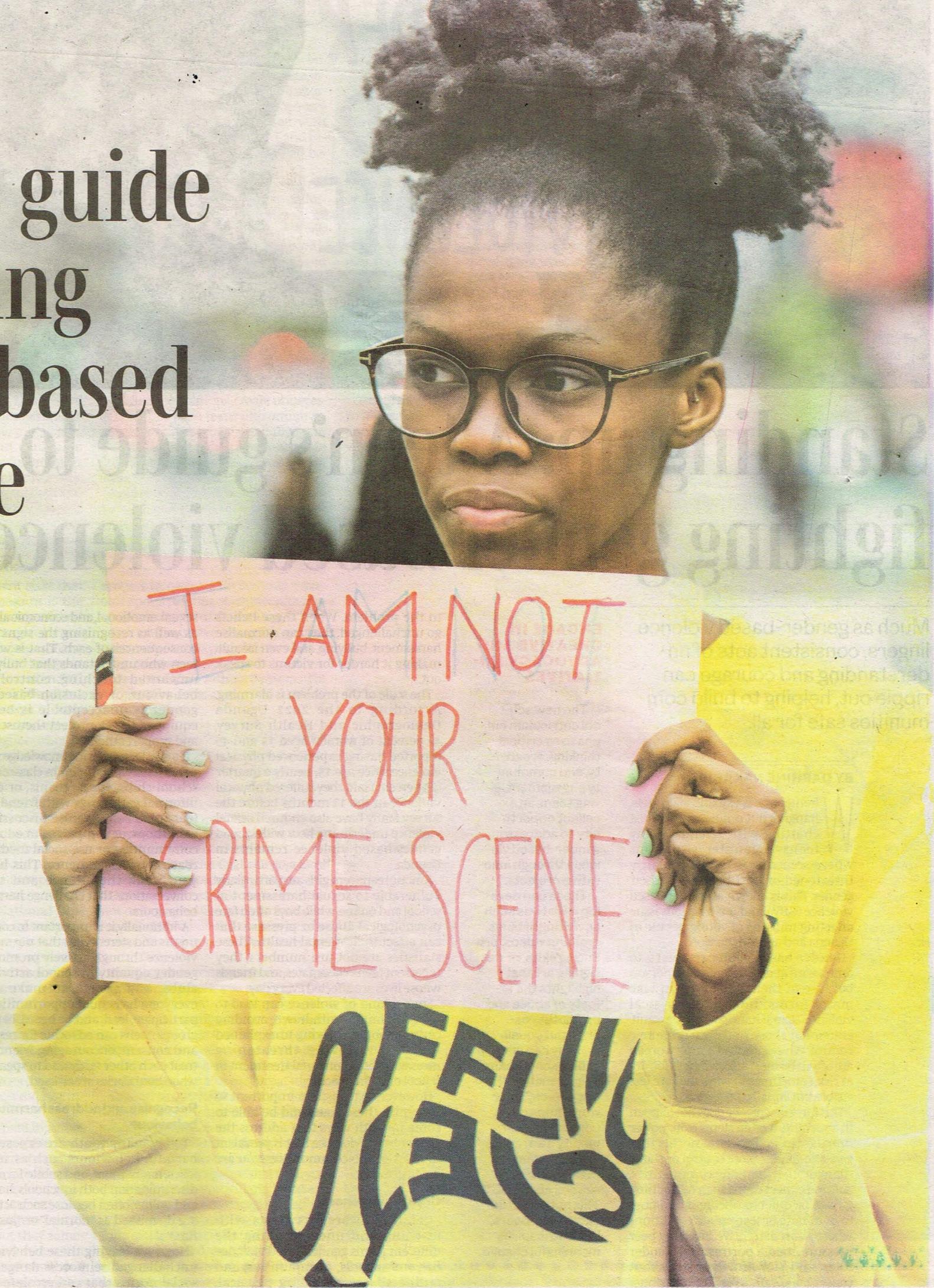


A teen's guide to fighting gender-based violence

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Standing up: A teen's guide to fighting gender-based violence

Much as gender-based violence lingers, consistent acts of understanding and courage can ripple out, helping to build communities safe for all.

BY DAPHINE NAKABIRI

Whether one is walking via streets, hanging out online, or even just chatting with friends, many teens encounter situations where someone is treated unfairly, threatened or hurt because of their gender. This is known as gender-based violence (GBV), and it is a serious issue affecting millions of young people in Uganda and around the world.

Gender-based violence refers to any harmful act directed at a person because of their gender. It can take many forms, including physical violence, sexual harassment or assault, emotional abuse, and even economic control. While girls and young women are often the most affected, boys too are at risk, sometimes in ways that are less visible, but equally damaging.

This form of violence does not happen in a vacuum. It often stems from power imbalances and societal norms that give one gender more control or status than another. In many communities, cultural expectations such as teaching girls to be quiet or obedient and boys to dominate or lead create conditions where abuse can thrive. Similarly, peer pressure, media portrayals of gender roles, and lack of awareness about consent and rights further contribute

ENGAGE IN CREATIVE AND ADVOCACY INITIATIVES

The new school curriculum emphasises critical thinking, creativity, and community engagement, giving teens an excellent opportunity to address gender-based violence through innovative projects.

These can develop initiatives such as writing articles, creating videos, producing skits, or designing art that highlights the effects of abuse and promotes respect and equality. They can also organise school campaigns such as "Respect Week," peer workshops on consent, or community awareness drives that encourage open conversations about GBV. This not only educates their peers, but also inspires meaningful change.

to the problem. When these beliefs go unchallenged, they can normalise harassment, bullying, and even assault, making it harder for victims to speak out.

The scale of the problem is alarming. According to the 2022 Uganda Demographic and Health Survey, 44 percent of women aged 15 and 49 reported having experienced physical violence since age 15; nearly a quarter (23 percent) said they suffered physical violence in the 12 months before the survey. Many have also endured sexual violence underlining how widespread gender-based violence remains in Uganda.

Among teenagers, girls are particularly vulnerable to sexual harassment at school and online, while boys often face psychological abuse or pressure that can affect their mental health. These statistics are not just numbers, they represent teens, classmates, and friends whose lives are affected every day.

Such a kind of violence can lead to teens becoming withdrawn, avoiding certain people, showing unexplained injuries, receiving threatening messages online, unequal treatment in school or social spaces.

However, as teens, it is important to recognise these signs and be able to come up with ways that address the gender-based violence that is prevalent in most of the communities you are living in today.

Create awareness

Creating awareness starts with learning and understanding the different forms of gender-based violence in your schools, communities, and online spaces including physical,

sexual, emotional, and economic abuse, as well as recognising the signs and consequences of each. That is why a teen who understands that bullying, unwanted touching, controlling behaviour, or exclusion based on gender is unacceptable is better equipped to act, protect themselves, and support others.

It also means sharing knowledge with peers. This can happen in classrooms, school clubs, sports teams, or even informal gatherings with friends. As teens, you can organise discussions, workshops, or campaigns to educate communities, or use social media to reach a wider audience. This helps you break the silence and start conversations that challenge harmful behaviours.

Additionally, it is important to correct myths and stereotypes that normalise violence through actively promoting gender equality in school activities, clubs, and sports, to make sure everyone has equal opportunities to participate, lead, and be heard. In peer groups, teens can advocate for respect and consent, encouraging friends to treat each other fairly and to speak up when boundaries are crossed.

Recognise and address harmful behaviour

Today, many youth are exposed to harmful behaviours such as sexist jokes, harassment, and subtle forms of discrimination both in schools, homes and online, often because such actions are dismissed as "normal" or "just for fun."

However, leaving these behaviours unchallenged reinforces dangerous social norms that can escalate into

more serious forms of gender-based violence. Teens can play a crucial role by noticing these everyday risks and taking action in safe, constructive ways. This could mean explaining why a comment or action is harmful, redirecting conversations toward respect, or calmly challenging stereotypes when they arise.

These small but consistent actions help shift the culture in schools, sports clubs, and online spaces, creating safer and more inclusive environments where everyone feels valued and respected.

Create safe spaces

Many teens face situations where they feel unsafe, whether at school, in their neighborhoods, or even online. However, creating safe spaces can help victims feel supported and give them the courage to speak out.

Teens can encourage friends or classmates who experience abuse to report it to trusted adults, such as teachers, school counsellors, parents, or local NGOs. They can also stand up safely when witnessing harassment, offering support without judgment, and help establish peer support groups where victims can share their experiences freely and confidentially.

Teens can also collaborate with adults to strengthen these safe spaces through working with NGOs, local authorities, or law enforcement to organise workshops and awareness campaigns to educate the wider community and provide access to resources. They can also advocate for schools to implement clear reporting channels and enforce anti-GBV policies, ensuring that every student has a structured, reliable way to seek help. Such initiative can contribute to environments where everyone feels secure, respected, and empowered to speak up against abuse.

Harness digital tools

In today's fast-paced world, technology can be used as a tool for change. While many teens experience harassment or bullying online, they can also use digital platforms to raise awareness, educate peers, and connect victims to support organisations.

This can be done through sharing information about consent, respect, and gender equality on social media, or promoting helplines and online counseling services, to reach hundreds of peers in a short time. Today, teens can use platforms such as Tiktok, Snapchat, WhatsApp groups, Twitter spaces or even podcasts.

These can be used to report abusive content, challenge harmful messages respectfully, and create campaigns that encourage safer online spaces, thus turning digital platforms into powerful allies in the fight against gender-based violence.

Practice empathy and resilience

To be empathetic is to understand and share the feelings of others, and for teens, practicing empathy is a powerful way to address gender-based violence. This can be done by supporting friends or classmates who are victims through listening to them without judgment, validating their experiences, and encouraging them to seek help. This can make a real difference in their lives, preventing cases of mental distress and continued abuse.

On the other hand, being resilient during this period means that teens remain strong, patient, and committed even when facing challenges whether it is witnessing abuse, confronting harmful behaviours among peers, or dealing with negative experiences online.