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GBV SHELTERS CLOSING WHERE WILL SURVIVORS RUN TO?

By Ritah Mukasa

As Uganda joins the world to mark the 16 Days of Activism against gender-based violence (GBV), it is important to pause and ask: What happens to survivors after they report violence? Where do they sleep that night? Who feeds their children and how do they navigate the long, distressing journey to justice?

A GBV shelter answers those questions. This is a temporary safe home for women and children fleeing violence and violent situations according to Rita Aciro, the executive director of Uganda Women's Network (UWONET).

When a woman arrives at a shelter, Aciro says, she often comes with nothing, but the clothes on her back; bruised, frightened and unsure of what tomorrow holds for her.

For her, a GBV shelter is not just a building. It is the thin line between life and death, between silence and justice, between despair and the possibility of starting again.

MANY ARE SHELTERS CLOSING

Over the last 17 years, the country has seen GBV shelters open in different districts under the supervision of the Ministry

If the country is serious about ending gender-based violence, the executive director of Uganda Women's Network, Rita Aciro, says shelters must be prioritised by the Government. They shouldn't be left to the civil society entirely.

"Shelters are not luxuries, but lifelines. Fund them. Expand and protect them," she requests, adding that when violence strikes, the survivor should not worry about: "Where will I sleep tonight?" But also, districts that donated land should not watch the buildings lie idle because there are no funds to run the shelters.

Aciro suggests integrating the shelters into national and local government budgets, as well

of Gender, Labour and Social Development (MGLSD).

According to ActionAid International, by last year, the country had 20 shelters serving 146 districts and nearly 50 million people. Majority belong to Civil Society Organisations (CSO) and faith-based actors.

On a sad note, these shelters are underfunded and many are closing, yet GBV continues to escalate. For example, following the end of the four-year FATE project in June, UWONET's two shelters have temporarily closed. The buildings are there and the need is

as recognising, training and institutionalising the frontline actors. The justice chain should be strengthened as well. Police, judicial officers, magistrates and Civil Society Organisations must work together to reduce delays, prevent case collapse and ensure survivors are not re-traumatised by the system meant to protect them. Lucy Mary Athieno, a SGBV specialist with MIFUMI, also wants perpetrators to be held accountable for their actions, because most times, when they get bail or bond, they go back home and terrorise the survivor. Others boast around: "I beat her and nothing happened to me. I am now back."

shelter was opened in 2008 in Tororo district by MIFUMI. In the same year, ActionAid Uganda piloted the Women Protection Centre (WPC) model in Mubende, Pallisa and Nebbi districts. The results led to the establishment of additional centres in Kumi, Katakwi, Mubende, Kween, Amuru and Kampala (in Bwaise) districts.

More were set up in Lira, Gulu and Amudat districts, with support from the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA).

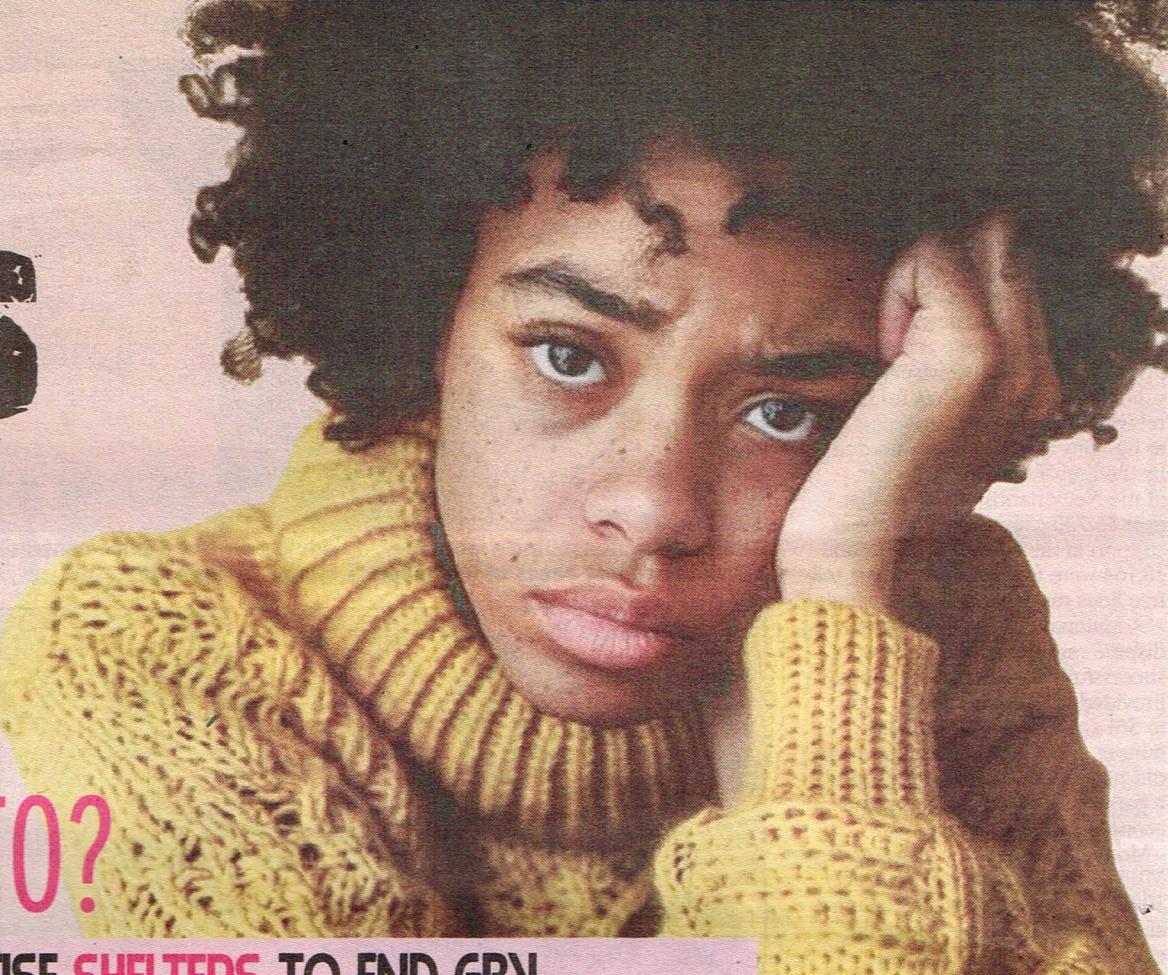
In 2014, UWONET constructed two GBV shelters in Kamuli and Namutumba districts, with support from the Government and Irish Aid. The districts donated land.

Aciro says, each shelter can host up to 25 people at full capacity. Survivors include women and girls, with provision to shelter boys below 12 years.

That's not all. In 2019, Women Rights Initiative (WORI) opened the Nyonga Women's shelter, a six bedroom home for survivors and in 2022, MIFUMI established their second shelter in Kalangala islands, among others.

GBV STILL PREVALENT

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Rita Aciro

'GBV SHELTERS SHOULDN'T BE ALLOWED TO CLOSE'

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BUT WITH GOOD NEWS

The 2023 Uganda Police Annual Crime Report had 15,184 cases of domestic violence and of these, 10,792 were female. Aggravated domestic violence led to loss of 249 lives; 95 were male and 113 were female. Last year, a total of 14,073 cases were reported to police. Yet also, the 2022 National Survey on Violence in Uganda conducted by the Uganda National Bureau of Statistics (UBOS) ranked intimate partner violence (IPV) at 45%, the highest being in Acholi region at 78%.

However, the good news is, many Ugandans were able to access justice thanks to the advisory centres and shelters. Data from the recently concluded From Access to Equality (FATE) project, funded by the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, indicates that over 25,700 clients sought walk-in support at the advisory centres and 18,164 were women. In addition, toll-free lines reached over 3,100 people.

Additionally, through alternative dispute resolution, 935 cases were successfully settled and the shelters provided refuge and holistic care to 561 survivors, including 206 minors. Most importantly, survivors did not only find safety, they found a pathway to healing, dignity and economic independence.

More to that, over the last decade, MIFUMI has reached out to over 10,000 survivors across the country, according to Dr Turner Atuki, the executive director.

One such is Harriet Nekesa, the principal development officer for Mbale district. She experienced all forms of violence from her ex-husband. Aside from the beatings and emotional torture, he hacked her 15 times and threw her in River Manafwa, but God saved her life.

"MIFUMI people did not know me, but they helped me and guided me through the legal proceedings, ensuring my voice was heard," she says. The perpetrator was imprisoned.

SHELTERS SAFE PLACE FOR VICTIMS

Shelters offer protection and temporary accommodation to survivors of physical, emotional, economic and sexual violence. The survivor is free to stay at the shelter while her case is being handled. Aciro says, they receive cases of rape, defilement, land-related disputes, family neglect and failure to provide.

On how these shelters work, the survivor is received and registered by the administrative officer or volunteer. Her details and nature of the complaint are documented. Thereafter, the case is then directed to the social worker or legal officer, depending on its nature. At this stage, the team assesses the survivor's safety.

If remaining at home is risky, for instance, there are threats of further violence, death or reprisals for



Champions counselling a woman at an advice centre. Advice centres are community safe spaces where survivors report cases of violence



Athieno with a survivor. She says they follow action plans on how different cases should be resolved

reporting, she is sheltered. But she is first oriented on shelter regulations. For example, phone use and visitors are restricted. She is also expected to treat others with respect, as well as participate in chores, counselling and training.

Meanwhile, while handling cases, Athieno says: "We follow an action plan on how the case can be resolved. If it is through mediation, we issue a summon letter to the perpetrators."

During mediation, they also sensitise the perpetrator about the law plus the dangers of GBV. They then sign an agreement, committing to change. The shelter keeps in touch to ensure they keep their word.

"We have seen violent men change completely," she says. Where the perpetrator is stubborn, the shelter involves police, cultural and religious leaders or the probation office,

At shelters, survivors found a pathway to healing, dignity and economic independence.

depending on what the survivor is comfortable with.

On the other hand, while at the shelter, the survivor also receives meals, basic necessities, medical care, legal advice and representation. But at some shelters, they also receive economic empowerment and soft skills to reduce dependency and vulnerability. Add to that guaranteed



Dr Turner Atuki

security and support from full-time matrons.

At Nyonga Women's Shelter, victims are also offered trauma healing and therapy services.

ADVICE CENTRES, A PATHWAY TO THE SHELTERS

Advice centres are also critical in the GBV fight, according to Atuki. These centres are community safe spaces where survivors report cases of violence. From here, some are referred to the shelter. In fact, in most places, the advice centre is close to the shelter.

They are manned by volunteers (champions) who are trained on GBV case handling. These centres are also linked to police, health centre and Community Based Organisations (CBO), such that the survivor gets the support she needs.

"We identify hot spots in every district, then lobby for space at the sub-county offices. We put the advice centre there," Atuki says.

Thereafter, they train the volunteers to manage those spaces.

Currently, Atuki says, they run 18 advice centres in nine districts under the Heroes Programme. Each advice centre handles an average of 50 cases monthly, depending on the location.

Some of these cases are mediated at

'SHELTERS ARE NOT THE SOLUTION'

Bernard Mujuni, the commissioner for equity and rights at the Ministry of Gender, Labour and social development, says the most ideal solution to GBV is to provide immediate redress by apprehending the perpetrators and ensuring full circle accountability. This means investing in referral pathways. Also, shelters should not replace the community where social support services are traditionally offered.

Sustained shelters is another form of subsidised interventions that President Yoweri Museveni discouraged.

"President cautioned that you cannot keep fighting each other at home and expect donors to give you money to sort yourselves," he says. "Sustainable solutions for GBV are within the communities experiencing it. We need to build the mechanisms for stopping and addressing it wherever it occurs."

the centre and others are referred to the Police. The advice centre follows up to ensure the perpetrators are held accountable.

And at UWONET, Aciro says, their advisory centres have a legal officer, co-ordinator, social worker and security guards. They also have administrative, transport and hygiene officers. Some survivors walk in while others are referrals from police, local council leaders, health facilities and community paralegals.

PRIORITISE SHELTERS TO END GBV?

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The justice chain should be strengthened as well. Police, judicial officers, magistrates and CSOs must work together to reduce delays, prevent case collapse and ensure survivors are not re-traumatised by the system meant to protect them.

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