

Safeguard children, youth in this fast-evolving digital age

As Uganda joins the world in commemorating of 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence, we are reminded that violence against children and youth is not only persistent but also evolving.

This year's theme: "Unite to end digital violence against all women and girls," draws attention to a new area of risk: the online world, where exploitation, harassment, and abuse are increasingly becoming common.

Achieving meaningful change during the 16 Days of Activism and beyond demands collective commitment and leadership. Government, civil society, and communities must continue investing in helplines, trained para-social workers, and child-friendly social welfare systems that can respond swiftly and effectively to abuse.

We must also promote responsible use of technology, strengthen and enforce digital safety policies, and increase awareness of respectful online conduct and behaviour in our society.

Too many of our children continue to experience physical, emotional, and sexual violence in places meant to be safe. According to Unicef, 35 percent of girls and 17 percent of boys in Uganda were sexually abused as children, and 59 percent of girls and 68 percent of males experienced physical violence during their childhood, with nearly half experiencing it in the hands of parents or

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Josephine Akiru
Child safety



adult caregivers.

Alarming, data from the Sauti's 116 child helpline reveals a steep rise in neglect cases. In 2023 alone, the helpline recorded 1,987 incidents of child neglect, 832 of physical abuse, and 737 of sexual abuse.

The helpline reported receiving about 1,500 calls each day. These numbers are more than just statistics. They reflect broken trust, interrupted childhoods and futures under threat. Violence and abuse disrupt development, erode mental health, and impede learning. Over time, the damage compounds, affecting not just individuals, but families, communities, and ultimately our national development.

I am proud to be associated with an organisation that believes that safeguarding

children and young people is not a side issue. It is central to building a stable, prosperous Uganda. Our work focuses on three pillars: preventing abuse before it happens, strengthening families through psychosocial support, parenting education, and economic empowerment to ensure homes become safer spaces; and providing safe alternative care for children who cannot remain safely with their families where belonging, protection, and consistency should be the norm.

Our youth empowerment initiatives also equip young people with digital literacy, awareness of online risks and the knowledge of how to report them. At the same time, we continue to champion a culture that protects children both online and offline.

Violence against children and youth is not only a moral failing; it threatens Uganda's future. Every child deserves to grow up safe, supported, and free from fear, whether in the home, the classroom, or online. These 16 Days of Activism call on all of us to renew our commitment to project children, empowering vulnerable young people and creating safe digital and physical environments.

This should be more than a campaign but a pivotal moment in our journey towards a safer, more respectful society for every child and young person. Let us not only raise our voices – let us commit to lasting change.

Ms Josephine Akiru, national director at SOS Children's Villages Uganda.