yoosefi Lebni et al. (2020) show, women and girls with disabilities experience a multitude of difficulties, a finding that should inform the work of organizations supporting this population.

Abuse significantly lowers the self-esteem of women and girls with disabilities. Their vulnerability, stemming from their disabilities, makes them particularly susceptible to profound psychological harm from any negative experience. This finding is consistent with

Curry et al. (2001), who suggest that mental health challenges such as depression, anxiety, feelings of shame, and low self-esteem often exist even before women and girls with disabilities encounter explicit discrimination based on their disability.

Negative community perceptions, attitudes, and practices toward women and girls with disabilities arise from a complex interplay of factors, including how a society is structured. These negative attitudes can contribute to or exacerbate the abuse they experience. The abuse often goes unreported within homes and institutions (including schools), and to law enforcement agencies. Consistent with the findings of Yoosefi Lebni et al. (2020), this study also identifies cultural prejudice and patriarchy as among the key drivers of these negative perceptions.

Women and girls with disabilities are integral members of the community and deserve full protection from discrimination. The harmful belief that disability is a curse or bad omen (Nakijoba, 2020) significantly influences the discrimination this population encounters. Uganda has taken steps to ensure that women and girls with disabilities are protected from abuse, violence, and discrimination based on their disability. For example, the country ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) (United Nations, 2006a) in September 2008, holding Uganda accountable for meeting the needs of this population. However, the sexual and gender-based violence women and girls with disabilities experience is heightened by limited awareness of their rights, low educational attainment, lack of resources, and dependence on others. These factors increase their risk of experiencing frequent and severe forms of sexual violence, often at the hands of neighbors and close relatives. This aligns with Bayot et al. (2006), who highlight the prevalence of violence against women and girls with disabilities within their own living environments.

Women and girls with disabilities face double discrimination because of their gender and disability. They are frequently excluded from community life – culturally, politically, socially, and economically – and are even abused by those in positions of power and protection, including individuals in government entities. Therefore, a concerted and sustained effort is crucial to protect this vulnerable population. Uganda must move beyond simply ratifying the UNCRPD. Mere ratification is insufficient; effective implementation is paramount. The government must take decisive action, not only to translate the principles of the UNCRPD into tangible improvements in the lives of women and girls with disabilities, but also to ensure that existing national policies designed to protect this vulnerable population are fully implemented. This requires concrete measures to dismantle discriminatory practices, proactively promote awareness of their rights, empower women and girls with disabilities, and guarantee their full inclusion and safety within Ugandan society.

Conclusion

While the Ugandan government and various grassroots organizations are making efforts to promote the rights of women and girls with disabilities (WGWDs), significant gaps remain. Research indicates that WGWDs continue to experience sexual, psychological, and other forms of abuse, which severely impede their equality and the full realization of their rights.

Community attitudes present a major obstacle. Prejudice against WGWDs is widespread, but it can be challenged through collaborative initiatives involving development organizations and community members. Changing hearts and minds to foster respect for people with disabilities is essential.

Immediate action is crucial to prevent both short-term and long-term harm to WGWDs and to create safer, more inclusive communities. To effectively address these

issues, funding must be allocated to evidence-based programs and the systematic collection of disability-disaggregated data, particularly at the local level. All interventions should be tailored to the specific cultural and social context of WGWDs to accurately identify their unique challenges and ensure that services are accessible to all.

The pervasive problem of violence further compounds the stigma, discrimination, and stress (including fear and frustration) faced by WGWDs. These intersecting issues create a cascade of negative effects, impacting not only the women and girls themselves, but also their families. The Ugandan government must develop targeted strategies to mitigate these potential harms.

Recommendations

1. Comprehensive Data Collection: Regular and systematic collection of disability-disaggregated data is essential for informed decision-making on the key issues affecting WGWDs. This data should be gathered at all service delivery points and during home visits by social workers and other relevant personnel, including those at probation offices, police stations, and healthcare facilities.

2. Strategic Partnerships: Strengthened networking and collaboration among local stakeholders, particularly relevant organizations, are vital to share resources and provide comprehensive support to WGWDs.

3. Targeted Advocacy: Intensified advocacy efforts should target both individual WGWDs and the broader community to create a culture of tolerance and prevent violence. Engaging religious leaders in redefining healthy masculinity is crucial. Strict enforcement of existing laws prohibiting violence against WGWDs is necessary to reduce all forms of abuse.

4. Specialized Training: Comprehensive training for medical staff, social workers, and other key stakeholders is essential to build understanding and respect for disability and equip them to address the specialized needs of WGWDs. Service providers must be educated on the diverse experiences of their clients, including those with hearing, visual, or speech impairments, as well as those with multiple disabilities.

5. Empowering Voices: The lived experiences of WGWDs must be heard and valued. Efforts should focus on listening to their stories, documenting their experiences, and developing solutions based on their insights. Documenting case studies and stories related to community awareness, practices, and the prevalence of violence against WGWDs should be strengthened. This should involve family members, including men, to address the patriarchal structures that contribute to discrimination.

6. Participatory Approach: The active participation of WGWDs at all levels of program development and implementation is essential. Their lived experience makes them uniquely qualified to identify challenges and propose effective solutions. This reflects the core principle of disability rights: "Nothing About Us, Without Us." The involvement of men, who are often the perpetrators of violence, is also critical.

7. Proactive Outreach and Accessibility: Service providers must actively engage WGWDs and integrate disability mainstreaming into all their activities. This will reach the many WGWDs who are often marginalized and experience disproportionately high rates of violence. Stakeholders must collaborate to ensure that service delivery points are fully accessible, with ramps, accessible restrooms, sign language interpretation, and Braille materials.

8. Investing in Evidence-Based Solutions: Funding priorities should include evidence-based research, addressing social values, norms, practices, and policies to effectively address the challenges faced by WGWDs within their families and communities. A home-based approach is highly recommended.

To conclude, by working together and prioritizing these recommendations, we can create a brighter future where WGWDs are empowered to thrive and reach their full potential without fearing abuse and violence.

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