



RAPID ASSESSMENT REPORT ON WOMEN ACCESS TO JUSTICE IN KARAMOJA



BY

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Affirmation

I Odelok Thomas, the executive Director of KAWUO, affirm that this rapid assessment report is the result of a collaborative effort supported by KAWUO, PILAC, and all stakeholders involved. The findings presented in this report are based on information collected from respondents in the target districts and have been analyzed with due diligence and professionalism by the research team.

I further affirm that this report reflects the contributions, insights, and experiences of the participants, and has been compiled with integrity, accuracy, and respect for ethical standards. All support received, both technical and financial, has been duly acknowledged

Signature.....Date.....

Grocery/acronym

KAWUO- Karamoja Women Umbrella Organization

PILAC - Public Interest law Clinic (of Makerere University School of Law)

FIDA- Association of women layers in Uganda

GBV - Gender Based Violence

CSO - Civil Society Organization

FGD - Focus Group Discussion

KII - Key Informant Interview

LCI - Local Council One

CDO - Community Development Officer

PSWO - Probation Social Welfare Officer

CFPU - Child and Family Protection Unit

PWD - People with Disabilities

ADRA- Adventist Development and Relief Agency

IJM- International Justice Mission

FGM- Female Genital Mutilation

NGO- Non-Government Organization

CBO- Community Based Officer

PDM- Parish Development Model

T/C- Town council

S/C- Sub County

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The rapid assessment study generated timely, context-specific evidence on women's access to justice in relation to violence against women in Karamoja. Using a qualitative method, cross-sectional design, data was collected from 120 women across six districts through Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and 25 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with justice actors, service providers, including CDOs, PSWOs, CFPU, Cultural and religious leaders, LCIs, and CBOs. The assessment examined prevalence, justice-seeking pathways, institutional responses, and barriers to accessing justice.

Findings revealed that violence against women is widespread, systemic, and deeply rooted in sociocultural and economic structures. Women experience multiple and overlapping forms of violence, including physical, sexual, emotional, and economic abuse, as well as harmful practices such as early marriage and Female Genital Mutilation (FGM).

Women predominantly rely on informal justice seeking systems, including family members, elders, and Local Council leaders, with only severe cases reaching formal institutions such as police and courts. Key barriers include stigma, fear of retaliation, economic dependency, long distances to services, weak law enforcement, corruption, and limited trust in formal justice systems. Referral pathways exist but are fragmented, poorly coordinated, and inconsistently functional.

Justice responses are characterized by a hybrid system combining informal mediation and formal processes. However, over-reliance on mediation even in serious cases undermines accountability and survivor protection. Women reported low satisfaction with justice services due to delays, costs, bias, and corruption.

Despite these challenges, promising practices include community sensitization, multi-stakeholder collaboration, mobile justice services, and the role of CSOs and women's groups in supporting survivors.

Therefore, strengthening access to justice requires integrated approaches that address harmful norms, enhance economic empowerment, improve coordination and accountability within justice systems, and expand accessible, survivor-centered services.

INTRODUCTION

• Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study was to generate timely and context-specific evidence on women's access to justice in relation to Gender-Based Violence (GBV) in the Karamoja sub-region. Despite the existence of national legal and policy frameworks, women in Karamoja continue to experience high levels of GBV and human rights violations, which limit their enjoyment of fundamental rights such as safety, dignity, health, property ownership, and participation in decision-making.

The study examined how women access justice in practice, assessed the effectiveness of existing formal and informal justice mechanisms, and identified the key barriers that hinder different groups of women from seeking and obtaining justice. It also sought to understand the levels of reporting and formal justice-seeking, despite the high prevalence of violence.

Ultimately, the study provided evidence to inform responsive programming, strengthened advocacy efforts, and supported engagement with duty bearers to enhance women's access to justice and protection against violence in Karamoja.

• Methodology

The rapid assessment adopted a qualitative approach, to generate comprehensive evidence on women's access to justice in relation to violence. The qualitative approach provided deeper insights to the prevalence of violence, barriers to justice, survivor experiences, power dynamics, and the functionality of available services and referral pathways.

In terms of research design, the study applied a cross-sectional design, collecting data at a single point in time from selected respondents within the targeted communities. This allowed for the generation of measurable indicators on violence and human rights experiences, reporting behavior, awareness of justice mechanisms, and access to services.

Qualitative data was collected using Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs). FGDs were conducted with women's groups and other relevant community members to explore collective experiences, social norms, and perceptions regarding violence and access to justice. KIIs were conducted with key stakeholders, including justice actors, service providers, and community leaders, to assess institutional capacity, coordination, and challenges within the justice system.

Regarding sampling, the study applied both probability and purposive sampling techniques. Probability sampling, including simple random sampling, was used to select respondents to participate in the FGD to ensure equal opportunity for participation and enhance representativeness.

Purposive sampling was used to identify key informant participants based on their knowledge, roles, and relevance to GBV prevention and response services.

- **Limitations**

Underreporting due to sensitivity of GBV and human rights issues: Some women were reluctant to disclose experiences of GBV and human rights violations or challenges in seeking justice due to stigma, fear of retaliation, and cultural sensitivities. This affected the accuracy and completeness of the data collected. To minimize this limitation, the study engaged trained enumerators with GBV-sensitive interviewing skills and ensured strict confidentiality, informed consent, and safe data collection procedures to build trust and encouraged honest participation.

Geographical and logistical constraints: Geographical barriers including long distances and poor road network in the Karamoja region restricted access to some justice actors especially in hard-to-reach communities. This affected the breadth of coverage. However, the assessment allocated additional time, transport, and logistical resources, and coordinated with local stakeholders to enhance access and ensured comprehensive coverage as possible.

FINDINGS

SECTION A: PREVALENCE AND NATURE OF GBV AND RIGHTS VIOLATION

Women experiences of violence

The assessment findings show that violence against women is widespread across all six districts of Moroto, Napak, Kaabong, Amudat, Nakapiripirit, and Abim. Women experience different forms of violence at the same time, mainly within their homes and communities. This was consistently reported in both Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with women and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with leaders, service providers, and community members. Violence is often seen as normal and is supported by strong cultural beliefs and male-dominated systems.

In Moroto and Napak, women and young people reported frequent cases of intimate partner violence, emotional abuse, and lack of financial support. Many women face violence related to household conflicts, especially over food and income. There are also cases of sexual exploitation, particularly among young women in trading centers. However, these districts show higher reporting levels, mainly because of stronger NGO presence and community awareness activities. This means that increased reporting is linked to better awareness and access to services, not necessarily higher levels of violence compared to other districts.

In Kaabong and Amudat, violence is strongly linked to harmful cultural practices. Early and forced marriages, polygamy, and Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) are common, especially in Amudat where FGM is widely practiced. These practices are socially accepted and deeply rooted in

tradition, making it difficult for women and girls to resist or report cases. As a result, although violence is high, formal reporting is low because communities prefer to handle issues within cultural systems.

In Nakapiripirit and Abim, Violence against women is also present but less openly discussed. The most common forms are domestic violence and economic deprivation, such as denial of food and basic needs. Reporting levels are low due to weak systems, limited access to services, and low awareness. Many cases are handled within families, which leads to underreporting and limited access to formal justice.

Across all districts, women face challenges in reporting violence or leaving abusive relationships. This is mainly due to economic dependence on men, fear of stigma, and lack of decision-making power. Many women remain in abusive situations because they have no alternative support.

The most common forms of violence reported include physical, sexual, emotional, and economic abuse, often happening together. Harmful practices like early marriage and FGM increase women's vulnerability to other forms of violence. For example, physical violence is often combined with emotional abuse and denial of resources, making it harder for women to escape.

Overall, GBV in Karamoja is not a one-time event but a continuous and systemic problem. While the types of violence are similar across districts, the causes and reporting patterns differ. Moroto and Napak show higher visibility and reporting, Kaabong and Amudat are influenced by strong cultural practices, and Nakapiripirit and Abim have more hidden and underreported cases. Despite these differences, the underlying issue remains the same: gender inequality and social norms continue to drive and sustain violence against women.

Categories of the most affected population by violence

The study findings shows that **women and girls** are the most affected by GBV across all six districts. **Women** were consistently identified as the primary group affected, followed by **girls**, particularly adolescents who face increased exposure to risks within both household and community settings.

The study further identified secondary high-risk groups, including children (especially girls), **Persons with Disabilities (PWDs)**, and **the elderly**, particularly **widows**. These groups face heightened vulnerability due to their limited ability to protect themselves, reduced access to support systems, and dependence on others.

In addition, Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) highlighted specific sub-groups that are highly vulnerable. These include **widows and single mothers, unmarried women, and orphans**. These groups are often socially and economically disadvantaged, making them more exposed to violence and less likely to access justice or support services.

Overall, vulnerability to violence was found to be intersectional, meaning that risk increases based on a combination of factors such as gender, age, disability, and marital status. Individuals who fall into multiple vulnerable categories for example, a **widowed elderly woman or a young girl** with a disability face even greater risk.

There are also notable district-level differences.

- ✚ In Amudat and Kaabong, girls are the most vulnerable due to the high prevalence of early marriage and Female Genital Mutilation (FGM).
- ✚ In Moroto and Napak, women and adolescent girls are more affected due to economic stress and increased social exposure.
- ✚ In Abim and Nakapiripirit, higher vulnerability is observed among the elderly, widows, and children, largely due to poverty, weak support systems, and limited access to services.

These findings highlight the need for targeted and inclusive interventions that address the specific vulnerabilities of different groups.

Manifestations of violence and human rights violation in communities

Violence manifests in both private and public spheres.

- ✚ At household level (Domestic violence, physical, emotional, sexual, Denial of basic needs food, shelter).
- ✚ At Community Level (Early/forced marriages, Land grabbing and property disputes, Sexual violence in social and economic spaces.
- ✚ At Cultural/Structural Level (Widow inheritance, Exclusion of women from decision-making, Gendered norms reinforcing male dominance

GBV trend analysis

The analysis revealed that there was persistent and widespread prevalence of GBV and Increasing vulnerability linked to Economic hardship, Alcohol abuse and Weak enforcement of laws

Emerging trends noted included rising cases of sexual exploitation among young women, continued prevalence of early marriage despite awareness efforts, increasing reporting through awareness, but low justice outcomes. There is a growing awareness of GBV and human rights, but behavioral and structural change remains slow, leading to sustained or increasing incidences.

For specific district variations:

- ✚ For Moroto & Napak (Increased awareness and reporting, slight improvement in community response mechanisms).
- ✚ Kaabong & Amudat (GBV remains high and normalized, Limited behavioral change despite awareness efforts) and for

✚ Nakapiripirit & Abim (Stable but underreported trends with weak data systems-unclear magnitude)

SECTION B: AWARENESS, JUSTICE SEEKING AND ACCESS PATHWAYS

Awareness about legal rights and protection mechanisms

The findings indicate moderate but uneven awareness of legal rights and protection mechanisms across the six districts, with clear variations linked to NGO presence, community engagement, and socio-cultural dynamics. Overall, both FGDs (women) and KIIs (local leaders, service providers, and cultural leaders and district stakeholders) confirm that while basic knowledge of rights exists, there is limited understanding of legal procedures, enforcement pathways, and practical application.

In Moroto District, awareness levels are relatively high, as consistently reported in FGDs and reinforced by KIIs (particularly NGO staff, probation officers, and local leaders). This is largely attributed to strong NGO engagement and sustained sensitization activities. FGD participants demonstrated familiarity with concepts such as women's rights and reporting channels. However, KIIs noted that despite this awareness, confidence to pursue formal justice remains inconsistent, with many cases still diverted to informal systems.

Napak District, awareness is moderately high, driven by continuous community dialogues and engagement platforms. FGDs reflected a growing understanding of rights, while KIIs (community development officers and local leaders) emphasized that repeated sensitization has improved knowledge. Nonetheless, the application of this knowledge remains limited, with survivors often opting for informal resolution mechanisms despite being aware of formal options.

Kaabong District, awareness is moderate but weakly translated into practice. FGDs indicated that community members are aware of certain rights and GBV concepts; however, KIIs (particularly elders and local leaders) highlighted that cultural norms, including polygamy and bride price systems, continue to override this awareness. As a result, there is a disconnect between knowledge and action, with low uptake of formal reporting pathways.

Amudat District, awareness is low to moderate but heavily constrained by cultural factors. While some knowledge exists largely noted in KIIs with service providers FGDs revealed that harmful traditional practices such as FGM and early marriage are deeply normalized. KIIs (especially cultural leaders) emphasized that cultural norms often take precedence over legal rights, significantly limiting the effectiveness of awareness efforts and discouraging reporting.

While in Nakapiripirit and Abim Districts, awareness levels are generally low, as reported across both FGDs and KIIs (local leaders and service providers). This is primarily due to limited outreach, weak presence of awareness structures, and minimal exposure to sensitization programs. Participants in FGDs showed limited knowledge of legal rights and reporting mechanisms, while KIIs confirmed that many community members rely on traditional systems due to lack of information and access.

Across all districts, a critical cross-cutting gap emerges: awareness does not translate into confidence to act or report. KIIs consistently highlighted barriers such as fear of stigma, economic dependency, and lack of trust in formal systems, while FGDs revealed hesitation among women to pursue justice despite knowing their rights. This underscores that increasing awareness alone is insufficient without strengthening confidence, accessibility, and responsiveness of justice systems.

Existing legal rights for women

The findings confirm that women are legally entitled to protection from violence, property and inheritance rights, and access to justice, but the understanding and application of these rights varies significantly across districts, as evidenced by both FGDs and KIIs (local leaders, service providers, and cultural actors).

In Moroto and Napak, there is a relatively stronger understanding of women's legal rights, largely attributed to sustained sensitization by NGOs and community engagement platforms. FGDs in these districts reflected that women are increasingly aware of their rights, particularly the right to report violence and seek support. KIIs (especially probation officers, NGO staff, and local leaders) confirmed that this awareness has translated into some utilization of formal justice mechanisms, including reporting to police and accessing support services. However, they also noted that formal justice is still not the first option, with many cases initially handled within families or at community level.

In Kaabong and Amudat, while there is basic awareness of legal rights, both FGDs and KIIs indicate that these rights are often subordinated to entrenched cultural norms and practices. KIIs with elders and cultural leaders emphasized that systems such as bride price, polygamy, early marriage, and in Amudat, FGM, continue to shape community responses to violence. FGDs further revealed that even when women are aware of their rights, social expectations and fear of cultural sanctions discourage them from exercising those rights, resulting in low engagement with formal justice systems.

In Abim and Nakapiripirit, awareness of legal rights is significantly limited, as reported across FGDs and KIIs (local leaders and service providers). Participants demonstrated minimal knowledge of formal legal protections, and KIIs confirmed that communities rely heavily on traditional dispute resolution mechanisms, with cases often settled within families or by local leaders. This reliance is reinforced by limited outreach, weak institutional presence, and low exposure to legal sensitization initiatives.

Across all districts, a consistent pattern emerges: cultural norms frequently override formal legal frameworks, and enforcement at the community level remains weak. KIIs highlighted that even where laws are known, implementation is constrained by social acceptance of violence, preference for informal resolution, and limited trust in formal institutions. Consequently, the existence of legal protections does not automatically translate into effective protection, underscoring the need for integrated approaches that bridge legal awareness with cultural engagement and system strengthening.

What women do first when faced with violence and human rights abuse

Across all six districts of Moroto, Napak, Kaabong, Amudat, Nakapiripirit, and Abim, a consistent response pattern emerged from both FGDs and KIIs (local leaders, elders, and service providers, district officers) regarding actions taken when women face violence. The most common initial response is remaining silent, followed by reporting to family members and seeking help from local/community leaders such as elders and LC1s. FGD participants repeatedly emphasized that silence is often driven by fear of stigma, economic dependency, and desire to preserve family relationships, while KIIs confirmed that families are typically the first point of mediation before any external reporting is considered.

Moroto and Napak, there is a notable but gradual shift toward formal support systems, as highlighted in FGDs and reinforced by KIIs (SCDO, Probation officers, and local leaders). Women in these districts are more likely though still not consistently to seek support from NGOs, police, or health facilities, particularly in severe cases such as rape or extreme physical violence. This shift is attributed to higher awareness levels, stronger NGO presence, and more accessible reporting structures. However, KIIs noted that even in these districts, informal mechanisms remain the first point of contact, with formal reporting often occurring only after initial community-level attempts fail.

In contrast, in Kaabong, Amudat, Nakapiripirit, and Abim, responses are overwhelmingly dominated by informal systems. FGDs in these districts indicated that women primarily rely on family members, elders, and cultural leaders to resolve cases, while KIIs (especially elders and local leaders) confirmed that formal institutions are rarely engaged unless cases escalate significantly. In Kaabong and Amudat, this was further reinforced by strong cultural norms and practices, where community-based resolution is preferred and sometimes enforced. In Nakapiripirit and Abim, the reliance on informal systems is compounded by limited access to formal services, low awareness, and weak institutional presence.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that the initial response to violence is predominantly informal, family-centered, and community-driven across all districts, with only limited progression to formal systems. This highlights a critical gap between availability of formal services and their actual utilization, underscoring the need to strengthen trust, accessibility, and integration between community structures and formal GBV response mechanisms.

Where women commonly seek help when faced with violence and human rights abuse

The study findings shows that women mainly seek help from informal support systems when they experience violence. Across all six districts, the first point of contact is usually family members such as parents, siblings, or in-laws. Women rely on them for advice, support, and mediation, mainly because they are easily accessible and trusted. Many women also prefer to keep issues within the family to avoid stigma and protect relationships.

Community leaders, especially elders and Local Council I (LC1) leaders, are also key sources of support. They receive complaints, organize meetings, and mediate disputes between parties. Most cases are handled at this level through dialogue and negotiation, often focusing on reconciliation rather than punishment. Cultural and religious leaders also play a role by providing counselling and guidance.

Formal institutions such as police, health facilities, and NGOs are considered secondary options. Women usually turn to these services only in serious cases like rape or severe physical violence, or when community efforts fail. In districts like Moroto and Napak, there is some improvement in the use of formal services due to increased awareness and NGO presence. However, informal systems are still the first choice.

In Kaabong, Amudat, Nakapiripirit, and Abim, dependence on informal systems is even stronger due to cultural norms, limited services, and low awareness. Overall, the findings show a clear preference for informal justice systems, which are accessible but often do not ensure full justice and protection for survivors.

Available reporting channels

- Local Council leaders (LC1)
- Police (Child and Family Protection Units)
- Health facilities
- NGOs and CBOs
- Community-based structures

Proportion of cases reaching formal institutions

The general trend is that there was a low proportion of cases that reached formal institutions. The estimated pattern based on qualitative data was that majority of cases were resolved informally with only severe cases (rape, extreme violence) reported formally. Higher proportion (Moroto and Napak), Moderate (Kaabong and Amudat) and Lowest in Abim and Nakapiripirit. The key insight is that formal reporting is directly correlated with Awareness, Accessibility and Presence of support actors within the districts.

Availability and functionality of referral pathways

Referral pathways for GBV response in the assessed districts are structurally present but operationally inconsistent, creating a gap between availability and effective service delivery. At the community level, survivors are able to move through a pathway that includes Local Council structures (LC1s), community-based actors (elders, women leaders, VSLAs), police (particularly Child and Family Protection Units), health facilities, and NGO service providers. However, in practice, these pathways function more as loosely connected actors rather than an integrated system, which significantly undermines survivor-centered response.

Weak coordination remains a central challenge. Community structures often manage cases informally without clear escalation mechanisms, while police, health facilities, and NGOs lack consistent collaboration. This results in poor linkage between medical, legal, and psychosocial services, with coordination largely dependent on NGO presence rather than institutionalized systems.

Delays in response significantly affect service effectiveness. Survivors face long waiting times due to distance, limited staffing, and logistical constraints such as lack of transport. These delays are particularly critical in cases of sexual violence, where failure to access timely medical care undermines both health outcomes and legal evidence, especially in remote districts like Abim and Nakapiripirit.

Limited follow-up and case tracking further weaken the system. There are no standardized mechanisms to monitor cases across referral points, leading to survivors dropping out before receiving full support. Feedback loops between institutions are minimal, reducing accountability and continuity of care.

These gaps are compounded by capacity and resource constraints. Community actors often lack technical GBV handling skills, while police and health facilities face staffing and resource shortages. NGO support is uneven, creating disparities in service access across districts.

Finally, socio-cultural barriers such as stigma, fear of retaliation, and preference for informal resolution discourage survivors from engaging with formal systems. As a result, referral pathways, though present, remain underutilized and ineffective without stronger coordination, capacity, and community trust.

Challenges faced by women while reporting cases and seeking justice.

The findings reveal that Gender-Based Violence (GBV) in the Karamoja sub-region is not only widespread but also deeply rooted in social, cultural, and structural systems that perpetuate inequality. This makes GBV both a persistent and normalized experience for many communities, particularly affecting women and girls who bear the greatest burden in terms of physical, emotional, and economic consequences. Despite its prevalence, many cases remain significantly underreported due to fear of stigma, retaliation, limited trust in formal systems, and entrenched cultural practices that discourage disclosure.

Encouragingly, there is a growing level of awareness among community members especially women and girls regarding their rights and available support mechanisms. However, this increased awareness has not translated into improved access to justice. Multiple barriers continue to hinder survivors from seeking and obtaining justice, including restrictive socio-cultural norms that prioritize family or community reputation over individual rights, high levels of economic

dependency on perpetrators, and weak institutional frameworks characterized by limited capacity, coordination gaps, and inadequate survivor-centered services.

Therefore, addressing GBV in Karamoja requires a comprehensive and integrated approach. Interventions should go beyond awareness creation to include deliberate efforts to transform harmful gender norms, promote economic empowerment for women and girls to reduce dependency, and strengthen referral pathways and justice systems. This includes enhancing the capacity of service providers, improving coordination among stakeholders, and ensuring that justice mechanisms are accessible, responsive, and survivor-centered.

SECTION C: HOW DO JUSTICE INSTITUTIONS MANAGE CASES

How do justice institutions handle and manage violence cases?

Findings from both Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) show that cases of violence against women are handled through a mixed system that combines community-based approaches with formal legal processes. In most cases, issues start at the community level and are only referred to formal institutions when they become serious or cannot be resolved locally.

At the first stage, cases are mainly handled by Local Council leaders (LC1s), elders, and family members. FGD participants from areas such as Kaabong Town Council, Kakamar S/C, Lotome, and Kiru explained that cases are discussed through meetings that bring together both parties, community members, and local leaders. These meetings often involve mediation and dialogue aimed at reaching agreement. This is supported by KIIs, where LC1 leaders from Kaabong and Nakapiripirit confirmed that they first “*sit down with both parties*” before referring cases further. Religious and cultural leaders also reported using counselling, mentorship, and community dialogues. This shows that the system strongly depends on community led solutions, with a focus on reconciliation.

When cases are not resolved or are more serious, they move to the next stage of documentation and investigation. FGDs from Kangole, Abiliyep, Rupa, and Katikekile noted that cases are then recorded, statements taken, and investigations carried out, sometimes with the help of community witnesses. KIIs with police officers, including the Child and Family Protection Unit (CFPU), confirmed that cases are formally registered and investigated to understand their seriousness. Civil society organisations such as FIDA also support by identifying, documenting, and following up cases. However, evidence shows that documentation often happens after attempts at mediation have failed.

The referral to formal institutions is mainly done for severe cases or when mediation fails. FGD participants in Nakapiripirit, Moruita, and Rupa reported that such cases may lead to arrests, court processes, and imprisonment. KIIs with probation and gender officers in Abim District also confirmed that cases are referred to police, courts, and partner organisations like FIDA, Uganda

Women's Network, and UN Women. Police further noted that they follow up on cases to ensure agreed actions are implemented. This shows that formal institutions play an important but secondary role, mostly handling complex cases.

In terms of outcomes, the system uses both formal and informal punishments. FGDs from Kangole, Moruita, and Kiru highlighted formal actions such as arrest and imprisonment, alongside informal penalties like fines, compensation, and community punishment. KIIs with cultural leaders and LC1s confirmed that offenders may be fined (e.g., livestock) or required to compensate victims. This reflects a blended justice system, where customary and legal approaches exist side by side.

Across both FGDs and KIIs, mediation is the most common approach to handle cases of violence against women. Many actors, including police, LC1s, and community leaders, reported using mediation to restore harmony. There is also strong emphasis on awareness creation, with stakeholders conducting community dialogues, rights education, and sensitization. Counselling and psychosocial support are provided by religious leaders, CSOs, and district officials.

However, some gaps are evident. The heavy reliance on mediation, even in serious cases of violence against women, raises concerns about whether women receive fair justice. Evidence suggests that survivors may be encouraged to reconcile with perpetrators, which can weaken accountability. In addition, referral systems are not well structured, and approaches differ across locations. This shows that while the system is accessible and community-based, it remains inconsistent and fragmented, which may affect the protection of women's rights.

[Availability of guidelines and policies on how to handle cases](#)

Findings from the KIIs shows that different actors use a mix of formal and informal guidelines when handling cases of violence against women. The type of guideline followed depends on the role of the institution or individual.

At the formal level, government officials, police, and civil society organizations use clear laws and policies. These include the Constitution of Uganda, the Domestic Violence Act, the Penal Code, and gender-related guidelines. For example, the Gender Officer and police confirmed that they follow national laws and have been trained to handle such cases. The Community Development Officer (CDO) also uses structured guidelines such as child protection policies, case management procedures, and safety guidelines for survivors. Organizations like FIDA also follow formal procedures when managing cases. This shows that formal actors rely on standard systems that guide how cases should be handled.

At the community level, the situation is different. Many LC1 leaders and community members use local by-laws and agreed community rules. These may include fines or penalties for offenders, such as paying money for fighting. Some communities also have guidelines that promote respect

and prevent violence. However, several respondents said there are no written guidelines, and decisions are made through discussions, mediation, and agreement between the parties involved.

Cultural and religious leaders mostly rely on traditions and religious teachings. Cultural leaders said they follow customs, even if these are not written down. Religious leaders use the Bible and counselling to guide victims and resolve conflicts.

Overall, the findings show that there is a combination of legal, community, cultural, and religious approaches. However, the system is not uniform. The lack of clear and written guidelines at community level leads to differences in how cases are handled, which may affect fairness and protection for women.

Challenges faced by institutions while responding to violence cases.

Findings from KIIs shows that the ability to respond to violence against women is affected by several key challenges.

A major issue is lack of resources and logistics. Many actors, including gender officers, police, and LC1 leaders, reported limited funding, lack of transport, and long distances to reach communities. This makes it difficult to respond quickly to cases and support survivors. There are also shortages of basic tools and limited support services, such as poorly facilitated shelters.

Another challenge is weak coordination among institutions. Respondents highlighted gaps between agencies handling cases and poor collaboration at community level. Some partners do not fully participate in mediation or follow-up, which delays justice and weakens case management.

Social and cultural barriers also play a big role. These include family interference, harmful cultural practices like forced marriage, and community disruption during case handling. Many cases are reported late, reducing chances of effective intervention. Victims also face intimidation, especially from perpetrators, which discourages reporting.

Additionally, bias and negative attitudes such as lack of respect for leaders and undermining of female leaders affect fair handling of cases. Lastly, the lack of clear and consistent guidelines, especially at community level, leads to inconsistent responses.

What should justice institutions improve to make services more accessible and fairer

A major issue is access to services, especially in remote areas. Participants emphasized the need for mobile courts, mobile legal aid clinics, and transport support for survivors, as distance limits access to justice.

There is also a strong need for more information and awareness. Respondents suggested community barazas, dialogues, media campaigns, and toll-free lines to help women access information and understand their rights and where to seek help.

The findings highlight gaps in coordination and referral systems, with calls to strengthen collaboration among service providers and improve linkages between institutions.

Concerns about fairness and accountability were also raised. Participants stressed the need to avoid corruption, ensure equal treatment, and promote transparency in handling cases.

Finally, there is a need for strong enforcement, including holding perpetrators accountable through arrests and punishment.

SECTION D: ENABLERS AND GOOD PRACTICES

Existing interventions/approaches that have improved access to justice.

According to the findings from the key informant interviews, the common existing interventions and approaches to improve access to justice include the following.

The findings show that access to justice has improved through coordinated efforts by community, government, and civil society actors. Key interventions include awareness creation, community policing, mobile justice services, and multi-stakeholder collaboration. The involvement of cultural and religious leaders, along with psychosocial support services, has further strengthened trust and use of justice systems, making services more accessible and responsive to community needs

District	FGD Key findings	KII Findings	Overall recommendations
Kaabong	Awareness creation, sensitization, women's economic empowerment dramas, dialogues, bilaws, disciplinary committees, legal aid	Strengthening reporting systems, referral, pathway, legal education, Alternative dispute resolution mechanisms, Paralegals, capacity building, livelihood support	Strong alignment on awareness and empowerment with FGDs focusing on prevention and KIIs on system strengthening
Napak	Community dialogues, sensitisation, referral pathways. Bi-laws, disciplinary committees	LC level rules and fines, routine meetings, structured Government	Both emphasize community Governance, with FGDs focusing on community enforcement and KIIs on formal rules and accountability systems

Nakapiripirit District	Sensitization, radio talk shows, male engagement reporting systems, legal aid, police presence	Capacity building, GBV shelter, juvenile remand homes, coordination meetings, legal tools, sensitization	FGDs focus on prevention and awareness, while KIIs highlight service delivery and protection infrastructure gaps
Amudat	Sensitization, dialogues, safe reporting, legal aid, mobile services, norm change		FGDs emphasize community awareness, norm change, and access to juvenile services
Moroto	Mediation, reconciliation, economic empowerment, addressing alcohol abuse, family dialogues, schooling for girls		FGDs highlight social behavior change and prevention of violence at house level
Abim District	Sensitization, dialogues, safe reporting, legal aid, mobile services, norm change	Funding for justice offices, anticorruption, referral pathways, community policing, sensitization	FGDs focus on community prevention and leadership engagement, KIIs on institutional strengthening and accountability

What more can be done to improve access to justices

Across all districts, FGDs emphasize prevention of violence through community sensitization, empowerment, and local accountability mechanisms, while KIIs focused on strengthening formal justice systems through capacity building, improved coordination, anti-corruption measures, and better service delivery structures. The findings show a clear complementary relationship between community-driven prevention efforts and institutional justice system reforms, indicating that effective responses require an integrated approach addressing both social norms and system weaknesses

Theme	Key interventions/approaches identified	Contribution to access justice
Community awareness and sensitization	Community dialogues, barazas, sensitization meetings, music/dance/drama, religious sermons, NGO led awareness campaigns	Increased knowledge of rights reporting channels and willingness to seek justice, especially among women and vulnerable groups

Community policing and law enforcement	Continuous community policing, arrest of perpetrators, active police involvement	Improved trust in justice systems enhanced reporting, and deterrence of crime
Multi-stakeholder collaboration	Partnerships between police, CSOs, CDOs, LCs, development partners, cultural and religious leaders	Strengthened referral systems, coordinated response and improved services delivery
Decentralized justice systems	Mobile courts, mobile legal clinics, improved access to courts	Reduced geographical and financial barriers, bringing services closer to communities
Cultural and religious structures	Cultural meetings, religious teachings, community encouragement to seek justice, mediation and reconciliation efforts	Enhanced community acceptance, legitimacy of justice processes and social cohesion
Psychosocial support services	Counselling, guidance during outreaches	Supported survivors of GBV cases, improving reporting and case follow through
Government structures and programs	Presence of Government agencies, CDO involvement, reference to PDM	Provided institutional support, sustainability and integration of justice interventions.

Existing partnerships/mechanisms in handling violence against women

While all districts demonstrate some level of existing mechanisms and coordination, the systems vary from institution-led (Abim), hybrid multi-actor (Kaabong), community-driven (Napak), to NGO-supported (Nakapiripirit) as seen below.

District	Key actors identified	Coordination
Abim District	Gender office, CFPU (police), courts, probation office, CSOs	Abim demonstrates a formalized and institutionalized coordination system, where government justice actors work closely with social service providers and CSOs. The emphasis is on structured case management, referral, and accountability, indicating relatively strong formal system integration
Kaabong district	Police, courts, CFPU, FIDA, ADRA, STV, religious leaders, cultural institutions, radio stations	Kaabong shows a highly diversified and hybrid coordination model, integrating formal justice actors with strong NGO presence and community communication channels. The inclusion of radio and cultural institutions reflects a strong emphasis on outreach and public awareness alongside legal support and service delivery.

Napak district	Community elders, FIDA, local leaders	Napak relies heavily on informal justice mechanisms and traditional leadership structures, particularly elders. While CSO involvement (FIDA) strengthens legal support, the system is largely community-based, with limited formal institutional coordination, reflecting dependence on social norms and local authority.
Nakapiripirit District	ActionAid, Save the Children, IJM, government agencies	Nakapiripirit demonstrates a strong NGO-driven coordination system, where international and local NGOs play a major role in service delivery, awareness, and protection. Government institutions are present but appear more complementary than leading, indicating reliance on development partners for GBV response.

However, the findings from KII highlight key gaps in the mechanisms addressing violence against women in Karamoja, including weak and uneven coordination between formal institutions and community structures, limited capacity of frontline justice actors, and persistent corruption within police and courts. There are also challenges related to low legal awareness, weak referral systems, and over-reliance on informal mechanisms such as elders, which sometimes operate outside formal justice processes.

In addition, the system is constrained by inadequate resources and infrastructure, including lack of GBV shelters, juvenile facilities, and legal support tools, as well as weak survivor protection services. Limited male engagement and insufficient efforts to address harmful social norms further undermine prevention efforts.

Women satisfaction with how cases are handled.

Across all locations, women report very low satisfaction with justice case handling, mainly due to corruption, bribery, delays, high costs, weak protection, and gender bias. While LC1 structures are sometimes viewed as slightly more accessible, the formal justice system (police and courts) is widely perceived as unfair, expensive, and unreliable, leading to a strong overall trust deficit

District	Satisfaction level	Key reasons
Kaabong T/C	Not satisfied	Corruption, bribery by police, complex and costly court procedures, missing files, distrust in police and court
Kakamar T/C	Not satisfied	Bribery, bias, victim-blaming, women seen as initiators of violence
Lotome S/C	Not satisfied	Bribery, bias, inferiority treatment of women, sidelining in case handling
Kangole T/C	Not satisfied	Delays, absence of officers, lack of trust, victim blaming
Nakapiripirit T/C	Not satisfied	Bribery, paid police forms, eg PF3, high costs affecting vulnerable women
Mourita	Not satisfied	Delays, absence of officers, lack of trust, victim-blaming

Amudat T/C	Nat satisfied	Bribe demanded by police, corruption in handling cases
Abiliyep S/C	Not satisfied	Bribery, over demanding officials, delays, lack of protection after reporting
Rupa S/C	Not satisfied	Bribery (LCI and police), interference with investigations, case withholding, delays
Katikekile S/C	Not satisfied	Corruption, lack of trust, absence of protection, victim blaming, delayed cases
Aabim S/C	Moderately satisfied	Corruption in police, high court costs, better performance at LCI level

The roles of leaders/CSOs/Women groups in strengthening justice process

● Community leaders

According to KII, Community leaders, including LC officials, cultural and religious leaders, and elders, play a vital role in supporting justice processes through mobilization, mediation, awareness creation, reporting, guidance, and case follow-up. They sensitize communities on key issues, receive and handle complaints, mediate disputes, and mobilize community members for dialogues and engagement activities. In addition, they provide guidance to victims, report cases to relevant authorities, and follow up with police to ensure action is taken

● CSOs

According to KII, civil Society Organizations (CSOs) play a critical role in strengthening access to justice by providing awareness creation, legal support, referrals, advocacy, and capacity building. They sensitize communities on gender-based violence and rights, facilitate referrals for survivors, and offer legal aid services such as mobile clinics. In addition, CSOs support victims with transport and other logistics to access justice, while also training communities and advocating for the rights of women and children.

● Women Groups.

According to FGDs, Women groups play a vital role in strengthening access to justice through awareness creation, survivor support, advocacy, accountability, early case identification, and empowerment. They conduct group discussions and meetings, lead sensitisation activities including music, dance, and drama (MDD), and provide counselling and emotional support to survivors. They also accompany survivors to seek services, carry out follow-ups, create safe spaces for disclosure, and disseminate simplified legal information. In addition, women's groups advocate against gender-based violence, engage men, promote whistleblowing, and support economic empowerment initiatives such as savings groups

● Institutions

Institutions such as the police, courts, probation offices, CFPU, and CDOs play a central role in the justice system through case handling, law enforcement, coordination, referrals, and protection

services. They are responsible for investigating and handling cases, tracking perpetrators, enforcing laws, and ensuring that justice processes are followed. In addition, they coordinate with CSOs and community leaders, support referral pathways, and provide protection services to survivors.

SECTION F: RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations.

- ✚ Strengthen coordination and functionality of referral pathways. Establish clear, standardized, and well-coordinated referral systems linking community structures (LC1s, elders, women groups) with formal institutions (police, health facilities, courts, and CSOs). This should include case tracking mechanisms, defined roles, and feedback loops to ensure survivors receive timely, continuous, and comprehensive support.
- ✚ Enhance access to justice services in hard-to-reach areas. Expand decentralized services such as mobile courts, mobile legal aid clinics, and outreach programs to reduce geographical and financial barriers. Provide transport support and increase the presence of justice actors, especially in remote districts like Abim and Nakapiripirit.
- ✚ Promote community-driven norm change and male engagement. Scale up sustained community sensitization, dialogues, and behavior change interventions targeting harmful cultural practices such as early marriage and FGM. Engage men, cultural leaders, and religious leaders as key allies to shift social norms that normalize violence and discourage reporting.

Strengthen institutional capacity, accountability, and enforcement. Invest in training, resourcing, and supervision of justice actors (police, LC leaders, probation officers) to improve case handling, reduce delays, and ensure survivor-centered approaches. Address corruption, enforce existing laws consistently, and promote transparency to rebuild trust in formal justice systems.

Support women's economic empowerment and survivor protection. Promote livelihood programs, savings groups, and social protection initiatives to reduce women's economic dependency on perpetrators. At the same time, strengthen survivor protection services, including safe shelters, psychosocial support, and legal aid, to enable women to report violence safely

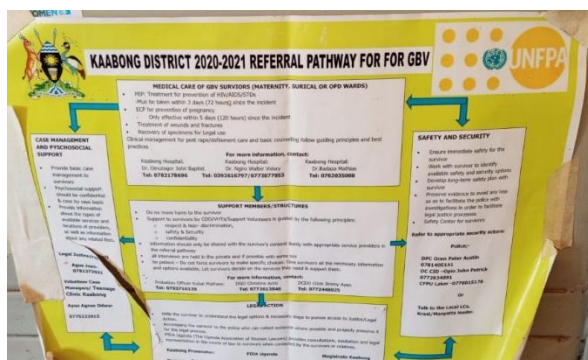


Figure 1 Referral pathway for Kaabong



Figure 2 Presence of awareness IEC materials

Annex i FGD for women

Introduction and Consent

- Introduce facilitator and purpose of the discussion.
- Explain confidentiality and voluntary participation.
- Clarify that participants do not have to share personal experiences if uncomfortable.
- Establish ground rules (respect, privacy, no judgment).
- Obtain informed consent.

Section A: Experience of GBV and Rights Violations

1. In this community, do women experience different forms of violence or mistreatment?
 - If yes, what types are most common?
2. What types of violence or rights violations are most common in this community?
 - *Probe gently: physical harm, emotional abuse, economic control, denial of property/inheritance, early or forced marriage, restriction of movement, exclusion from decision-making.*
3. Which categories of women are most affected?
 - *Young women, widows, women with disabilities, married women, separated/divorced women, etc.*
4. Are these issues increasing, decreasing, or remaining the same? Why?

Section B: Awareness of Rights and Justice-Seeking

5. What rights do women know they have in this community?
 - *Probe: right to safety, property rights, protection from violence, participation in decisions.*
6. If a woman experiences violence, what does she usually do first?
7. Where do women commonly seek help?
 - *Family members*
 - *Elders/clan leaders*
 - *Local Council*
 - *Police*
 - *Courts*
 - *Religious leaders*
 - *NGOs or women's groups*
8. What factors influence whether she reports the case or remains silent?

Section C: Barriers and Institutional Response

10. What challenges prevent women from reporting violence or seeking justice?

- Probe: stigma, fear, cost, distance, lack of knowledge, cultural norms, corruption.
11. How do justice institutions (LC leaders, police, courts) generally handle cases involving women?
 12. Are women satisfied with how cases are handled? Why or why not?
 13. What support systems exist that help women access justice?

Section D: Recommendations

14. What should be done at community level to reduce violence against women?
15. What should justice institutions improve to make services more accessible and fairer?
16. What role can women's groups play in strengthening protection and accountability?

Annex ii Key informant interview guide with the officer bearers

Introduction

- Introduce yourself and the purpose of the study.
- Clarify confidentiality and voluntary participation.
- Explain that the discussion aims to improve women's access to justice.
- Obtain consent to proceed.

SECTION A: Prevalence and Nature of GBV & Rights Violations

1. From your experience, what are the most common forms of GBV and human rights violations affecting women in this area?
 - *Probe: domestic violence, sexual violence, early/forced marriage, property grabbing, denial of inheritance, economic violence.*
2. Which categories of women are most vulnerable? Why?
3. Have you observed any trends in GBV cases over the past 2-3 years (increase/decrease)? What explains this trend?
4. Approximately how many cases does your office/institution handle per month (if applicable)?

SECTION B: Awareness, Justice-Seeking and Access Pathways

5. In your view, how aware are women of their legal rights and protection mechanisms?
6. Where do women usually report cases first? formal or informal systems? Why?
7. What proportion of cases reach formal justice institutions (police/courts)?
8. Are referral pathways between institutions clear and functional?
 - Probe: police → health → probation → court → shelters → legal aid.
9. What challenges do women face when attempting to access your services?

SECTION C: Institutional Response and Effectiveness

10. How does your institution handle GBV and women's rights cases?
 - Probe: procedures, timelines, survivor protection measures.
11. Are there specific policies or guidelines you follow when handling such cases?
12. What resource or capacity challenges affect your ability to respond effectively?
 - Probe: staffing, transport, funding, training, infrastructure.
13. How would you assess the effectiveness of justice responses for women in this area?
14. Are cases sometimes resolved informally? What are the implications?

SECTION D: Barriers, Gaps, and Systemic Issues

15. What systemic gaps exist in ensuring women's access to justice?
 - Probe: coordination gaps, weak enforcement, corruption, cultural pressures.
16. How do cultural norms influence reporting and case outcomes?
17. Are there groups of women who are particularly excluded from justice services?

SECTION E: Enablers and Good Practices

18. What interventions or approaches have improved women's access to justice in this area?
19. Are there partnerships or coordination mechanisms that are working well?
20. What role do community leaders and CSOs play in supporting justice processes?

SECTION F: Recommendations

21. What should be done to strengthen women's access to justice in Karamoja?
22. What institutional reforms or support would improve your response capacity?
23. What policy or resource changes are needed at district or national level?

