
Communities Affected By HIV/Aids And Its Impact On The Protection Of

Children's Rights In Jinja District

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Abstract

Uganda is one of the first African countries affected by the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) in the early 1980s. The country did not have the resources to provide the required treatments and prevent the spread of the virus. The poor and sometimes non-existent health care services increased the spread of HIV in the country, especially in rural areas where some communities are hard to reach. This study sought to explore the services and support offered to children in different Ugandan communities, as well as to understand their perceptions about these interventions. Structured interviews using a mapping technique with 15 children aged between 13 and 17 years were conducted in five districts in Jinja town. Direct observations were also conducted in five different sub-counties through The AIDS Support Organization (TASO). Content qualitative analysis was used to capture the children's perceptions. There were 6 themes identified in this study: 1) Children identified family, friends, pastors and teachers as key actors in their social circle as people who are respecting their rights; 2) Chairpersons were crucial to the daily functionality of their communities, where they provide safety and consultation services; 3) Although some children acknowledged the presence of local, national and international organizations for developing and implementing projects, most children were unaware of the presence, specific functionalities, or the operation centres of the organizations. In consort, they were unaware of the services out there designed to help vulnerable children; 4) Children had various sex disaggregated responsibilities, from financial support for their families (girls) to subsistence activities (boys). Work responsibilities and childbearing expectations hindered girls from staying in school after the secondary level; 5) Children felt more comfortable discussing perceived delicate and sensitive topics (e.g. secrets) with friends. Children were least comfortable expressing their opinions with adults to whom they could not relate (e.g. educational aspirations). Children were mainly afraid to openly discuss sensitive and difficult topics with adults due to fears of the negative consequences, such as physical beatings, of disobedience; 6) Unavailability and inaccessibility of secondary and post-secondary schools in remote communities hindered children from receiving education past primary levels. The findings revealed some key challenges that vulnerable children in Uganda can face, including discomfort and fear about speaking with adults, responsibilities and unavailability or inaccessibility of education, as well as the lack of knowledge and awareness of the available services.

Keywords: Communities , HIV/Aids, Protection and Children's Rights

Background to the Study

More than 64% of new HIV infections are in Africa (WHO, 2018). Compared to other continents, the highest other rate is 10%. Many countries use different methods to prevent HIV/AIDS, but also to reduce the number of new infections. In some key

countries based in sub-Saharan countries, based on different models of care, outcomes remained similar in terms of infection reduction, and acceptable standard HIV care was considered an alternative (Hagey et al., 2017) (James & Jacob, 2023) .

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Statistics on the prevalence of HIV/AIDS in Uganda are alarming. According to the United Nations Program on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) (2016), 1.4 million Ugandans are living with HIV, of which 130,000 are children aged 0 to 14 years. Compared to South Africa, where 7.7 million people live with HIV (WHO, 2018), Uganda has 82% fewer people infected. If compared to the Democratic Republic of Congo, Uganda has 68% more people infected with HIV and also 86% more compared to South Sudan (Oromo et al., 2023).

HIV prevalence in the Middle East region of Uganda is 4.7% (Ministry of Health & Uganda AIDS Commission, 2019). It is one of the lowest HIV prevalence rates in the ten regions in North East and West Nile at 3.7% and 3.1% respectively (Ministry of Health & Uganda AIDS Commission, 2019). In 2018, there were approximately 4,600 children newly infected with HIV in Uganda, and 47% of the total number of children infected in the country received antiretroviral therapy (ART) (Christopher, Moses, et al., 2022). However, most children do not use ART and live with the adverse effects of the disease. In 2016, nearly 1 million children and adolescents between the ages of 0 and 17 in Africa became orphans because their parents contracted AIDS (Zulaikah & Rebecca, 2023). Although the numbers have decreased in the last decade, the government and

Statement of the Problem

Communities affected by HIV/AIDS have not been represented in research over the past two decades. Information about the functionality of organizations and programs offered to people with the disease, much less AIDS orphans, is limited. In some situations, such as when a person contracts a disease or loses one or both parents, it is essential to have some degree of protection from other members of the community (Ntirandekura & Christopher, 2022). AIDS orphans find themselves in a situation that makes them a vulnerable part of the population. Some programs must be completed to meet their basic needs as outlined in the CRC. If more information and studies were available on the

communities still face the problem. Two major projects in Uganda related to mother-to-child transmission (MTCT) and ART programs initiated by the government have helped to reduce and prevent new HIV infections.

The Ministry of Gender, Labor and Social Development (MGLSD) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) report that adolescent girls are most vulnerable to HIV/AIDS, accounting for two-thirds of all new HIV infections (MGLSD & UNICEF, 2015). For example, these girls are more likely (23% of them) to drop out of school due to pregnancy and 35% of them are likely to be forced into early marriage (Victor et al., 2023).

The Government of Uganda has also signed and ratified other documents responding to international calls to strengthen specific strategies designed to eliminate various forms of violence against children. One of the first actions was the ratification of the Worst Forms of Child Labor Convention on 21 June 2001 (John et al., 2023). This was soon followed by its accession to the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (OPCRC) on the involvement of children in armed conflict. This was signed on 6 May 2002. The Optional Protocol provides treaty-related procedures to support States, governments and their ministries in respecting and developing programs that will suit children and their families (OHCHR, 2018).

role of the community and programs, it would provide insight into whether the rights of these orphans are protected and whether their daily lives are better (Flavia et al., 2023).

The social impact can also cause difficulties in ensuring the protection of children's rights by international organizations, the government and also the communities in that country (Christopher, Komunda, et al., 2022). According to Humanium, Ugandan children are at high risk of abuse (Humanium, 2014). A study that directly engages communities that deal with both people with AIDS and AIDS orphans could help us understand the role and impact of programs implemented by local organizations. Several studies conducted in this area have focused on the challenges of protecting children's rights, access to treatment and marginalization in communities affected by HIV/AIDS (Richard et al., 2022). Services are needed for children, especially AIDS orphans, because of the resulting social impacts, such as children's responsibility to their parents and the need to care for their siblings in Uganda.

Therefore, this research sought to identify actors who are responsible for children, especially AIDS orphans in the five sub-districts of Jinja. The study provides a better picture of the people who are actively and directly involved in helping orphans in Uganda and provides an account of the programs implemented by various actors (communities, federal government, national and international organizations) to support and help AIDS orphans in Uganda. several areas of their well-being; health, education, protection and freedom of speech (Cand et al., 2022).

Specific Objectives

1. To examine the effect of HIV/AIDS in Jinja District
2. To examine the role of communities affected by HIV/AIDS in protecting the rights of children in Jinja
3. To investigate the programs that have been put in place for AIDS orphans in Jinja

Methodology

The study adopted a case study design considering that the government provided a fast and efficient response to the HIV/AIDS crisis. More specifically, the research was conducted in Jinja, which is the largest city near Kampala. Jinja was chosen as the study's site due to its favorable location, such as the flat topography. Kampala was not chosen as the research site because the city has a dense population and most of the NGOs have their head offices scattered in the capital city. Jinja, however, has these NGOs grouped in one location. The group included 10 females and 5 males. The participants were purposively sampled. The criteria for selection of the participants included the following: the participant must be between 13 and 17 years of age and must have resided in the village for at least one year. This age group is based on the recommendation by Kroger (2004) that children in their adolescent years are mature enough psychologically to participate in such a study. The researcher was able to gather data from multiple sources in the data analysis, and this allowed for a triangulation during the analysis. Once the observation and interviews were completed, we had the recorded data transcribed into transcripts. The transcripts were reviewed for clarity and accuracy. Verbatim data was fed to the software *Word* and then fed into the software NVivo 12 & SPSS to be codified (Nelson et al., 2022). We decided to conserve only the non-verbal actions that were influential on the semantics of speech from participants. The researcher employed a qualitative content analysis to analyze data collected in Uganda (Miles et al., 2014).

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RESULTS

Responsibilities of chairpersons

Chairpersons have a number of responsibilities in the communities. All fifteen children in each sub-county considered chairpersons as important assets in their communities. There were more male chairpersons than female ones in each community in Jinja. In general, each sub-county had at least one chairperson, but three children indicated that they have even up to five and six chairpersons who lead their communities. In this paper, leaders and chairpersons are used interchangeably.

Most of the children confirmed that chairpersons perform multiple tasks both for their communities and those specifically for children. During the interviews, girls gave more information regarding this issue than boys. They also expressed their gratitude to chairpersons for the responsibilities that they have for children. The most common responsibilities for leaders concerned keeping their communities safe. In Budondo and Mafubira, the number of times that children talked about this subject was higher than in any other sub-county. One participant attested to this in one of the interviews as follows:

“Their role is to see that there is no chaos in the village and the community. They have to protect people from their property.” (Boy participant, 16 yrs, Mafubira County)

Another essential role the chairpersons played was to help and consult people in their communities. Leaders are known in communities to be abreast with all kinds of information and they guide people when they have questions and concerns. Parents and children seek advice from their leaders when they face challenges and need resources that they could not find anywhere else. As representatives of their people, leaders had higher responsibilities than for any other members of the community. One participant supported this by saying that:

“They help people when they have problems. Sometimes, when parents or guardians do not have money, the leaders help to give some money, or they can themselves take children to hospitals for treatment.” (Girl participant, 13 yrs, Massese County)

The mention that chairpersons give pieces of advice was only mentioned in Massese, Central Division, and Buwenge. Children living in Budondo, Central Division, and Mafubira, talked more about health as a form of security that was provided by leaders. They are often seen as the main points of contact as they give medical care, provide resources such as clothes, food, and medicine for families who need it.

“Some provide medical care to the people.” (Girl participant, 17 yrs, Central Division County)

Aside from their general responsibilities in the communities, leaders performed other tasks that concerned children only. They advised the school children on the importance of finishing their school year and performing well in

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school so that they can access education at a higher level and advised truants about the benefits of attending classes regularly. Again, the chairpersons supported a number of children to attend school by providing their families with financial support.

In addition, some children mentioned that they had their own chairpersons who advise them. It must be stated, however, that not every sub-county has access to a chairperson who works specifically with children. One participant stated appreciative opinions in the extract below:

“For us children, we have ours, we have our leader who also solves a problem. That one is the Face Chairperson who's in charge of children's affairs. So, for us children, we go to him or her.” (Boy participant, 16 yrs, Central Division County)

Children look up to their chairpersons to understand the societal norms in their communities. For example, if a child wanted to know if something was wrong or right, they would talk to their chairperson about it. They would then receive guidance from the chairperson about how they should behave in the community (Mercy et al., 2023). Children look up to them for guidance as they (the children) grow and learn about their places and roles in their social circle. Strangely, only one child mentioned finding it easy to talk with her leader, unlike the other children who preferred to talk with their friends and family members about their fears. One female participant said:

“Go to the chairperson if I have any fears. The chairperson, I go to the same person to share my fears.” (Girl participant, 14 yrs, Buwenge County)

Moreover, children mentioned more than fifteen times that the chairpersons protected them. Most of the children shared difficulties surrounding child abuse in their communities and about their fears of their guardians. For them, knowing that they could confide in their chairpersons encouraged them to speak out loud about their personal and familial issues. Unfortunately, none of the children were able to give more details about the process and the results of those reports.

“In case there is violating their rights, she goes to report. Like in case the guardian burns her. Injures with fire. Like that. Touch her with fire. Him or the fire. In case he damages her body.” (Girl participant, 14 yrs, Budondo County)

Local, national and international organizations

Local, national and international organizations were also considered important actors in the community. More girls than boys considered organizations as important actors in society and acknowledged that these organizations undertook a number of projects in the community. In total, 13 children mentioned at least once in their interviews that they did not know any institutions or organizations, and seven could not remember the names of these organizations. Only two children could not remember or name any organizations that help children and their families in their communities. Unsurprisingly, the Central Division had most of the international and national

organizations.

In Buwenge, children recognized organizations such as churches and mosques as important because they take initiatives in developing projects to help their communities. As a result, people in the communities hugely support these organizations because they believe that they benefit greatly from their services. For instance, people donate money to the churches because they know they will get their money back in many folds. A case in point is where a family asked their pastor to keep the offerings and donations they give during the service organized every week, so that it helps him to cover some family expenses and pay for his children's school fees.

Moreover, children mentioned a number of times that the church is an essential organization that helps their families financially. Only a few children talked about the support they received from their mosques, which we found not very surprising, since only a few of them were Muslims. Some children also mentioned the important roles churches played for orphans. But for the church's

support, some orphans would not have had access to education, and food. A girl told us:

“They offer food for the body. And even offer education to those children who are, who are orphans. They even help with education to those people. To those children who need funding.” (Girl participant, 14 yrs, Buwenge County)

Some organizations were mentioned only as important in one specific sub-county due to their location. Soft Power and Soul are two examples of such organizations. These two international organizations were only mentioned by a child staying in Budondo. The child could not give any description for these two organizations, apart from mentioning that white people ran them, and that he went there a couple of times to charge his mother's cellphone. Thus, children might know about the existence of these organizations but may not know what role they play in the communities.

Another institution considered important was Share an Opportunity (SAO) Uganda, a Christian child-centred non-governmental organization that helps orphans. SAO is located in Kampala but was mentioned during the interview by two children living in Buwenge. These children indicated that they often travelled to Kampala to visit their families. A similar NGO considered important is BRAC Uganda. This organization contributes to poverty reduction and supports women and youth by engaging them in different sectors of the economy such as health, education, and youth empowerment. This international organization is located in Budondo and was mentioned during the interview by children living there.

Although Jinja Connection, which is based in Central Division and helps children living in the street, was mentioned

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as important, participants shared more information about 20 international organizations than the three national ones and the four communities' initiatives. TASO was mentioned twice, both by boys, as an international organization, although it is actually a national one. The boys, however, correctly identified the aim of TASO as a consulting organization that supports people affected by HIV/AIDS, as seen in the extract below.

“So, it's called the AIDS Support Organization. So, they are consulting people with HIV and also encouraging them to take more tablets. To at least improve their immunity.” (Boy participant, 16 yrs, Central Division County)

Another group of people mentioned during the interview and considered by several children as people who were helping the communities were the whites. Documentaries and articles have demonstrated that most of these whites, mostly from North America, engaged with the people and were known to promote their religion in Uganda. That is to say the whites were not only providing financial support for institutions and families but were also teaching and training the people on sexual relationships and the importance of monogamy. A male participant said in one of the interviews:

“There are some whites who are there. Then the ministry called Koagala in that church. They do help, for such programs like paying school fees and helping families.” (Boy participant, 17 yrs, Massese County)

Finally, due to several difficulties faced by the population, the United Nations (UN) was quite involved in the country. In the northern parts of the country, the government continued to work closely with several organizations to provide the best resources and facilities they could to refugees immigrating to South Sudan. The United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) has its head office in Kampala but it works in several districts across Uganda to provide those resources. UNICEF is also another UN Agency that mentioned works in the country due to the poor quality of life of the children. Only two children, however, mentioned those two UN Agencies during their interviews, but none of these agencies had an office in Jinja.

To reduce the risk of famine in some communities in Jinja, a number of national and international organizations have settled in different sub-counties. A majority of them are located in the Central Division due to it being an urban town and in Budondo, which is the closest area with a high number of residents. During the interviews, both girls and boys gave the same answers for the organizations. In Buwenge, no one could mention any organization in their area, and eight children could neither remember the name of the organization nor say such organizations existed. Only four organizations were mentioned, and they are all related to the organizations that give food to children and their families. The following extract from one of the interviews attests to these assertions:

“There's a group called Kualagana. This group moves different houses and inquiries from parents about how children feed. They ask them do they have breakfast; do they have lunch. So, they advise them on how to cultivate and maybe like have maize that they can have for breakfast. Sometimes they go to school. He comes

back, and he finds food because the organization tries to intervene. The group tries to intervene." (Boy participant, 16 yrs, Mafubira County)

Mosques and churches are quite important institutions in Uganda. Statistics show that one eighth (12.5%) of the population are Muslims, and four fifths (80%) of Ugandans are Christians (Souza & Cribari-Neto, 2015). During the week, families who needed resources such as food or financial support to pay for school fees for their children were able to meet in these institutions to pray and ask for help from one another. During the weekends, if someone had a specific request to finance a project or pay some fees for their children, they simply had to share it with the pastor who shared the information with the community and raised money during the two services. During the interview, it was only boys living in Massese who recognized the efforts of churches and mosques in providing food for the needy and helping families in their communities. The extract below supports this finding:

"OK there's a project behind there, it's a church as well as the project. Such families go there and they give them like pocho. There is this green river which they field it with pocho and they give them." (Boy participant, 17 yrs, Massese County)

Surprisingly, when we asked children, during interviews, where their families would go or what they would do if a resource was missing, only one girl from the Central Division mentioned her neighbours as the go-to-place for help when the need arises. As the child was located in the city centre of Jinja, where most of the organizations are located, it showed that sometimes they only need to look at a closer help, especially if they have a great connection with their neighbours.

"They go to their neighbours. They give food." (Girl participant, 17 yrs, Central Division County)

Massese and Mafubira are well known in Jinja to be far from the city centre and have few national and international organizations to help families and children. For this reason, other strategies are needed. One of the ideas shared was the creation of artefacts, such as bracelets and necklaces to be sold to others, and especially tourists, since Jinja is recognized as one of the tourist towns because of the River Nile for the number of outsiders due to the Nile. Another child, as instantiated in the extract below, mentioned the necessity to find work or sell materials from the home to be able to provide for the family.

"You sell whatever you have at home to buy the food you need." (Boy participant, 16 yrs, Mafubira County)

Another actor that is deemed essential is the medical centre. Medics play a fundamental role in organizing programs that are aimed at ensuring the protection of the rights of children. A medical centre is the first place where people

turn to for treatment and advice regarding their health problems. Several departments make up the health centre and these departments are manned by specialists who deliver quality healthcare to their patients. In Jinja, there are only a few hospitals available, and most of them are situated in the Central Division or at the border of the next cities. Jinja hospital is the most popular place where the Jinja community goes to access healthcare.

“There is this one. The Regional Hospital, but I'm not seeing it. Jinja hospital.” (Girl participant, 14 yrs, Central Division County)

Some children who were interviewed considered the Regional Hospital as part of the healthcare centres in their area, though it is not situated in their area. Instead of hospitals, it was possible to find multiple clinic centres in their sub-counties or private clinics. Both male and female interviewees shared similar experiences about the general difficulties in accessing healthcare at these medical centres in their respective sub-counties. Also, it was only girls living in Central Division and Massese who mentioned that there were no medical centres in their sub-counties, and if there were any at all, it was not easy to access them.

The accessibility of these facilities varies according to the location of children's houses. Some medical clinic centres were also easier to find than others and were closer to the main roads. In general, the majority of the children interviewed mentioned that the hospital or clinic centres were closed, and that they could easily access it.

Only 33% of girls and 20% of boys thought that it was not easy to access any medical centres, and they were all living in Massese which is known to be an industrial district. Despite the presence of manufacturing companies and factories, there are only few activities and landmarks such as churches, mosques, and schools in the area. The three children interviewed mentioned that the hospital is quite far from their sub-county.

“That they are somewhere up there on the other side. It is not easy.” (Girl participant, 13 yrs, Massese County)

Children's responsibilities

As part of the article in the ACRWC, the role of children in relation to caring for their parents is primordial. Indeed, the article stipulates the responsibility of children to take care of their parents. Due to the cultures in their country, and expectations of their families, children are facing new challenges when it comes to the way they perceive themselves, especially as adolescents. As the children's rights admonish, knowledge of their roles in their communities is an essential element for them to feel comfortable to share their opinion. In that case, girls share more information about their roles than boys. Among others, caring for the house and teaching others were part of their responsibilities. A general and similar task shared by both sexes was to clean the compound and the house. One participant said:

“My role. I help the community by doing some work. Like cleaning the compound, toilets.”
(Boy participant, 15 yrs, Budondo County)

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Usually, boys were asked more often to fetch water and were allowed to leave the house. It was never or rarely inquired for girls to do the same. They were required to clean the house, wash clothes and do the dishes, as one interviewee said:

“The girls cook. And the girls wash clothes. The boys go fish water. They wash dishes and stay at home.” (Girl participant, 13 yrs, Massese County)

Few children classified their responsibilities in securing their neighborhood to be important. The chosen method to advertise and be in charge of the safety of members of their communities was to report to the police. Each time they would see someone behaving irresponsibly, they reported it to the police who would then take care of the situation and act to restore order in the community. An interviewee reported that:

“If someone is doing any, if anyone is acting bad in the society, go to the police and report.” (Girl participant, 14 yrs, Buwenge County)

Only one child during the two interviews mentioned that her role was simply to go to school. Since there is only one child not going to school in the entire sample, it was surprising to have only one child talking about her role as a student. She did not include any other tasks or responsibilities during the two interviews. For her, she was defined as a student and nothing else. Finally, four children indicated that they had no role or responsibilities in their

communities. They were all aged from 15 to 17, and they indicated that they do not have responsibilities, except that they take interest in doing things that they deemed interesting. For example, one child mentioned the importance of taking care of his chicken but did not classify that as part of his responsibilities or role in his family:

“I do not take any responsibility. I just love my chicken.” (Boy participant, 16 yrs, Mafubira County)

Involvement of organization at school

As part of their curriculum at school, children learn various subjects at school. Sexuality is the most common topic studied at school, owing to the easy access to information provided to the schools by international organizations. They provide the schools with information on how children can avoid HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections. During the interview, a child mentioned TASO and the Red Cross Society as organization that provided his school with information for them to learn. Such information was hitherto accessed only when they visited the doctor.

“Ok, they have gotten in such curriculum from Red Cross and TASO.” (Boy participant, 16 yrs, Massese County)

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Accessibility to education

In general, more girls than boys mentioned that their community schools have classes for the students of different grades, such as lower and upper primary schools, elementary schools and secondary schools. Only one boy in Mafubira mentioned that there were no Primary Schools available in his community, even though he mentioned in the second interview that his school was in his neighborhood.

Compared to the primary schools, secondary schools were less available and accessible in remote communities. Two children from Massese confirmed in both interviews that there were no secondary schools in their community. As for colleges, there are even fewer than the elementary schools. The fewer colleges offered courses in Nursing and Information Communication Technology (ICT) only. There are only two colleges that represent technical schools in Jinja, and both are located in the Central Division. All children from the Central Division said that there were college schools, unlike other children who mentioned at least in one interview that there were none.

Results changed for the universities as the most popular and well-known universities in Uganda are located in different regions in the country. Jinja has four private universities that are all placed in four of the five sub-counties: Nsaka University in Mafubira, Kampala University (Jinja Branch) in Bugembe, Failand University in Massese-Walukuba, and Makerere University (Jinja Branch) in Central Division.

Conclusions

Communities play an important role in protecting children's rights, along with families, grandparents, and other relatives who take care of children. However, lack of resources sometimes prevents children from getting all the support they need.

Women, like mothers, sisters, teachers, tend to be the ones children open up to about their needs, due to spending more time together. However, their voices are often not heard in the patriarchal societies.

Involving men more is needed to promote children's rights, since society is patriarchal. Without men's support, women cannot freely advocate for children.

Recommendations

There is need to increase support and involvement of men in promoting children's rights, given the patriarchal nature of society which marginalizes women. This will help give children more advocates.

There is need to strengthen community-led programs and projects that support vulnerable families and children. This could be done through increased funding and resources.

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