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[Domestic Violence and Women's Vulnerability to HIV-infection in Uganda](#)

Fact Sheet: Domestic Violence and HIV/AIDS in Uganda

Many thousands of Ugandan women are becoming infected with HIV, and will eventually die of AIDS, because the government is failing to protect them from domestic violence. Women whose husbands rape, physically attack or otherwise intimidate them are unable to protect themselves from infection or get access HIV/AIDS services. The government of Uganda has failed to criminalize or prosecute violence against women in the home. Through its inaction, the government contributes to Ugandan women's vulnerability to HIV infection.

"There are times when I don't feel like [sex] and tell him to use a condom but he doesn't want to. I'm on family planning. That causes disputes. When I tell him to use a condom he refuses. He accuses me of having other men. He goes away and doesn't provide. So I have sex with him so that he can look after the children and won't fight...the co-wives are dying one by one. He's still having sex with me without a condom. If I tell him to use a condom there is such a big fight."

- Margaret Namusisi, Human Rights Watch interview, January 2003

Background:

- The HIV/AIDS pandemic disproportionately affects African women; women's peak infection rates occur at earlier ages than men.
- Of sub-Saharan Africa's 28 million HIV-positive people, 58 percent are reported to be women and girls.

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- UNAIDS estimates that in countries with generalized epidemics, approximately 80 percent of women between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four lack “sufficient knowledge” about HIV/AIDS.
- HIV/AIDS was first identified in Uganda in 1982 on the shores of Lake Victoria in Rakai, southern Uganda. Years of political turmoil, war, and its aftermath of poverty, malnourishment, and dilapidated health services provided a conducive environment for the spread of the disease. By 2001, an estimated cumulative total of 2.2 million people had been infected with HIV, and about 800,000 Ugandans had died since the onset.
- UNAIDS has estimated that out of a population of 21 million, 1 million Ugandans are currently living with HIV/AIDS.

How Uganda fails to protect women from domestic violence and consequent HIV infection:

- Although Uganda has been successful in reducing HIV/AIDS prevalence rates throughout the country, the government has yet to incorporate violations of women’s rights, including domestic violence, in their HIV/AIDS programming.
- Uganda has made great strides in incorporating gender equality into the framework of its constitution and has made efforts to enhance women’s representation within its own structure. However, for many women, rhetoric has failed to translate into action. The government has failed to pursue policies of eliminating violence against women, to provide women with equal protection of the law, to ensure women’s rights to the highest attainable standard of health, and, ultimately, to protect women’s rights to physical integrity and to life.
- For most Ugandans, property rights are absolutely essential to economic survival. Women’s unequal property and inheritance rights in Uganda therefore contribute to women’s poverty and place them at a social disadvantage. Property rights violations exacerbate the vulnerability of HIV-positive women, who may be evicted from their homes and forced into poverty

because they lack the ability to secure land and shelter for their families. Women often have no choice but to remain in abusive and dangerous relationships: they simply have no alternatives.

- Since the early 1990s, local nongovernmental organizations have unsuccessfully lobbied the Ugandan government to pass domestic violence legislation, legislation addressing domestic relations, and legislation providing for women's co-ownership of land.
- Many traditional customs in Uganda subjugate women in marriage and limit their sexual autonomy. Polygyny, the marriage of a man to more than one wife, is inherently discriminatory, and, because the man may be having unprotected sex with multiple partners, exacerbates the risk of HIV transmission. The payment of a "bride price," or dowry by a man to a woman's family, essentially makes the woman her husband's property and denies her any authority in marriage, including over sexual practices. Widow inheritance, whereby a man "inherits" the widow of his dead brother, exposes women to the risk of unwanted and unprotected sex.
- For many Ugandan women, social worth and acceptance is based on marriage and children, making separation or divorce almost impossible. The disparity between education for men and women is such that women are forced to remain dependent upon men for economic and social stability, which means they are often forced to endure severe abuse. Women who try to leave their marriages are faced with social disapproval and enormous pressure to return to the marital home.

The effects of domestic violence on women in Uganda:

- **Sex as a marital obligation**—Married women experience immense social and cultural pressure to have sex with their husbands. Women who are married may be at a greater risk of HIV infection than women who are single, as single women do not feel the same obligation to have

unprotected sex with their partners.

- **Inability to negotiate condom use**—Many women in Uganda are afraid to raise the subject of prophylactic protection for fear of being beaten. Husbands often beat their wives because they suspect their wives of having extramarital affairs if they propose condom use, or because the men are defensive about being accused of adultery themselves. Violence is a common response when women suggest condom use.
- **Forced sex**—Marital rape does not exist as a legal concept in Uganda. The failure to criminalize forced sex in marriage perpetuates the belief that women have an obligation to submit to their husband's sexual advances upon the terms that he dictates.
- **Diminished reproductive rights**—Many women are forced into intercourse as a result of the husband's desire to have a child.

Recommendations:

- The Ugandan government should enact and enforce laws that specifically prohibit domestic violence and criminalize marital rape.
- The government of Uganda should amend discriminatory marriage and property laws.
- The government should launch awareness campaigns informing the public about domestic violence and its intersection with HIV/AIDS and the health risks of harmful traditional practices. These awareness campaigns should be part of the national HIV/AIDS strategy.
- Uganda should provide support to nongovernmental organizations that work on domestic violence, establish domestic violence and HIV/AIDS campaigns specifically targeting men, prioritize the provision of shelters for abused women and their dependent children, and support programs that provide legal assistance and counseling services for women.

What you can do:

If you are concerned about the alarming rate of HIV/AIDS infection in women and its relationship to domestic violence in Uganda, you can visit our [Take Action Now!](#) page, and write to government officials, donor organizations, and nongovernmental organizations.

For more information on domestic violence and HIV/AIDS in Uganda, see the Human Rights Watch report “Just Die Quietly: Domestic Violence and Women’s Vulnerability to HIV in Uganda,” available at <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2003/uganda0803/>.

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