

## National News

The report on orphans and vulnerable children shows that 1,372,229 children had lost their fathers, while 550,925 children had lost their mothers.

BY TONY ABET

A new report has revealed a troubling gender disparity in parental deaths, with children in Uganda far more likely to lose their fathers than mothers.

The Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS) report on Orphans and Vulnerable Children (OVC) Monograph 2024 shows that six (6.2) percent of children have lost their fathers (paternal orphans), compared to 2.5 percent who have lost mothers (maternal orphans).

Overall, about 13 percent of children under 18, roughly 3 million, have lost one or both parents, with 4.2 percent being double orphans (lost both parents).

"7.2 percent of the children do not have a mother (one in 14 children do not have a mother). Of these, 921,334 children aged less than 18 years, do not have both their parents. This means for every 25 children in the country, one had lost both parents," the report reads. Specifically, in the report, 1,372,229 children had lost their fathers, while 550,925 children had lost their mothers.

The gap between paternal and maternal orphans widens with age. By 17 years, nearly 12 percent of children have lost their fathers, compared to only 4 percent who have lost mothers.

The burden is heavier in rural areas and among girls, who are also disproportionately affected by the loss of fathers.

"The number of paternal orphans was higher than the number of maternal orphans. Overall, 2,464,493 children had lost their father, or the survival status of their father was not known," the report reads further.

Prof Yovani Lubale, the chief author of the OVC report and a biostatistician at Bustema University in an interview with *Daily Monitor*, linked the higher rate of paternal orphanhood to three main factors.

"First, historically, men have been involved in riskier activities than women. That is why, even long ago, accounts of the dead often listed 'women and children', because women were expected to remain at home and be protected," he explained.

"Second, economic instability has pushed more men to migrate out of the country than women. Men often leave after having children, while many women migrate before they have children. When these men die abroad, they leave behind orphans," he explained.

Prof Lubale also linked the disparities to differences in life expectancy between the two genders. "Life expectancy for men is consistently lower than for women in Uganda and across the world. This naturally results in more paternal orphans," he said.

The UBOS data also indicates that although life expectancy increased to 68, men are on average dying earlier than women, at the age of 67, against 70 for women.

## Life expectancy divide

Dr Patrick Tusiime, a public health specialist who served previously as the Commissioner for Communicable Dis-

## ORPHANS AND VULNERABLE CHILDREN REPORT



## REPORT

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921,334

Minors / underage: 7.2% of the children do not have a mother (one in 14 children do not have a mother). Of these, 921,334 children aged less than 18 years, do not have both their parents.



67

## Average age:

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# Fathers dying twice as much as mothers – report

eases at the Ministry of Health, explains the disparity.

He said besides genetic factors, the limited ability of men to withstand stress, their engagement in risky behaviours and poor health-seeking habits can explain their shorter life expectancy.

"Men can't withstand stress as easily as women do. Priding with heavy muscles in the physical world, yet inside them, men yearn to be treated like babies," Dr Tusiime told *Daily Monitor*.

He said there are more early and premature deaths of men resulting from the struggle to get or retain sex mates. "Men will fight, stab and kill fellow men over women," Dr Tusiime said, adding that this also contributes to the low life expectancy of men in the country.

"There are more men drowning in alcoholism and other drug addictions than women. It is also easier to catch a man in bad driving, theft and other crimes than women," Dr Tusiime said.

The expert explained that these health-endangering habits predispose men to diseases and reactions from the public that eventually cause them to die early.

Dr Tusiime also cited the work choices men make, such as joining the military and becoming boda boda cyclists, among other extra-laborious work engagements, as other factors contributing to a shorter lifespan in men.

"You can manage to live a good life, but imagine you are a military person in war, you may sometimes not escape the bullets, and this will kill you prematurely," Dr Tusiime noted.

Men also tend to be polygamous in African society, meaning the death of one man (father) can leave many children as paternal orphans, more than the number of orphans that can result from the death of a mother, especially in a polygamous setting.

## Child mothers miss father figure

The new UBOS report shows that the death of fathers has far-reaching effects on the children (orphans), especially girls. The report said orphaned girls who lost their fathers were more likely to be child mothers.

"The prevalence is slightly higher among paternal orphans (2.4 percent) than maternal orphans (2.2 percent)," the report reads.

The prevalence of child mothers was also lower among double orphans (1.2

percent) compared to single orphans (2.4 percent).

But in the report, paternal orphanhood appeared to be protective against child marriage (remain single mothers), with the rates at 7.5 percent among paternal orphans versus 9.2 percent among maternal orphans. This is probably because many children under paternal and double orphanhood become household heads or support their mothers to raise other siblings.

"Considering various forms of orphanhood, child-headed households lead in each type, for example, 10.3 percent (one in 10) of the children living in child-headed households were paternal orphans, and 9.5 percent were double orphans," the report reads further.

The OVC report authors, however, said often when the father passes on, the mother assumes the headship of the household.

The report shows that 21 percent of the households headed by women had orphaned children, which is more than two times the percentage of orphans in male-headed households at 9.2 percent.

"Even though, overall, higher proportions of children stayed in male-headed households, the number of paternal orphans in the female-headed households (950,318) was twice that of male-headed households (421,911)," the report reads.

"The implication of this is that many paternal orphans end up missing the father figure in their lives," the authors warned.

The proportion of maternal orphans

who were living in male-headed households (2.5 percent) and female-headed households (2.4 percent) during the census was similar. This, according to the authors, implies that "it is very likely that girls who lose a mother will grow up in homes headed by a mother figure."

But generally, the report and experts said all the children who lost one or both parents were struggling to attend school, and they faced several vulnerabilities.

The report shows that 72 percent of non-orphan children were attending school, compared to only 54 percent among orphans. This was for those aged six-17 years. Also, 28 percent of orphans had never attended school, compared to 16 percent among non-orphans.

According to the report, orphanhood is highest in rural regions and areas like Madi (20 percent orphanhood rate), Karamoja (19 percent), and Acholi (14 percent).

Analysts said this can be linked to insurgencies/insecurity and other calamities faced in these communities. This signals the need for targeted interventions to support the children and reduce preventable deaths of parents.

## Interventions

Mr Aggrey Kibenge, the Permanent Secretary at the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, said this report will strengthen Uganda's capacity to plan effectively and prioritise interventions targeting OVC and families.

He said plans are underway for the government to provide special grants targeting families with vulnerable children, and those with disabilities.

"This monograph comes at a time when Uganda has embraced a progressive policy shift in the understanding of child vulnerability," he said.

"While the orphans and other vulnerable children policy of 2004 provided a strong foundation for targeting children in the greatest need, the national child policy 2020 broadened this perspective by recognising that all children are inherently vulnerable and require comprehensive protection and support."