

By Johnisani Ocakacon

For nearly two decades, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) insurgency devastated the Acholi sub-region, leaving communities trapped in poverty, displacement and fear.

In the aftermath, the scars of war fuelled a sharp rise in gender-based violence (GBV), as broken livelihoods, trauma and widespread alcoholism drove conflict within households.

GBV became so common that it shaped daily life for many couples, deepening family breakdowns and slowing development.

Today, however, communities across Acholi are recording a notable decline in GBV cases following years of counselling, community sensitisation and the growing involvement of men's champion groups working to restore peace in homes.

Valentino Ogaba, the community-led monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning (ColMEAL) chairperson in Akweyo village, said the prolonged LRA war severely undermined family stability and regional development.

"I used to be a very rude husband, and my behaviour almost cost me

# GBV cases drop across Acholi districts

my marriage. But after receiving guidance on the negative impact of GBV and seeing how my behaviour was dividing my family, I changed, and peace was restored at home, and I am now a GBV champion in my village," he said.

ColMEAL is an approach under the Uniting Towards Gender Equality for Enjoyment of Women and Girls' Total Health and Rights (TOGETHER) project, implemented by ADRA-Uganda with funding from Global Affairs Canada in the districts of Agago, Kitgum, Lamwo and Pader.

Concy Aloyo of Lukwor North said her husband previously sold off family produce to fund his drinking and often returned home violently. She said this changed after they joined the ColMEAL group, where communities are trained to set development goals and address GBV.

"I used to stay in my marital home with my children like slaves, but now I thank God. The battering of wives

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**The number of health workers in that have been trained to manage GBV cases.**

by men has reduced due to efforts by development partners," she said.

Aloyo added that men now spend less time drinking and more time working with their families. "Husbands and wives plan their budgets together, and this has improved understanding in families," she added.

Her husband has since quit drinking and joined a local champion group that sensitises households about the dangers of domestic violence.

Simon Peter Odongkara, the Lukwor North LCR vice-chairperson, confirmed a sharp drop in reported cases.

"Parents used to spend time drinking alcohol in the trading centre, and children were left to loiter around without going to school. But things have changed, and there are minimal cases of violence being reported," he said.

David Nokrach, who is in charge of Atanga Health Centre, said the facility now screens about six clients monthly, down from 30. Nursing officer Petra Elupe said outreach programmes have helped families understand the root causes of GBV.

Pio Ndahilo, the TOGETHER project manager, said health workers have been trained and mentored in sexual and gender-based violence response, while youth have been engaged in life-skills programmes that promote safer behaviour.

"These efforts are strengthening

relationships, and many parents have resumed paying school fees and supporting school feeding programmes," he said.

Ndahilo said the sh13b seven-year project targets 30,000 beneficiaries across four districts. So far, 69 health workers in health centre III and IV facilities have been trained to manage GBV cases, while women's participation in decision-making has risen from 22% to 55%. He added that the project also contributes to sickle cell disease prevention alongside GBV reduction.

Ambrose Ongwech, the assistant district health officer for maternal and child health in Pader, said sustaining the gains requires continued community dialogue and mindset change.

Dr Moses Mwanga, an assistant commissioner in the Ministry of Health's community health department, said alcohol and drug dependency remain major contributors to domestic violence in northern Uganda. He added that the ministry will continue partnering with organisations to scale up GBV prevention efforts.