

Julia Diemer
 West Branch High School
 West Branch, IA
 Uganda, Factor 15: Women's Rights

Uganda: Improving the lives of the women farmers

Imagine waking up every morning and being terrified. Surpluses of backbreaking chores were waiting to be done, while the stomach of every family member was empty. This is a common scene for a rural woman farmer in Uganda. Small landowners in these country districts are struggling to provide and keep their families fed. There are many ways to fix this issue, but a problem is holding them back. Ugandan women do not have equal rights in the nation. Since they are the main crop growers, their equality and basic safety needs must be met to allow families to fully break free from poverty.

The way to beat hunger in the rural nation is through security and education. Ugandan journalist, Jacqueline Asimwe reported that over 60 percent of married women have experienced domestic violence at some point in their lives (Asimwe 2). These are the farmers who are taking care of the children, household chores, and the crops. Yet they are not allowed to partake in financial decisions and rarely stay in schools. Asimwe continued on to say, "Notwithstanding all the violence that women face, I dare to dream. I dream that one day we will be a country free from any form of violence. I dream of a time when no man, woman or child will live in fear at home, in the community or in the country. I dream of a time when violence will not be tolerated or excused. I dream of happy, healthy homes and relationships. I dream of a Uganda where violence is abhorred, where each person is respected and appreciated...That is my dream. This dream can become a reality if we are determined."

Uganda is a landlocked country sitting in East-Central Africa. Lake Victoria, Kenya, and the Democratic Republic of Chad surround this country. In comparison, it is slightly smaller than Oregon. It hosts a tropical climate that is generally rainy, with two shorter dry seasons. Uganda is on a plateau and brags a fertile, well-watered area. Uganda is ethnically diverse and, despite having fertile land, has some startling statistics. 48.9 percent of the population is under 15 years old. Less than 4.4 percent of the population is over 55. The median age is 15.5 years old, yet the birth rate is third highest in the world. Uganda has one of the lowest life expectancies in the world ("World Fact Book: Uganda" 4).

Though life expectancy is poor, the country's total fertility rate is high at an estimated six children born per woman. The typical rural family has five to ten people consisting of a mother, father and children. However, over 16 percent are in polygamous marriages. Their diet is homegrown, based on whatever crop the family produces. Most often, they are plantains (including other fruits and grains) and livestock ("Characteristics of Households" 2). Many of the children miss school to help with farming.

As stated, skipping class is extremely common in rural districts. Children can attend a seven year primary school that is fully funded by the Ugandan government, but most of the educational facilities are half-built, over-crowded, and falling apart. Though the schools are free, many require "extra supplies" such as brooms, books, etc. Many rural students drop out. Private schools allow a far more extensive education but are more costly ("Education in Uganda" 3). In fact, only 23 percent of Ugandan women over 25 have a secondary education compared to 87 percent of Americans over 25.

With a high susceptibility to diseases, Uganda has some of the worst health care in the entire world. It is ranked 186th out of 191 nations ranked by the World Health Organization. The lack of facilities in rural areas is credited with these numbers. 51 percent of people do not have any contact with public healthcare facilities (Kelly 2). Malaria accounts for 14 percent of all deaths, yet less than 10 percent of children who are five and under are sleeping under insecticide-treated nets. The government and additional programs

have invested a large amount of time and money toward improved health care, but the rural districts continue to struggle. In Uganda, one in every 200 births ends the mother's life. Approximately 1.2 million people are living with HIV/AIDS ("World Fact Book: Uganda" 2). With a high rate of disease and lack of healthcare, it can be difficult for farmers to be successful on such a small plot of land.

This small plot of land typically consists of 1 to 2.5 ha, or about 2 to 6 acres ("Rural Poverty in Uganda"). A mixture of grains, fruits, and meat from livestock are grown to sustain the family. Feeding the entire family off of a small plot of land and a few goats is extremely difficult. Most commonly, the women plant, grow, and harvest the crops. Plantains, cassava, sweet potatoes, millet, sorghum, corn, beans, and groundnuts are many of the foods grown. Sheep, cattle, and goats are some of the livestock raised on farms. Less abundant are cash crops such as coffee, cotton, and tea.

Land is privately owned by families, so the choice is theirs on how they practice agricultural techniques. Subsistence agriculture takes place on tiny plots of land, where many families fail to gather enough crops to properly feed everyone. Poor farming methods are practiced, including a lack of diversity in methods and cultivating up and down on slopes, which both lead to soil erosion and over-cultivation. This does not give soil enough time to regain fertility and does not maximize the amount of products grown. Also, these farming techniques are more prone to pests and diseases. Modern equipment is too expensive for the subsistence farmer to afford (Javie 1).

Poor farming methods are one major barrier to improving agricultural productivity. Others include gender inequality and an overall lack of information/education. Also, families struggle to produce enough to feed their families. Education in the rural Uganda takes a backseat. All of these issues damage their potential to rise from poverty.

Perhaps the underlying issue behind hunger is human rights, especially women's rights. It is extremely crucial to food production in Uganda. Women are the main farmers in rural Uganda, which is home to 85 percent of the people. The women are treated poorly, have little protection, and are not sufficiently educated ("Discrimination Based on Race, Sex, Religion, Disability, Language, or Social Status" 1). If they cannot feel safe or know the most efficient way to grow crops, they cannot grow enough food to feed their families or enough to make a profit. Therefore, the production of food is significantly less compared to areas where farmers are educated and secure.

These women are disadvantaged in many aspects. They are not entitled to inherit any land. Abuse is common amongst these communities as well. A recent Johns Hopkins University study released that an overwhelming number of rural women experienced verbal or physical threats from their spouse and many were beaten. Some laws already in place are technically supposed to protect women. However, there are no laws that specifically protect women from spousal rape. Law enforcement officials, reflecting general public opinion, continue to view wife beating as a husband's decision and rarely intervene in cases of domestic violence ("Discrimination Based on Race, Sex, Religion, Disability, Language, or Social Status" 2).

Gender-based violence is outlined into four main categories, all of which directly impact poverty levels in rural Uganda. Sexual violence and physical/emotional abuse plague the nation and clearly harm the women. Another category is socio-economic troubles, which discriminates women from taking part in monetary and social decisions. Women are the main farmers and are not even allowed make their own choices regarding their crops. The last category in gender-based violence includes harmful traditional practices. These include early marriage, neglect, lack of education, and forced marriages.

Technically, major steps have been taken to improve women's rights in Uganda. In 2010, the addition of the Domestic Violence Act and the Prohibition of Female Genital Mutilation Act were legal actions that

have been put in place. Both are implemented sparsely ("Women's Rights in Uganda: Gaps between Policy and Practice" 1). Women lack inheritance of land from husbands and a recent study found that 46 percent of women have experienced marital rape ("Women in Uganda" 2). The Domestic Relations Bill discouraged bride price, marital rape, and polygamy, yet these behaviors are widely practiced in most areas of Uganda.

One of the largest issues regarding women's rights in Uganda is the domestic abuse that plagues the rural land. A specific study targeted the Rakai district in southwestern Uganda that borders the United Republic of Tanzania and Lake Victoria. Researchers interviewed men and women in private to protect their security. Some results were shocking, to say the least. Education levels were low, especially for women. Only 23 percent of females in the study's target population had completed primary education (Koenig 6). This means that the women of this district had little to no schooling, thus having little access to not only business knowledge, but also proper agricultural techniques. This could greatly affect the crop production and then monetary choices when it comes to selling any left over crops.

Another interesting aspect is that women who were educated were significantly less likely to be abused than those who were not. The study found that women with secondary school education or higher faced significantly lower risks of violence. Education is a great tool in success, yet the overwhelming majority of these women do not have it. If the lack of education is not startling enough, perhaps the following results are even more so shocking. 40.1 percent of women had experienced verbal abuse in the last year. Of all women interviewed, 30.4 percent had experienced physical threats or violence over the past 12 months. The most commonly reported reason for physical assault was the wife's neglect of household chores. Other typical causes were the woman disobeying the husband or family elders, the woman's refusal to have sex, and arguments over money (Koenig 8). These may not seem like large numbers but to place it in perspective, nearly one-third of women in this district are being abused. It is important to address the widespread abuse because it directly affects food security.

Resolving the abuse, lack of protection, and lack of education would directly benefit rural women and the rest of the family. These females maintain the crops that feed their families. The study above revealed these agricultural women are being treated poorly. How can people expect them to be successful in producing the necessary foods for their family, if it is their partners harming them? The people who produce crops cannot even feel safe in their own home. This is not taking place only in the Rakai district; it is happening all across the country. As previously mentioned, 46 percent of rural wives experience marital rape. This is alarming to think how these women are not sufficiently protected or respected.

Furthermore, there are other legal benefits that these women are not entitled to. Inheritance is a gift rarely bestowed to these rural women. It is not given to daughters or wives. In some cases, the widow is even a package deal with the land (Bikaako 2). The passing down of land goes to males. Most often, if a husband dies, then the land becomes the property of the surviving male child or a male in-law ("Uganda Women's Land Rights" 2). Land benefits in particular are a specific issue that policy makers have been struggling with. The government created the Land Act of 2004. This law explains that the male had to consult his wife before selling their land. This is scarcely enforced. If it is, the land deed is signed by the husband, with the wife as a mere witness so she has no actual ownership of the fields. Think about this as well. According to wfp.org, "if women farmers had the same access to resources as men, the number of hungry in the world could be reduced by up to 150 million". 150 million people who are starving could be saved if women were properly treated.

Other major barriers stand in the way and if women had equal opportunities, these issues would be easier to knock down. The poor quality of sustainable agriculture and education both have a negative impact on the small farmers of Uganda. According to the Women's Education Project, "women are often left to the side by agricultural development programs. They take up new technologies at a slower rate, they don't

have the confidence to engage in marketing, they are totally disempowered. Because women are more often kept out of the market, and thus often out of the national language, they benefit greatly from a curriculum that allows them to start in their native language and excel into the national language. Without basic literacy, without fluency in native and national languages, women are excluded from the market” (“Educating Women through Agricultural Development” 1).

If women were better educated, they would feel more confident in participating in improving agricultural techniques, thus helping the issue of sustainable agriculture. According to Worldbank.org, “an extra year of secondary schooling for girls can increase their future wages by 10 to 20 percent” (“Goal 3: Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women” 1). If more programs regarding the proper ways to farm were introduced to these women, then they would be able to grow more crops and feed their families. If these rural girls stayed in schools longer, then they would be more entitled to not only be confident enough to make financial decisions, but also feel proud enough to demand respect. Teaching these children how to manage money and crops, along with basic business language, they could help their parents improve the farms and then grow up with the experience. Women would be gradually brought into the business aspect of farming as new generations come through. Countries that invest in promoting the social and economic status of women tend to have lower poverty rates. But before these young children can step up to make a change, the current farmers require their basic needs met. When the women of Uganda start to feel safe, then they can begin to produce enough to feed their families and even make a profit. The parents can increase crop production, so the children have the resources to attend the schools. In addition to this, if laws were better enforced in rural areas, then women can feel better protected and men will start to follow through with any new programs set in place.

The world has high ambitions for equality as well. The Millennium Development Goal that will be helped is goal 3, which is to promote gender equality and empower women. This is hard for rural districts to reach. Only 2 of 130 countries involved have equal education at all levels and 1 percent of global agriculture credit goes to African women (“Goal 3: Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women” 1). According to Worldbank.org, “putting resources into poor women’s hands while promoting gender equality in the household and in society results in large development payoffs [economically]. Expanding women’s opportunities in public works, agriculture, finance, and other sectors accelerates economic growth, helping to mitigate the effects of current and future financial crises.” Fixing goal number three would aid in the immediate recovery of world hunger, because these women are the main crop growers of the country.

Having women develop a positive self-image, while seeing other successful women and couples in power, could aid in achieving women’s rights as well. Rural farmers could make positive changes if **both** spouses had an equal opportunity to engage in decisions and social functions, along with access to resources. Other international and local groups can help with empowering women and enlightening men on the negative consequences of abuse. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has been making large strides in helping this issue and works with the government of Uganda. The Ministry of Gender, Labour, and Social Development is the agency that enforces the program. The start of Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV) Project in northern Uganda revealed a major problem. (“Sexual and Gender Based Project” 4).

SGBV hopes to not only get women involved in reporting and preventing violence, but husbands, male family members, and other possible attackers to resist lashing out. Men could also attend and meet successful male leaders with a strong woman companion, thus seeing that it could work for them. The implementation of laws and local police reactions to violence would back these new beliefs and give women more of a chance to stand up for their rights. Without help from local authorities, these women, who have already been abused or been exposed to it, feel as though they cannot safely speak out. The program also outlines the issues that rape has traditionally not been discussed in Ugandan families, so

raising awareness and protecting women through law enforcement will help significantly. Early marriage is another topic that is addressed in SGBV ("Sexual and Gender Based Project" 4).

Districts in Northern Uganda, such as Gulu and Lira, have been working hard to get local medics, police officials, and lawyers to help with this project, but with little funding and support, the potential progress cannot be reached. The issue with the SGBV project is the fact that it is only taking place in the war-torn areas of the north and not implemented throughout the rest of the country. It also lacks attention and proper protection by the security forces implementing it. With this being said, the program addresses many concerns, accompanied with good solutions that could transfer over to smaller groups in other distinct districts. If these ideas were spread to other rural regions in Uganda, monumental changes could possibly be made.

Along with these government programs, local groups could really help. Forming committees with police, local leaders, and families could get unique perspectives and encourage others to join in stopping violence. Sending representatives, both male and female speakers, to rural farming districts would show how important this factor is. By seeing powerful examples and being backed by the law, drastic improvements could be made. The Women's Democracy Network (WDN) Uganda Country Chapter began a small workshop where legislative and journalistic women went around to local places and spoke to women. This got local farmers not only involved in decision skills, but also showed them the power of being a female. In the select few areas they worked, the Uganda Chapter of WDN had success and saw a positive change in the attitudes of women they counseled ("Increasing Women's Leadership Capacity" 1). The workshop shows how these types of programs could be successfully added to the rural districts of Uganda. These workshops help to ensure women's rights, which is crucial to fighting poverty and producing food. If women were respected, protected, and educated, more crops could be grown with more sustainable techniques.

Groups like the UNDP and World Bank could place gender equality programs near rural communities, so every person would have access to it without feeling as though they were being intruded on. In addition, have them centralized between villages so marketing and collaboration between farm families could be more widespread. By integrating local political figures, international volunteers, government programs, and farming families, they can all work together to achieve equality to defeat poverty and hunger.

So far, the Ugandan government has been relatively cooperative with crafting policies to help poverty-stricken areas. Since there are a few SGBV and other programs in place, leaders can be shown how well these projects are working to get more people on board. Getting the word out about these new facilities and programs to rural families can be done through incentives. Perhaps offering clean water or another treat will get people to initially come and sign up. This could keep villagers attending these groups and classes, along with listening to the messages the program is trying to get across. Demanding that families change traditions will be met with a large amount of resistance. This is why it is necessary these centers are not telling rural people that their lifestyle is wrong, rather show them the economic benefits of a positive, domestic relationship. Having only outsiders from other countries could cause these villagers to be wary and not want to get involved. Mixing workers from Uganda, volunteers, and the rural folk themselves will allow for an easier transition without accusing the villagers of poor behavior. There should also be a surprise check-up on facilities every so often to ensure that these programs would not be corrupted by local forces.

As Asimwe stated, she had a dream for equality. She had a dream to not go to sleep at night, starving and fearful of her future. She had a dream for a life filled with happiness, hopes, and achievement. Through innovative work, effort, and compassion, changes can be made so that one day right around the corner, the dream of these Ugandan women can be fulfilled.

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