

Uganda must urgently invest in GBV shelters

Jane (not her real name) came to the Women's Probono Initiative (WPI) for legal advice. She had just fled her abusive partner, arriving with visible injuries on her face. She explained that her partner, who was her sole provider, had physically assaulted her. With no safe place to go, she felt trapped between returning to her abuser or facing homelessness.

Stories like Jane's are all too common. Many women are willing to seek justice but are constrained by the lack of social protection. Without safe spaces and survivor-centred services, women are often forced to choose between enduring abuse or facing destitution.

In 2026, the global theme for International Women's Day, "Give to gain," reminds us that protecting and empowering women is essential for collective progress. One of the most effective ways to give to women is by investing in gender-based violence shelters and strengthening the legal and institutional frameworks that protect survivors. These measures ensure women like Jane can access safety, justice, and the support they need to rebuild their lives while fostering a society where gender-based violence is not tolerated.

In Uganda, gender-based violence remains a persistent and alarming challenge. The 2024 Uganda Annual Police Crime Report recorded 14,073 domestic violence cases, 1,667 rape cases, and 12,312 defilement cases, indicating that 34 children are defiled every day. Despite the existence of laws such as the Domestic Violence Act, enforcement remains weak and uneven across districts. On-

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Tracy Nabbaale
Gender-based violence



ly about 27 percent of reported cases are investigated and taken to court, and just five percent result in convictions. Underfunded institutions, delayed prosecutions, and limited survivor-centred services continue to widen the justice gap. As a result, many women report abuse without receiving meaningful protection or support.

In this context, GBV shelters play a transformative role. Shelters are not merely safe houses; they are lifelines where survivors can access medical care, psychosocial support, legal guidance, and opportunities for economic empowerment. These spaces allow women and girls to recover, regain agency, and navigate the justice system with confidence. By investing in shelters, society does more than protect individual survivors. It strengthens communities and reduces the risk of re-victimisation.

While civil society organisations run most shelters in Uganda and rely heavily on do-

nor support, government investment and political commitment are critical for sustainability. There is an urgent need to increase funding to the Ministry of Gender, Labour, and Social Development to support the establishment and operation of GBV shelters. Access to shelters must be expanded in high-risk communities, including refugee-hosting districts, remote areas, and urban informal settlements, so that women and girls can reach safety, receive counselling, access legal aid, and begin the journey to recovery. Currently, shelters, counselling services, and legal aid for survivors of violence are not funded by the government. It is high time that this changed.

The "Give to Gain" principle also calls on the broader public to engage. Every person, professional, policy-maker, and donor can contribute to a society where women are valued, protected, and empowered. Supporting shelters, advocating for stronger accountability frameworks, and challenging narratives that normalise violence are practical ways to invest in gender justice. Law and advocacy are tools that, when wielded intentionally, transform not only individual lives but entire communities.

By investing in survivor-centred shelters, we can ensure that no woman or girl is ever forced to choose between safety and justice.

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