International Journal of Academic Management Science Research (IJAMSR)
ISSN: 2643-900X
Vol. 9 Issue 8 August - 2025, Pages: 27-28

Addressing Domestic Violence through University Leadership Structures in Uganda: Policy Gaps and Opportunities

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Abstract: *Domestic violence is a pervasive social issue that extends into the higher education sector, affecting both student welfare and leadership dynamics. This article examines the capacity of university leadership structures in Uganda to address domestic violence among students, with an emphasis on policy gaps and potential interventions. Using a qualitative case study design involving four universities, the study draws on interviews with student leaders, administrators, and counselors, as well as policy document reviews. Findings reveal that while universities acknowledge the existence of domestic violence, most lack explicit policies or targeted programs for prevention and response. Student leadership bodies often operate without formal training on handling domestic violence cases, leading to inconsistent and ad hoc interventions. The paper concludes with policy recommendations, including the integration of domestic violence response protocols into student governance systems and collaboration with external organizations for specialized support.*

Introduction

Domestic violence is commonly perceived as a private matter, but its effects on student academic performance, mental health, and leadership participation are well-documented (WHO, 2021). University leadership structures—both administrative and student-led—have the potential to play a pivotal role in prevention, early intervention, and survivor support. However, the extent to which they are equipped to address this issue remains underexplored in the Ugandan context.

In many Ugandan universities, student leadership bodies such as guild councils serve as both advocates for student welfare and intermediaries between students and administration. These bodies could be instrumental in addressing domestic violence, yet they often lack the policies, training, and resources necessary to intervene effectively.

Literature Review

Higher education institutions have been recognized as strategic spaces for implementing social change initiatives, including gender-based violence prevention (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2011). University leadership can act as a "policy bridge" between academic communities and broader societal structures (Banyard et al., 2007). However, in low- and middle-income countries, leadership structures in universities often face competing priorities, limited budgets, and cultural barriers that hinder proactive engagement with domestic violence issues (UNESCO, 2020). Studies in African universities highlight the tendency to treat domestic violence as an external matter, separate from campus safety (Akinlabi, 2019). This gap underscores the need for integrated policy frameworks that empower both administrative and student leaders to respond to domestic violence in ways that are survivor-centered, trauma-informed, and culturally sensitive.

Methodology: A qualitative multiple case study design was employed to explore the policy environment and leadership practices surrounding domestic violence in Ugandan universities. Sample: Four universities (two public, two private) across different regions of Uganda. Data Collection: Interviews with 24 participants: 8 student leaders, 8 university administrators, and 8 university counselors. Policy document review of student handbooks, guild constitutions, and university codes of conduct. Data Analysis: Thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns, policy gaps, and innovative practices.

Ethical considerations included anonymity of participants and secure storage of sensitive data.

Findings & Discussion

Policy Gaps: None of the universities had a standalone domestic violence policy; references to violence were usually embedded under general "disciplinary" or "security" clauses. Student leadership constitutions lacked explicit mandates to address domestic violence, leading to minimal engagement with the issue. Limited Training for Student Leaders: Most student leaders reported receiving no formal training on how to handle domestic violence cases. Responses were often improvised, relying on personal judgment rather than standardized procedures. Missed Opportunities for Collaboration. While some universities had counseling centers, there was little collaboration between these centers and student leadership bodies. Few partnerships existed with external NGOs specializing in domestic violence prevention or survivor support. Positive Practices: One private university had introduced a peer advocacy program where trained student volunteers could refer survivors to appropriate services. A public university had piloted an annual gender-based violence awareness week led by both student and administrative leaders.

Conclusion: Ugandan university leadership structures, though positioned to address domestic violence, are hindered by policy gaps, lack of training, and limited partnerships. These weaknesses result in inconsistent support for survivors and missed opportunities for prevention.

Recommendations: Develop Standalone Domestic Violence Policies that clearly outline prevention, reporting, and response procedures. Integrate Domestic Violence Response Training into student leadership induction programs. Establish Formal Partnerships between universities and specialized NGOs for survivor support services. Mandate Collaborative Committees involving student leaders, administrators, and counselors to oversee domestic violence initiatives. Promote Awareness Campaigns to challenge stigma and encourage help-seeking behavior among students.

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