



CEHURD
social justice in health

Empowering Women Through Legal Aid and Justice - A Story of Hope | International Women's Day



One of CEHURD's Legal Aid Camps in Lira District.

Every year on March 8th, the world unites to celebrate International Women's Day, acknowledging the remarkable contribution of women while reflecting on the progress made in achieving gender equality and the challenges that persist. In Uganda, this day serves as an opportunity to honour the resilience, achievements, and ongoing struggles of women in a nation where they are both agents of change and face considerable adversity. The journey of women's rights in Uganda is a mix of progress and challenges, but their contribution to society remains monumental, making their recognition during International Women's Day crucial for fostering change and empowerment.

In Uganda, access to justice remains a significant hurdle for many, especially women and marginalized communities. Moreover, cases of abuse for this category of people are rampant and reported as indicated in the recently published Annual Police Crime Report 2024. In such instances, legal aid services become essential to ensuring everyone has the opportunity to defend their rights and access justice, regardless of their socio-economic background. The Center for Health, Human Rights and Development (CEHURD) has been at the forefront in ensuring that women and girls whose rights have been violated access justice. Through its legal aid and empowerment programs, CEHURD has made a substantial impact to address the systematic challenges and inequalities that impact on the lives of women and girls.

CEHURD is a non-governmental organization dedicated to promoting and protecting the right to health and advancing access to social justice in health systems in Uganda. The institution established a Legal Aid Clinic in 2020 to provide free legal support to survivors of abuse and people whose rights have been violated but are not in a position to support themselves through mainstream court systems to access justice. Since then, the Institution has supported more than 311 women

and girls to access justice for cases on maternal health rights violations, Sexual and Gender Based Violence, detention in health facilities, and access to medicines and services.

A Unique Approach to Legal Aid

CEHURD employs a unique approach to legal aid. It places the clients at the center of accessing justice. The communities we serve, including women and girls, are made to understand the court system, its operations and possible timing for the cases. This allows them to work together with us through the litigation process with hope and a settled mind.

The holistic approach to our legal aid expands from provision of rapid response services, to watching brief in court, litigating cases before Courts of Law and Quasi-Judicial Bodies and providing psychosocial support to our clients. When we receive a client at the legal aid clinic, we analyse and develop an opinion about the case. The process of analysing it sometimes involves conducting visits and investigations to inform our actions. In cases of Sexual and Gender Based Violence, oftentimes, we collaboratively engage the police to ensure the accused is in custody and ready to be produced in court. While doing this, we place the client at the center and respect the investigations of the police. Once the charges are referred and the case has to proceed through the court process, our mandate moves to supporting the family and witnesses to attend court as well as watch brief in these cases. We also ensure that we monitor the cases to their logical conclusion together with the clients. All this is done to ensure access to justice for the survivors and their families.

Our approach also includes empowering women and girls. This is usually done through organizing legal aid clinics. In 2024 alone, we conducted twenty-four legal aid clinics in eighteen districts across Uganda. These clinics gave us an opportunity to create legal awareness on various human rights and provide legal support and advice to over 20,437 vulnerable people including women and girls within the communities. We have registered tremendous success since the inception of our legal aid clinic, witnessing families beam with hope that was once lost in their pursuit for justice gives us satisfaction.

As proponents of our values, we hold annual client meetings to gather feedback and accountability. In this space, clients get an opportunity to interface with actors within the justice system. Stakeholders such as police, probation officers and the Judiciary speak to clients to help them better understand the justice system. The meetings also implore us to identify key issues that could enable us to improve the legal aid clinic and its services.

Once we receive judgment or rulings from Court in our favour, CEHURD takes an extra mile to ensure that this justice is realized. A clear example of this is a case of maternal health violations in Arua and Mityana Districts where two women died while giving birth. Litigated for over 9 years from 2011 through 2020, the government of Uganda has since respected and implemented 90% of the orders in the said case, in a pursuit to advance women's rights. In this case, Nalubowa Sylvia and Anguko Jennifer died in Mityana and Arua Regional referral hospitals (respectively). CEHURD sued the government for its failure to provide basic maternal health commodities including blood, cotton wool, mama kits etc in its health facilities leading to the death of expectant women. The case was ruled 9 years later in affirmative by the Constitutional Court. The government spends only compensating the clients in this case, which process CEHURD is still following up in its pursuit to ensure access to justice by women.

CEHURD's legal aid clinic continues to reach vulnerable members of the community including women and girls with accurate information on access to justice. With this, there is a ray of hope that with continuous provision of legal aid services, we shall see a society in which social justice and human rights in health systems is realized.

Persistent Challenges in the Pursuit of Justice

While CEHURD's legal aid initiatives have been effective in empowering women and protecting their rights, several challenges remain. Access to justice, particularly in rural and remote areas, is still limited due to inadequate legal infrastructure and limited awareness about the same. Cultural and societal barriers also prevent women from seeking legal help, including stigmatization, economic dependency, and entrenched gender norms.

Light sentences are often awarded in cases of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence, which survivors and their families do not appreciate. These sentences can be as light as one year of imprisonment or community service for perpetrators of sexual violence. This is one of the issues that we call upon the judiciary to look into, on this women's day. While as an institution we appreciate the process and the sentencing guidelines that the judiciary employs, we are cognisant of the fact that some cases, especially those of violence against women need to be reflected upon.

Delays in sanctioning files by the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions also hinders access to justice. Frequent adjournments in some courts of law also cause litigation burnout for survivors and witnesses.

Corruption by duty bearers also frustrates cases in the referral pathway. Negotiations with the families of the survivors initiated by the accused person's family and friends are also a major hindrance to accessing justice for women and girls. Corruption and negotiations have led to the settlement of many cases of Sexual and Gender-Based violence in the community thereby denying justice to the women and girls.

A Survivor's Story: From Darkness to Hope

My name is Rose (not my real name), and I never thought I would make it through my ordeal, yet here I am, ready to share my story. In my darkest moments, I found CEHURD, a legal aid organization dedicated to helping survivors of sexual violence to stand up for their rights and access justice, and Kyampisi Child Care Ministries, a team dedicated to putting an end to child abuse. They believed in me when I could not believe in myself. With their legal and psychosocial support, I escaped and sought justice not just for myself but for all children suffering in silence, and I want to share my story—one filled with pain and strength. I am a survivor of sexual violence, and I hope that by telling my story, I can show you that even in the darkest times, there is still hope and love.

When I was just three years old, I lost my parents. My siblings and I went to live with our grandparents in Nakasongola, and for a little while, life felt safe and happy. But everything changed when my grandparents passed away. My world shattered into pieces. We were separated and sent to live with different relatives. I ended up with my uncle James in Hoima. Before long, my fears turned into a nightmare. My uncle was not someone to trust; instead, he became my worst enemy. He sexually harassed me over and over again, turning my childhood into an endless cycle of pain and suffering.

When the COVID-19 lockdown hit, my situation worsened. One cold night, I made the hardest decision of my life. I ran into the forests of Buraru in Kyabigambire, my heart pounding with fear and hope. Just when I was losing hope, I met Auntie Edith, a kind woman from the church who took me in.

At that point, I found out about CEHURD, a legal aid organization working to support survivors of sexual violence in Hoima. They reached out to me through their SGBV champions and brought lawyers who were ready to help. They took my situation very seriously, and we reported what happened to the police. CEHURD was determined to support me and worked hard with the probation office to refer me to a safe space where I sought shelter and protection.

Then, the day came when the CEHURD lawyers managed to have my uncle arrested. With the support of CEHURD and the

safe environment at the safe space, I began to rebuild my life. Uncle left me with a pregnancy and I now have a bouncing baby boy. I have learnt to slowly love him, for who he is—a light in my dark life.

Going back to school was both exciting and hard. Now, I am in Senior Three, working hard and dreaming of a brighter future. Through it all, I even found the strength to forgive my uncle, who is now in prison for what he did to me.

CEHURD, this safe space saved me. They showed me that love and support could change lives. Now, I see a future full of possibilities, and I want to help other children who feel lost, just as I once did.

To anyone reading this: if you find yourself trapped in darkness, please know that there is hope. You are not alone. There are people out there who care and want to help.

The legal aid initiatives carried out by CEHURD have made significant impact in empowering women in Uganda, providing them with the tools to challenge injustice and inequality. By offering legal support in cases of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence, access to medicines and maternal health, CEHURD has helped women and girls access justice and claim their rights. As Uganda continues to strive for gender equality, CEHURD's work remains crucial in ensuring that women, especially those in marginalized communities, are not left behind. Moving forward, expanding legal aid services and strengthening legal reforms will be essential in creating a more just and equitable society where women's rights are fully recognized and protected.

CEHURD has opened up a fund for survivors of sexual violence to access justice. The purpose of this legal aid fund is to support survivors of sexual violence with court attendances, and psychosocial support. We therefore, encourage the public to support this cause. Support can be extended through;

Bank Transfer
Account name:
Center for Health Human Rights and Development
Account number: 9030023415843,
Bank name: Stanbic, Branch: Garden city

Momo Pay
Dial *165*3#, Merchant Code: 198080

Happy International Women's Day!

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