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## **U.N. investigating 'surge' in female genital mutilation in Uganda**

By Nita Bhalla

Reuters (25.01.2019) - <https://reut.rs/2DDNIOF> - The United Nations said on Friday it had sent a fact-finding team to eastern Uganda to investigate a "surge" in the number of women and girls undergoing female genital mutilation (FGM).

The probe by the U.N. Population Fund (UNFPA) comes after Ugandan media reported this week that armed groups had been forcefully conducting FGM in Kween district near the eastern border with Kenya.

The reports sparked alarm across the east African nation, which has a strict anti-FGM law in place that has helped reduce the number of FGM cases in recent years.

"We have dispatched a fact-finding mission to Kween which will hopefully provide us with more background on this unexpected surge," Alain Sibener, UNFPA country director in Uganda told the Thomson Reuters Foundation by email.

"But what we know for sure is that FGM is being eliminated and therefore the recent incidents do not erase the achievements of the campaign," he said, referring to joint efforts since 2009 by authorities, charities and the U.N. to curb the practice.

About 200 million girls and women worldwide have undergone FGM, which usually involves the partial or total removal of the external genitalia, according to U.N. estimates.

Seen as necessary for social acceptance and increasing a woman's marriage prospects, FGM is prevalent across parts of Africa, Asia and the Middle East.

Performed by traditional cutters, often with unsterilized blades, girls can bleed to death or die from infections. FGM can also cause lifelong painful conditions such as fistula and fatal childbirth complications.

At least 100 girls and women in Kween were forced to undergo circumcision by groups led by elderly women and accompanied by men with machetes, Ugandan media reported.

The news reports triggered debate in the country's parliament and the government ministers vowed to take action against the "inhuman" practice.

Uganda criminalized FGM in 2010 with a maximum penalty of 10 years imprisonment. Compared to other African nations, prevalence rates are low with only 0.3 percent of women aged between 15 and 49 having been cut, according to government data.

However, in some communities in the east and northeastern parts of the country, prevalence rates are more than 90 percent, the U.N. said.

Campaigners said more public awareness campaigns are needed, and law enforcement should be stepped up in remote and rural areas where the tradition persists.

"The eastern part of Uganda had experienced long periods of violence and insecurity that made it difficult to enforce the law as effectively as it had ought to be," said Jean-Paul Murunga of campaign group Equality Now in Nairobi, Kenya.

"This is an opportunity for the government to take advantage of the current tranquility to reach the remotest areas and enforce the anti-FGM law to the fullest."

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## **Police arrest 19 people over FGM gang attacks on women in Uganda**

***Critics say police should have acted earlier on reports of forceful mutilation of more than 400 women in a month by armed groups***

The Guardian (24.01.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2sLzXBw> - Sixteen men and three women have been arrested for allegedly aiding and abetting female genital mutilation (FGM) in eastern Uganda after reports of gangs attacking women in the region.

The suspects were taken into custody earlier this week after joint police and military operations in Kween district. The arrests followed local media reports of more than 400 women, some as young as 12, being mutilated by force by local gangs in the past month.

FGM was outlawed in Uganda in 2010, but campaigners say too little is being done to persuade people, especially in rural areas, to stamp out the practice.

The reported groups of up to about 100 people are led by elderly women, accompanied by men armed with machetes.

"We carried out an operation," said Polly Namaye, Uganda's deputy police spokesperson. "Some of the people we arrested include those who participate in the process, the people who cut, those who prepare the girls for circumcision, the ones who sing during the celebrations and all that."

"It [FGM] hurts the girls [and women], it makes them uncomfortable and fear for themselves. It's torture in itself."

"We encourage that this [practice] is not carried on. We encourage the women to stand up for themselves and refuse to take part in this ritual, which was made criminal by law."

Mercy Munduru, programme officer with the Uganda Association of Women Lawyers, said the police should have taken action earlier.

"FGM has no place in our society and should not be happening in 2019 under the watch of our security personnel. FGM violates the rights of women and girls to sexual and physical integrity," said Munduru.

"We strongly condemn the forceful and continued prevalence of FGM in eastern Uganda, which in essence is washing away the relevance of the FGM Act, a law we fought so hard for to avert such a gross violation of women's rights."

Livingstone Sewanyana, executive director of the Foundation for Human Rights Initiatives, said: "The biggest weakness with our legal system is inability to implement laws that have a bearing on individual dignity and integrity. The FGM Act is one such piece of legislation that has hardly been enforced, yet FGM is both dehumanising and degrading to those who are subjected to this inhuman act."

"What needs to be done to eradicate such a practice on a more sustainable basis, besides prosecution under the law, is to carry out intensive sensitisation of communities about the dangers of such an archaic practice to a person's health, bodily integrity and wellbeing."

"A collective public education campaign by state institutions and civil society organisations, alongside local leaders, would offer a more effective and deterrent solution to this problem."

Traditional beliefs in the Kween, Bukwo and Kapchorwa districts, in Sebei region, and Amudat and Moroto in semi-arid Karamoja region, make it hard to combat FGM.

Munduru said: "No single approach can eliminate FGM. Criminalising the practice only will not change people's behaviour. We recommend greater government involvement in the protection of women's rights. Tackle the secrecy that allows cutting to continue."

"It is time for advocates to invoke human rights standards and hold governments accountable for their inaction in response to FGM. So that girls and women no longer have to suffer in silence."

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## **Male feminists inside Uganda's police strike out at killing of women**

By Thomas Lewton

Thomson Reuters Foundation (05.03.2018) - <http://tmsnrt.rs/2p9cTLo> - Balancing a heavy clay pot on his head with a baby tied to his back, policeman Francis Ogweng caused a scene as he marched down the busy highway towards Uganda's capital, Kampala.

With traffic backed up to the horizon, crowds of men stared and laughed as the baby girl swaddled in white cloth slipped precariously down Ogweng's back, pulling his khaki uniform into disarray.

"We want to put ourselves in the shoes of women," Ogweng, an assistant superintendent in the Uganda Police Force (UPF), told the Thomson Reuters Foundation. "Is it difficult to carry water? Is it difficult to carry a baby?"

Judging by the sweat dripping down his face, it is.

Onlookers were surprised to see a senior officer marching to stop violence against women, in a force that opponents of Uganda's long-serving President Yoweri Museveni accuse of spending more time suppressing dissent than tackling crime.

Police often break up opposition rallies in the east African nation with teargas and beatings, rights groups say they torture suspects to illicit confessions, and surveys often rank the force as Uganda's most corrupt institution.

"Their image has been tainted," said Regina Bafaki, head of Action for Development, a local women's rights group.

"They have actually been more violators than protectors of citizen's rights."

But a spate of unsolved murders of young women, with more than 20 corpses found beside roadsides south of the capital since May, is putting rare public pressure on the police.

They have charged more than a dozen suspects with the women's murders, listing possible motives range from domestic rows through sexual abuse to ritual murder linked to human sacrifice.

### ***Battering of women***

Ogweng was not alone, flanked by three policemen carrying bundles of firewood, a 50-strong police brass band and other officers carrying placards that read: "Peace in the home. Peace in the nation. Prevent Gender Based Violence".

"Men can also carry water, men can carry babies ... it does no harm at all, it doesn't make a man less of a man," said Ogweng, who describes himself as a feminist - a rarity in a country where women often kneel to show deference to men.

About half of Ugandans believe that domestic violence is justified under certain circumstances, such as when women neglect children or burn food, government data shows.

"There are those who still believe that battering of women, beating of women, is something normal," said Asan Kasingye, assistant inspector general, another unlikely ally in Uganda's fight for gender equality.

"We must invest our resources, our training, our recruitment ... into fighting against gender based violence," he said, seated in his top floor office at the police headquarters.

"It must percolate, it must be known by everybody. So it preoccupies us."

### ***Stripped naked***

The police demonstration calling for an end of violence against women went down well with locals around Entebbe, where about 20 women were raped and murdered in 2017.

"This government prides itself for bringing security ... but at the same time when these ladies were being murdered, the government didn't even talk about it," said Anatoli Ndyabagyera, whose fiancée Rose Nakimuli was killed in July.

The murders illustrate a broader problem in Uganda, where government data shows more than one in three women suffer physical or sexual violence from an intimate partner, although few report it to the police.

"We have in our society a dangerous attitude of men thinking they can dispense with women and they can get away with it," said Ndyabagyera. "They look at women and tend to think of them as items of ownership."

Four in 10 girls wed before they turn 18, even though Uganda has banned child marriage, according to the United Nations children's fund (UNICEF), and few go beyond primary school.

Efforts to pass a bill seeking to ban traditional practices, like dowry and the inheritance of widows by their husbands' male relatives, and to grant rights to women in divorce have floundered for years.

Women wearing miniskirts were stripped by mobs of men following the 2014 Anti Pornography Act that banned "indecent" dressing and the police in 2015 stripped female opposition leader Zaina Fatuma naked in the street.

"There are (officers) who are badly behaved," said Ogweng, who works in the child and family protection department.

"But there are those who are good, and there are many."

Given the influential role of the police in Ugandan society, Ogweng believes he can help to change people's perceptions about what it means to be a man.

"People are so rooted in the culture where some things are only done by women and some things are done by men," he said.

"If a man, a police officer, can carry a baby, can carry a pot, then other men can do it ... Men even called me afterwards and said: 'You have opened my eyes' ... So I think people are beginning to understand."

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## **Married women now undergoing circumcision**

By David Mafabi

Daily Monitor (19.01.2018) - <http://bit.ly/2mRoldO> - Faced with the new law against Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), traditionalists have now shifted to circumcising married women with the consent of their husbands.

Statistics released at the 2017 cultural day celebrations that focused on public health, reported that among more than 200 youth interviewed across Sebei sub-region (Kapchorwa, Kween and Bukwo districts), only 24 per cent of girls aged 10 to 14 have experienced some form of genital mutilation, while 76 per cent of women between 25 and 35 have undergone the procedure. Speaking to Daily Monitor last week, the Reproductive Education and Community Health programme executive director, Ms Beatrice Chelangat, said although the practice of circumcising young girls is slowly declining in Sebei, the trend has changed to circumcising married women.

"And this is being done in houses with the knowledge of husbands, in the villages and in the bushes even across the borders to Kenya. Wives claim that they are visiting relatives in Kenya but cross with local surgeons," said Ms Chelangat.

The statistics reveal that uncircumcised married women are undergoing pressure from their husbands and society because they are not allowed to serve elders, get food from the granary and attend traditional meetings.

"The mothers-in-law abuse them, they are shunned," said Ms Chelangat.

While reading from the 2017 FGM survey in Sebei sub-region, she said REACH found that in spite of the ban, traditionalists are carrying out the practice unabated in the bushes, in the hills and in caves with most incidents happening in secret, sometimes unhygienic places - creating a big risk of infection.

Former Kapchorwa District chairman Nelson Chelimo urged NGOs involved in the fight against FGM to now target married people.

***FMG source***

Globally, it is estimated that 100 million to 140 million girls and women alive have undergone some form of female genital mutilation, according to the United Nations Population Fund.