

UYDEL Report on Child Exploitation during COVID-19

Coping of the urban and rural
vulnerable Children with COVID-19
pandemic in Central Uganda.

**Sexual exploitation, victimization,
suicide, depression, alcohol and drugs.**

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Executive Summary

This report is a review of Child Exploitation during the COVID-19 pandemic with emphasis to the urban and rural vulnerable Children in Central Uganda. Factors taken in consideration included:-

- 1). the Demographic trends, vulnerability and urban youth population in Uganda as Uganda's population shows a worrying future trend, with over 70% of the population below 30 years.

Many young people engaged in some form of child labor (UBOS Report, 2017) with 20.3% (8.3 millions) of the population living in abject poverty (UBOS National Housing Survey Report 2019/20).

- 2). COVID-19 and Child vulnerability led to families and children in the city slums and rural towns especially those experiencing homelessness were the worst hit, as they struggled to survive. Their small informal businesses were forced into abrupt closure inevitably consumed the little capital making their future even more oblique.

Previous studies estimated over 18,000 children in Uganda trapped in sexual exploitation, slavery and other worse forms of child labor. (UYDEL 2011).

- 3). The Impact of COVID-19 on the slum youth and the study Goals. A rapid assessment study from

the program participants was undertaken on the street and slum youth engaged in sexual exploitation during the COVID-19 pandemic.

- 4). Social demographic characteristics of the study participants was conducted with 583 study participants interviewed, 90% were females. In terms of age, 42% were aged 18 - 20, 30% were aged 15 - 17 years. Of these, 59% had both parents alive while 15% had single parents. Only 26% reported being orphans.
- 5). Work for pay, child labor and Trafficking interviews were conducted and only 32% of the participants had worked for pay during the lockdown period and that 67% of these worked to provide themselves with basic needs. 16% (93) of the children were trafficked during the COVID-19 lockdown period.
- 6). Sexual exploitation and Transactional sex, online sexual exploitation, Trauma, depression and victimization were also extensively investigated.

Authors:

Rogers Kasirye, Mark Sewali, Mutaawe Rogers, Kinobi Moses, Ann Namulinda, Barbara Nakijoba and Anna Nabulya

Corresponding Author:

Rogers Kasirye
Uganda Youth Development Link,
P. O. Box 12659, Kampala - Uganda.
E - mail: kasiryer@yahoo.com / uydel@uydel.org

1.0 Background

Demographic trends, vulnerability and urban youth population in Uganda

Uganda population shows a worrying future trend. It was estimated to be 41.6 million in mid - 2020 (UBOS statistical Abstract, 2020), with an estimated average annual growth of 3.0 percent¹; with over 70% of the population lying below 30 years. The Uganda urban population has also been increasing partly due to creation of new urban centers and rural - urban migration now projected at 10.6% (UBOS,2021). There is high prevalence of early marriage which comes with a lot of social, health and economic challenges.

A total of 2 million children (5 - 17 years) were engaged in some form of child labor (UBOS Report, 2017) with 20.3% (8.3 millions) of the population living in abject poverty (UBOS National Housing Survey Report 2019/20).

The prison statistics also showed that those aged 18 - 30 constituted 66.7% (40,072) of the total prison population, drawn largely from Kampala city (UBOS, 2020).

1 <http://library.health.go.ug/sites/default/files/resources/UBOS%20Statistical%20Abstract%202020.pdf>

As many urban youths migrate to the city, they remain vulnerable, due to limited access to employment, health and social services. The urban youth present many unique social and health needs including limited family and community support which hinders their growth into full potential for self - sustenance. Inadequate skill due to early drop out from schools amidst extreme poverty² have been cited as the major causes of their vulnerability. Some slum youth are homeless and live a disorganized life in such deprived communities which sometimes hinders possible social and health interventions to help improve their lives.

2 <https://www.studeersnel.nl/nl/document/tilburg-university/victimization-of-vulnerable-groups/college-aantekeningen/summary-articles-victimization-of-vulnerable-groups/517444/view>

COVID-19 and Child vulnerability

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a devastating impact especially in low - income countries with fragile health system and no welfare system in place to mitigate such vulnerabilities that make their population very susceptible. The COVID-19 cumulative cases have remained low (only 44,281 cases) with 359 deaths (MoH Report, May 2021). In a bid to draw a strategy to deal with the pandemic at medical, economic and social behavioral level, Uganda government declared 42 days partial lockdown on 6th June 2021 which has great implications to the survival of the urban slum youths. Families and children in the city slums and rural towns especially those experiencing homelessness were the worst hit, as they struggled to survive. Their small informal businesses were forced into abrupt closure inevitably consumed the little capital making their future even more oblique.

Previous studies estimated over 18,000 children in Uganda trapped in sexual exploitation and other worse forms of child labor. (UYDEL 2011).

The NGOs serving vulnerable urban children had to close all safe spaces and facilities during the lockdown. Many children had no immediate health and psychosocial support as their social

network collapsed. NGOs instituted an emergency re-integration plan to resettle stranded children in their reception centers including those formerly working in bars, lodges, and brothels that were closed by government. The groups were disbanded and eventually exposed to forms of sexual exploitation and other forms of child labor on the streets. Not many beneficiaries who had run away from homes, were able to trek long distances back to their rural homes as there was no public transport. A case study in point was at the UYDEL facility the Director mentioned that:-

“Our entire 9 Drop -in Centers/ Safe Spaces were closed. Over 2000 slum youth and poor children scattered and only a few went home. We received distressing calls from some of our young people we serve in our drop in centers that life had become unbearable. There was a lot of hunger, and severe violence inflicted on children. It is estimated that another 3 million Ugandans are expected to fall into abject poverty hence raising the number to 23 million people”

The Impact of COVID-19 on the Slum Youth

The rapid assessment study from the program participants was to enable clear understanding of how the street and slum youth, those engaged in sexual exploitation survived during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research team were interested in knowing the most affected cohort and special needs they presented or experienced. What were the new emerging issues related to children as a result of the pandemic? The study wanted to establish other cofounding issues during the pandemic. The team also wanted to establish the level of exploitation that was prevalent, alcohol and drug use, victimization and suicide ideation cases.

Uganda has made significant progress in the fight against sexual exploitation, other forms of child

labor and drug abuse among school drop outs but these have received little attention in terms of coverage, reporting and documentation in the media as compared to children who are attending formal education. The HEADSS³ youth risk mapping tool was adapted to include more questions on coping, online sexual exploitation and child labor during and after the COVID-19 lockdown. In the end, the team were to draw lessons and implications to help improve urban vulnerable children lives during the pandemic and full lock down hence design long term solutions regarding the children's rights and survival from the responses available to them.

³ <https://depts.washington.edu/dbpeds/Screening%20Tools/HEADSS.pdf>

Government response

Government adopted all the interventions including those from non - state actors through its coordination of service providers. The major relief items from government included food distributed in the districts of Kampala, Mukono and Wakiso. However, government efforts were dismal as many households were never reached, no cash transfers for

families and young people to cushion the many problems they were facing. This was viewed as a viable social protection measure that could turn around events since social protection measures are largely lacking. Many actors were either overshadowed by government or had limited responses during COVID-19.

2.0 Methods

This descriptive report is a rapid assessment study adopting a cross-sectional design to describe the impact of COVID-19 amongst the vulnerable urban youths. It is largely qualitative with standard structured questionnaire based on the themes identified from the HEADSS tool. Additional relevant questions on ways of coping during COVID-19 were included. This was supplemented by qualitative information from other field reports. Data was gathered through a face-to-face interview between a social worker and the selected respondent.

This study employed purposeful sampling technique to specifically reach those respondents who participated in the UYDEL urban intervention programs in the year 2019/20 in the districts of Kampala city, Luweero and Mityana municipalities. The questionnaire was pre-tested in Mukono district and all participants were out of school children. Data was organized and analysed using Statistical Package

for the Social Sciences (SPSS) and excel, to ensure accuracy and reliable illustrations.

Staff were trained on the application of the questionnaire, ethical considerations during data collection, motivation of respondents to give quality responses to avoid social desirability effect which is common amongst this highly mobile population.

The study ethically promoted voluntary participation, disclosure and all those who did not want to participate were left out. The interviewers were retrained in research ethics on human subjects like avoiding bias and putting pressure on the respondents (bracketing) for those who worked at the same facilities as this would be counterproductive and can lead to undesirable effect. Ethically, the study was approved by our UYDEL ethical board as an emergent issue requiring urgent attention.

3.0 Findings of the study

Social demographic characteristics of the study participants

Of the 583 study participants we reached, 90% were females. In terms of age, 42% were aged 18 - 20, 30% were aged 15 - 17 years. Those aged 21 - 24 years accounted only for

22%. The least numbers 6% were in the age group 10 - 14 years. Of these, 59% had both parents alive while 15% had single parents. Only 26% reported being orphans.

Living status and education

Interestingly, 41% of the participants were living with their families and 59% lived away from their families. Reports revealed that 48% lived in monogamous families and 39% lived in polygamous families. 29% of those percent had ever been forced out of their homes, 29% (169) had children,

with (36) having' given birth before 15 years. 86% of the study participants had taken an HIV test. In terms of education levels, over half (52%) had stopped in primary and 43% in lower secondary. Most of the study participants had ever been to school. See table below: -

Social Demographic characteristics (N= 583)	Percentage
Age	
(10 - 14) years	6%
(15 - 17) years	30%
(18 - 20) years	42%
(21 - 24) years	22%
Gender	
Female	90%
Male	10%
Level of Education attained before enrolment	
Primary	52%
'O' level - Lower Secondary	43%
Tertiary/ 'A' Level	5%

Parental status	
Both parent living	59%
Single parent	
Orphans	26%
Nature of family	
Polygamous	39%
Monogamous	48%
Others	13%
Do you live together with your parents	
Yes	41%
No	59%
(NO) of the 59% (17 leave alone and 34 % with their spouses/boyfriends).	
Have you ever been forced out of home (Yes)	21%
Have children (Yes)	29%

Work for pay and child labor

The study sought to understand if vulnerable youth had worked for pay during COVID-19 pandemic period of 2020. Only 32% of the participants had worked for pay during this lockdown period and were mainly connected by friends, guardians or spouses. We established that 67% of these worked to provide themselves

with basic needs, 23% to take care of their families and the 10% had to remit their pay back home. Study participants revealed that they had challenges with employers including non-payment of their wages (63 percent), sexual harassment (28) and physical violence. See table below: -

Trafficking and Work	Percentage
Have you worked for pay during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown?	
No	68%
Yes	32%
Who connected you to get the job?	
Friend/spouse/guardian	80%
My self	20%
How old were you when started working for pay?	
(10 - 14) years	13%
(15 - 17) years	49%

(18 - 20) years	33%
(21 - 24) years	5%
What reasons brought into working pay?	
Provide my basics needs	67%
Take care of my family	23%
Peer pressure/forced by parents	10%
Were you remitting money home?	
No	69%
Yes	31%
Did you have any issues with your employer? (YES)	25%
If Yes. What were those issues?	
No payment/Under payment	63%
Sexual harassment/ Physical violence	28%
Being over worked	9%
Did you pay the person who found you the job? (YES)	14%

Trafficking

Trafficking involved recruitment and movement of vulnerable young people to the destination places of exploitation. We noted that (93) 16% of the children were trafficked during covid lockdown period. The movements were largely facilitated by guardians, relatives or parents

(44%), strangers/pimps and friends (43 percent) while others by self - 13 percent. The respondents revealed that 79 percent were convinced to move while 21 percent had been forced. Many of these were promised work 59%, education 29% and a good life (12%). See table below: -

Child/Human Trafficking places	Percentage
Have you ever been trafficked (YES)	16%
Who brought you here?	
Guardians/Relative/parent	44%
Friend/stranger/pimp	43%
Self	13%
Under what circumstances were you trafficked?	
Convinced	79%
Deceived/forced	21%

What were you promised?	
Work	59%
Education	29%
Good life	12%

Sexual exploitation

During COVID-19 lock down period, we sought to understand how susceptible the children were to sexual exploitation. Of the 583 study participants, 73% engaged in sexual activities for survival dominated by those of 15 - 17 years accounting for 60% while those between 10 - 14 years 19% were also active. We noted that 30% reported to have

experienced forced sex with 59% in the 15 - 17 years age group followed by 23% 10 - 14 years age group. Some were mainly forced by the boyfriends 39%, strangers 34%, relatives and guardians at 16% and employer's/ workmates at 11%. Largely, 71% of those who experienced forced sex never reported the abuse to any responsible person or institution.

Transactional sex

Of the study participants, 46% claimed to have engaged in transactional sex before COVID-19 lock down, while 31% continued engaging in transactional sex for survival during the pandemic. Of these 62% were introduced to the vice by friends and 30% by themselves. Sexual activities with multiple partners having between (1

- 5) male partners accounted for 87%. Transactional sex before and during covid19 took place more in lodges and hotel, and brothels. 11% did it from the clients' homes. A small number of 8% had been arrested because of violating curfew times, accused of theft and involved in fights/chaos. We noted that 75% of these stayed for some time in the police cells.

Sexual Exploitation	Percentage
Have you ever had sex?	73%
How old were you when you first had sex?	
(10 - 14) years	19%
(15 - 17) years	60%
(18 - 20) years	18%
(21 - 24) years	3%
Have you ever been forced to have sex?	
Yes	30%

If yes, At what age	
(10 - 14) years	23%
(15 - 17) years	59%
(18 - 20) years	14%
(21 - 24) years	4%
By who	
Friend/boyfriend	39%
Client/stranger	34%
Relative/guardian	16%
Employer/Workmate	11%
Did you report the abuse	
No	71%
Yes,	29%
Have you engaged in Transactional sex activities before COVID ? (YES)	46%
Have you engaged in Transactional sex during and COVID-19 (YES)	31%
Who introduced you to transactional sex?	
Friend	62%
Self	30%
Others	8%
How many sexual partners do you have?	
(1 - 5) partners	87%
6 and above partners	13%
Where do sexual exploitation acts take place?	
Lodge/hotel	66%
Brothel	23%
In my home	11%
Have you ever been arrested? (YES)	8%
If Yes, Why?	
Chaos	33%
Curfew time	33%
Accused/other cases	34%
For how long did you stay at the police station?	
Less than a week	74%
More than a week but less than a year	26%

Have you ever tested for HIV/AIDS? (YES)	86%
Do you have children? (YES)	29%
Age at first birth	
(10 - 14) years	7%
(15 - 17) years	47%
(18 - 20) years	39%
(21 - 24) years	7%

Online sexual exploitation

The study sought to establish whether online sexual exploitation was prevalent considering that there were limited opportunities for physical interactions with clients. The study noted that 85% of the study participants were using social media platforms via phones. This was dominated by Facebook at 48%, and WhatsApp 40%.

The study also revealed that 49% of the urban youth had undergone naked stripping. While performing

karaoke, these girls mainly got involved in drinking alcohol and drugs, while other 18% engaged in transactional sex with adults. We also noted that a smaller 3% were offered a fee to appear in a photographic shot. Another, 8% who were engaged in karaoke were offered a fee to appear in erotic sexual activities in the bars. Peer groups largely influenced behavior of others through doing joint activities like alcohol and drug use, naked stripping, karaoke.

Online Child Sexual Exploitation	Percentage
Do you use any of these social media platforms? (YES)	85%
Have you accessed any pornographic material? If Yes where?	
Facebook	48%
WhatsApp	40%
Other social platforms	12%
Who introduced you to pornography?	
Friend(s)	61%
Self	24%
Others	15%
Have you offered to appear in any pornographic photo shoot for pay? (YES)	3%
Have you engaged in karaoke activities before? (YES)	8%
If yes for how long	

0 to 6 (Months)	86%
Above 6 Months	14%
Who introduced you to karaoke?	
Friend	84%
Relative/spouse	16%
How many children were in your Karaoke group on average?	
Less than 6	43%
6 to 10	43%
Above 6	14%
What problems do children like you face in Karaoke groups?	
Sexual violence (harassment, bad touches/rape/defilement/striping naked)	51%
Delay or no payment	26%
Alcoholism/drug abuse	23%
While in karaoke did you participate in naked stripping ? (YES)	49%
What did the girls do after or when not busy performing karaoke?	
Drinking alcohol or smoke	45%
Engage in transactional sex	18%
Nothing/I don't know	34

Trauma, depression and victimization

The major causes of stress among vulnerable young people included scarcity of money, abuse in homes and in the communities, and prolonged pandemic related issues. 54% had financial problems, another 34% were abused, while 12% were stressed due to lack of basic needs due to unemployed. Another 21% (125) of the study participants have

ever thought of committing suicide and 29% percent experienced stigma and discrimination.

In terms of victimization, 52% of the study participants experienced sexual harassment or rape, 18% were physically assaulted and battered, while 16% lost property with 14% losing their parents to covid19 related issues. See the table below: -

Trauma, Depression and Victimization	Percentage
what usually causes stress to you?	
Financial problems	54%
When abused/disappointments	34

Lack of basic needs/Unemployment	12%
Have you ever thought of committing suicide? (YES) 125	21%
Have you experienced Stigma before? (YES)	29%
What form of victimization have you experienced before?	
Sexual Harassment/Rape	52%
Physical Assault/Battery	18%
Theft	16%
Death of parents	14%

Drugs, Alcohol and Substance use

States have duty to protect children from all forms of illicit abuse according to the United Nations Children's rights of 1989 Art.33. **“States Parties shall take all appropriate measures, including legislative, administrative, social and educational measures, to protect children from the illicit use of narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances as defined in the relevant international treaties”**. The Uganda Police Annual Crime Report 2020 reported a drop in Narcotics cases from 2,750 in the year 2019 to 1,714 in 2020 but the report is feared to have fallen short of tracking information about scattered children/youth to establish how children were affected as consumers, producers, distributors and marketeers of narcotics and what was done to protect them for their survival and development.

The study hence discovered that 43% percent of the study participants used alcohol, tobacco, cocaine and marijuana. Fewer respondents used other drugs as a coping strategy

⁴ United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child, 1989 art.33.

partially due to limited access during the partial lockdown. Girls used more alcohol than any other drugs which they started much earlier than 15 years. Notably, 15% of the vulnerable youth started drinking as early as 10 - 14 years. WHO has indicated that early drinking affects brain growth and escalates other risky behaviors like transactional sex. Sadly, most of these were introduced to alcohol by friends (58%) in the urban risky environments. Friends promoted the culture of using alcohol and other drugs in negative ways to help girls cope with the pandemic but also be able to manage well during transactional sex. This was also encouraged further by sexual partners or boyfriends. Adolescents in transaction sex commonly used alcohol and less of drugs (Kasirye and Nakijoba, 2020) as a way to cope with the stress that comes from male clients, gain courage and increase confidence, peer influence/ socializing, forget negative thoughts that come with COVID-19. See the table below: -

Drugs, Alcohol and Substance use	Percentage
Have you ever used alcohol? (YES)	43%
How old were you when you first took alcohol?	
(10 - 14) years	15%
(15 - 17) years	61%
(18 - 20) years	17%
(21 - 24) years	7%
Who introduced you to alcohol?	
Friends	58%
Boyfriend/girlfriend	20%
Others	22%
Have you ever used any of the following (YES)	
Alcohol (472)	81%
Tobacco (58)	10%
Marijuana (41)	7%
Cocaine (6)	1%
Khat (6)	1%

Negative feelings, Distress and Abuse during COVID-19

COVID-19 made the urban slummy home environments risky, with no parent child attachments in the face of poor nurturing systems. This escalated the risk factors since many of the institutions that contribute to protective factors were considered non - essential and therefore closed down.

From the perspective of the study participants, COVID-19 brought

about negative feelings like feelings of hopelessness and disappointment. Some were worried and extremely stressed about their survival during the lock down period. 19% were reported as sexually abused, 25% abused through beating and 20% neglected and abandoned by caregivers. There were cases of shortage of what to eat which accounted for 56% and others had financial due to unemployment.

Impact of COVID-19	Percentage
How do you feel about the situation with COVID-19?	
Disappointed/Hopeless	48%
Worried/Stressed	47%
Others	5%

Have you faced any form of violence and harassment during COVID-19 lock down? (YES)	33%
If yes, what was the form of violence?	
Sexual abuse	19%
Beating	25%
Neglected	20%
Others	36%
Have you faced any challenges due to the situation with COVID-19 lock down? (YES)	77%
If yes, what challenges did you face?	
Shortage of what to eat	56%
Not able to work/Financial shortage	44%
Have you received any kind of support during COVID-19 lock down?	
Yes	64%
No	36%
What kind of support did you receive?	
Food	74%
Money	14%
Other basic needs/counselling	12%
Who provided you with this kind of support?	
UYDEL	71%
Relative/friend	21%
Others	8%
What's your urgent need either during or after the COVID-19 lock down?	
Employment/job	63%
Food	19%
Vocational skills/Education	13%
Others	5%
Livelihood/economic survival	Percentage
Are you participating in vocational skills? (YES)	87%
Do you belong to any saving group? (YES)	48%

4.0 Discussion of Findings

Social demographic features of study participants

More females (90%) participated in the study and these constitute the majority of clients received by UYDEL facilities. Girls were found to be more vulnerable because they dropped out of school early due to forced early marriages, early pregnancies, and orphaned at an early age in which exposes them to early sexual risk behavior. Parenting status exhibited both monogamy and polygamy which presented a mixture of different child upbringing styles. The homes appeared to be struggling economically as many of the young people had dropped out of school at primary level. The study established that more than half respondents had left home to live with peers whose places of abode were either in bars or shelters where they engaged in child labor and exploitation with highly compromised safety and health.

The study discovered that over a quarter of the study participants had been recruited for domestic work for pay (which is a form of child labor) by friends or guardians to meet their basic needs from the meagre pay earned. Struggling families were likely to offer their children for work as a source of income to complement their survival, irrespective of the challenges and problems encountered in the workplaces. Many girls who were out of school were susceptible to trafficking and innocently facilitated mainly by relatives and pimps to move to new settings for sexual exploitation or child labor. Many of these were promised work, education and a good life as a bait to move them to move to exploitative environments.

Sexual Exploitation, Transactional Sex and COVID-19

COVID-19 affected many slum and urban vulnerable girls who were either attracted or forced into transactional sex as alternative means of survival by friends. Almost all girls were engaged in transactional and survival sex with men ranging between 1 - 5 male partners. We noted that three quarters of (73

percent) of our study participants mainly those in the age 15 - 17 years got actively engaged in transactional sex during the lockdown period.

Most of these sexual acts were with multiple partners and unprotected. Most of it was, transactional and survival sex in exchange for money

to meet basic needs such as shelter and food. The functional nature of Alcohol and other drugs increased the negative behavior and made them more vulnerable (30 percent experienced forced sex) as they become more tolerant and willing to meet more partners. This kind of risky sexual behaviour may have resulted into HIV/STI infections, teenage pregnancies and early childbearing. The higher the risks caused by the pandemic the more vulnerable the girls were to exploitation and sex slavery.

Many Girls involved in transactional sex were sexually harassed by the clients, physically abused, not given pay, while others were forced by their pimps to offer sex to clients without consent or refusing to use safer sex practices. A large number of the sexual abuses were not reported during this period and many of these victims were left traumatized and depressed. This partly may account for high numbers presenting high suicide ideation.

Online sexual exploitation

Online platforms have significantly affected behavior negatively and all positive messages earlier disseminated to communities. It triggered risky behaviors such as naked stripping, use of drugs/alcohol which was noticed among the participants who were using social media platforms. These platforms have made it easier for perpetrators to contact vulnerable young people, share images of abuse, hide their identity and inspire each other to commit further crimes. Like other forms of sexual abuse, online abuse can scar victims emotionally for a lifetime. The biggest problem for vulnerable young people involved in Karaoke groups is sexual violence (harassment, bad touches/rape/defilement/stripping naked) and delay in their payments or no payments.

This means young people who were not busy during the lockdown due to the pandemic times were more likely to get involved in vices which are addictive and can negatively affect their health outcomes. Peer groups largely influenced behavior of others through doing joint activities like naked stripping and consumption of alcohol and drugs.

Trauma, depression and victimization was noted to be high amongst these population due to exploitation in labor and transactional survival sex activities. Rape and abuse were commonly cited in the data that was captured. It was noted that there were others who reported physical assault as they were battered, and lost their properties.

Drugs, Alcohol and Substance use

COVID-19 presented a very challenging time. Alcohol and drugs were used because they were worried and extremely stressed about their survival during the lockdown period. Reports indicated that vulnerable youth started drinking as early as 10 - 14 years. For such a population, early drinking affects brain growth and drinking leads to other risky behavioral problems. Most of these were introduced to alcohol by friends whereas others by sexual partners or boyfriends. Friends promoted the culture of using drugs partly as a recreation but also to reduce stress and fear. The negative physical and mental effects of the use of alcohol and other drugs are well documented in health centers. Use of these drugs may cause blackouts, poisoning, overdose and death; physical and

psychological dependence; damage to vital organs such as the brain, heart, and liver; inability to learn and remember information; and psychological problems including depression, psychosis, and severe anxiety. Patterns of risk-taking behavior and dependency (drugs and transactional sex) not only interfere in the lives of the abusers but also have a negative impact on others.

COVID-19 presented a very challenging season and use of alcohol and drugs had a big impact on youth behavior and likely to lead to many challenges like violence. The Uganda Government made efforts to close all bars and all drinking places but people still have access to alcohol through back door to an extent of the alcohol industry boasting about increased sales during COVID-19.

Suicidal ideation

Among the youth participants 125 (21.4%) reported having had suicidal ideation with one in every five - experiencing suicide. A much higher percentage of youth who reported suicidal ideation reported experiencing stress as a result of having financial problems, physical

and emotional abuse. Sexual harassment was one of the triggers for suicide and half of the study respondents reported victimization in terms of sexual harassment and rape. Survivors of rape were more likely to attempt or commit suicide.

Victimization

There is a pattern of victimization imbedded in practices of sexual harassment among vulnerable youths due to poverty, lack of family support and risky environment. Sexually abused suicide attempters showed more suicidal behavior than their non - sexually abused counterparts. Children living under child headed households or with boyfriends were more predisposed to stress and expressed limitations in social stress support systems.

Parental support is a key protective factor. When children stay alone, they do not get full attention. When children are chased out of the home, it increases their stress levels and exposure to abuse and other risks that result into suicidal ideation. Furthermore, children were more at risk of exploitation and initiation into antisocial behavior by friends when they are living alone, as over half of

the respondents were introduced to transactional sex by friends. Almost all the female's participants had lived and exchanged sex with between (1 - 5) sexual partners.

Some of the suicidal youth (43%) reported being under alcohol use 47%, giving birth at an early age of (15 - 17 years), which increased stress, and suicidal tendencies.

COVID-19 had very devastating impact and heighten the vulnerability of girls further. Many of them felt disappointed/hopeless/worried and stressed. These situations had been intense with some girls who experiencing suicide ideation. Many faced situations of violence and harassment in form of sexual abuse, beating, neglect and many confessed having faced many challenges particularly lack of food and money.

5.0 Impact and Implications of COVID-19 to vulnerable urban youth

Many urban vulnerable youths largely remained unattended to during COVID-19 and faced the pandemic in its worst form. The vulnerable youth resorted to risky sexual behaviors such as

transactional sex, having multiple partners and practiced unsafe sexual activities which tantamounted to sexual slavery as a result of COVID-19 lock down.

Hopelessness, disappointments, depression, victimization and violence

The pandemic brought about negative feelings of hopelessness and disappointment due to lack of basic needs like food, shelter and medication for vulnerable young girls and their families or children. The lock down period brought to the fore the use of drugs and alcohol by the vulnerable young girls because they were worried and stressed with no other alternative for survival. The study participants reported to have

faced different forms of violence and harassment in lodges, brothels of and homes through sexual abused, beatings and neglect by their loved ones or caregivers and families as they had food insecurity and inadequate incomes to support livelihood in homes. It was mainly friends that introduced risky behaviors to the vulnerable young girls as a way of coping with the situation of COVID-19.

6.0 Conclusion

In such a pandemic and post-corvid situation, there is a need to build resilience among the urban vulnerable children and their caregivers and families to adapt to the changing environments and new demands brought about by pandemic. Many children and families appeared to have no quick solution to address the challenges of especially shortages of basic needs. This resulted into hopelessness, stress and depression. Trauma from child labor, sexual exploitation, sex slavery, alcohol and drugs abuse emerged unpreventably.

During such pandemics, are chances of relapse into transactional sex and negative behavioral outcomes, survival sex/crime and violence are bound to increase. The spike in alcohol and drug consumption as a way of coping with the negative effects of COVID-19 may seem to be a quick solution for the young people.

All actors including the state and non - state actors need to develop mechanisms to raise awareness, prohibition, mitigation and protection measures to handle such a crisis which leaves slum children far off. Most of the state policies need to be revisited and factor in unforeseen emergencies that may arise to escalate child trafficking, sex slavery, rape and abuse, hopelessness, suicide, violence and other forms of sex slavery.

Youth lost their jobs and their enterprises which resulted in anxiety, stress and suicidal ideations due to uncertainty of the future. Uganda has no welfare programmes. "Everyone was on his or her own". Largely, such children were left unattended to as referral places closed. This population is a normally neglected and forgotten population. Government need to devote more resources to increase awareness and enforcements of the rights of children especially karaoke and brothel owners who recruit and turn children into sex slavery.

Most of the care of such children is largely a civil society activity which cannot be relied on entirely. Community participation was limited and not visible during this time, these need to be revamped and get involved in issues affecting this population especially on norms, violence and child upbringing and safeguarding.

The child protection system, including cash transfers needs to be revamped at village levels to enhance prevention and protection measures for the neediest children and families. NGOs that complement state actors and intervene with a variety of approaches need to be supported further including tax exemption as many keep their eyes on the ground and support a lot in such crisis.

Conflict of interest

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Contact Us:

Uganda Youth Development Link (UYDEL)

Sir Apollo Kaggwa Road, Bifro House (Opp. MBI).

P. O. Box 12659, Kampala (U).

Phone: +256 (0)414 - 530 353

E - mail: uydel@uydel.org Website: www.uydel.org

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