



POLICY BRIEF

**ADDRESSING GENDER
BASED VIOLENCE AGAINST
TRANSGENDER PERSONS IN
RURAL AREAS OF UGANDA
– A CALL FOR INCLUSIVE
PROTECTION**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Transgender individuals in rural Uganda face a severe and pervasive crisis of gender-based violence (GBV), compounded by deep-seated discrimination, legal ambiguity, and societal stigma. This brief highlights the unique vulnerabilities of transgender individuals in isolated rural settings, where limited access to justice, healthcare, and support services exacerbates their exposure to physical, sexual, psychological, and economic violence. It calls for urgent, comprehensive, and rights-based policy interventions to ensure the safety, dignity and human rights of transwomen in Uganda, advocating for legal reforms, awareness campaigns, and the provision of inclusive support services.

Introduction: An Unseen Crisis

Gender-based violence (GBV) remains a critical human rights and public health challenge in Uganda. While women and girls are broadly recognised as primary victims, the experiences of transgender individuals are often overlooked, particularly in rural contexts. Transgender persons in these areas are subjected to compounded forms of violence rooted in transphobia, misogyny, and cultural misunderstanding, leading to severe physical harm, psychological trauma, and profound social marginalisation. Addressing this invisible crisis is essential for achieving a truly inclusive and just society.

Vulnerabilities of Transgender Individuals in Rural Uganda

Uganda's legal and social landscape is largely conservative, with strong religious and traditional norms influencing perceptions of gender and sexuality. While there are no explicit laws criminalising transgender identities, the broader anti-homosexuality sentiments and laws often create a hostile environment for all LGBTQ+ individuals, including transgender persons.

In rural Uganda, these challenges are intensified by:



Isolation and limited anonymity: smaller communities offer less anonymity as everyone knows everyone else. This makes transwomen more visible targets for discrimination and violence.



Weakened rule of law: Limited presence and training of law enforcement, coupled with community pressure, often result in non-reporting or inadequate response to GBV against transgender persons.



Ineffective traditional justice systems: Reliance on traditional leaders and family structures, which often lack understanding or are prejudiced against transgender individuals, further denies them access to justice.



Limited access to information and resources: Rural areas have fewer services, advocacy groups, and information sources on human rights or gender identity, which makes it harder for transgender persons to access essential support and recovery services as well as legal support.



Poverty and lack of economic opportunities: Transgender persons often face discrimination in employment and housing, pushing them into precarious economic situations, increasing their vulnerability to exploitation and violence.

Key Issues and Forms of Violence

Transgender persons in rural Uganda experience a spectrum of GBV, often with impunity. Some of the most common forms of violence to which they are exposed are:



Physical Violence: Beatings, assault, mob justice, and violent attacks, frequently perpetrated by family members, neighbours and, at times, strangers. These attacks are often driven by transphobia, the perceived “violation” of gender norms, or accusations of immorality.



Sexual Violence: Including “corrective rape,” where perpetrators attempt to “cure” or “punish” a transgender person for their gender identities. Sexual violence is often coupled with extreme brutality and humiliation, and is rarely reported due to fear of further harm or arrest.



Psychological and Emotional Violence: Persistent verbal abuse, public ridicule, ostracism, threats, forced evictions, and family rejection lead to severe psychological trauma, depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation.



Economic Violence: Discrimination in employment, denial of inheritance, forced displacement from homes, and extortion by authorities or community members, leading to destitution and dependence.



Structural Violence: Denial of access to essential services like healthcare (due to stigma from providers, lack of gender-affirming care, or fear of being outed), education, and legal protection. Police often refuse to file reports or actively discriminate against trans persons seeking justice.

Barriers to Justice and Protection

The unique circumstances of transwomen in rural Uganda create significant barriers to seeking justice and protection due to:

-  **Fear of further violence and retaliation**, both from perpetrators and from authorities who may be transphobic.
-  **Lack of trust in law enforcement** due to past experiences of discrimination, harassment, or extortion by police.
-  **Legal ambiguity and discrimination:** Lack of specific legal protections for transgender people means their identities are often not recognised, leading to denial of rights.
-  **Social stigma and shame** prevent survivors from speaking out, fearing further community ostracisation or family disownment.
-  **Geographic isolation:** Physical distance to police stations, health facilities, or legal aid centres in urban areas can be a major deterrent to seeking legal support, justice or other social protection services.
-  **Lack of awareness and training:** Law enforcement, health workers, and judicial officials often lack understanding of gender identity and the specific needs of trans survivors of GBV.

Recommendations

To address the grave human rights violations faced by trans gender persons in rural Uganda, we urge the following actions:

5.1 Legal and Policy Reforms:

-  **Review and amend discriminatory laws:** Repeal or amend existing laws that directly or indirectly fuel discrimination and violence against LGBTQ+ individuals, ensuring a safe legal environment for transwomen.
-  **Enact non-discrimination protections:** Introduce explicit legal protections based on gender identity, ensuring transwomen are protected under general anti-discrimination laws.
-  **Legal recognition of gender identity:** Establish clear, accessible procedures for transgender persons to legally affirm their gender identity, which can enhance their safety and access to services.

5.2 Strengthen access to Justice:

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Capacity Building for Law Enforcement and Judiciary: Implement mandatory, comprehensive training for police, prosecutors, and judges on gender identity, GBV, human rights, and non-discriminatory practices.
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Establish Safe Reporting Mechanisms: Create confidential and trans-inclusive reporting channels for GBV survivors, ensuring their safety and avoiding secondary victimisation.
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Provide Legal Aid: Support and expand pro bono legal services and legal literacy programs specifically targeting transwomen in rural areas.

1.3 Enhance Social and Community Support:

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Public Awareness Campaigns: Launch national and local campaigns, involving community and religious leaders, to combat transphobia, reduce stigma, and promote understanding and acceptance of gender diversity.
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Support Community-Based Organisations (CBOs): Fund and empower local CBOs and trans-led organisations working in rural areas to provide safe spaces, peer support, and advocacy.
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Economic Empowerment Programs: Develop vocational training and micro-finance initiatives tailored to transgender persons, promoting economic independence and reducing vulnerability.

1.4 Improve Access to Inclusive Services:

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Healthcare Provider Training: Train healthcare professionals on gender-affirming care, respectful communication, and non-discriminatory provision of health services, including GBV response and mental health support.
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Establish Rural Safe Houses and Shelters: Create and support culturally sensitive safe houses and crisis centres in or near rural areas, providing immediate protection and support for transgender persons survivors of GBV.
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Psychosocial Support: Ensure access to trauma-informed counselling and mental health services that are sensitive to the unique experiences of transgender persons

Conclusion

The violence faced by transgender persons in rural Uganda is a human rights crisis that demands immediate and concerted action. Ignoring this population not only perpetuates grave injustices but also undermines efforts to achieve gender equality and human rights for all Ugandans. By implementing the recommended policy reforms, strengthening justice systems, fostering social inclusion, and ensuring access to comprehensive services, Uganda can uphold its commitment to human rights and create a safer, more equitable society for all its citizens, including its most vulnerable. It is time to ensure that no one is left behind in the pursuit of justice and dignity.



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