

Message from the Executive Director in Support of the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence

As Uganda joins the world in commemorating the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence, we reaffirm our unwavering commitment to ending violence against women and girls. This year's theme for the United Nations' UNiTE campaign, *"Towards Beijing +30: UNiTE to End Violence Against Women and Girls,"* calls us to reflect on the progress made since the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, while also challenging us to confront the persistent barriers that women and girls continue to face in their daily lives.

In Uganda, despite the efforts made through policy frameworks and legal reforms, violence against women and girls remains a significant challenge. Whether through domestic violence, sexual harassment, child marriage, or harmful traditional practices, too many women and girls live in fear and face violence in their homes, schools, and communities. This reality is particularly stark in rural areas, where deep-rooted cultural norms, limited access to education, and poverty continue to perpetuate gender inequality and violence.

In recent years, we have seen an alarming increase in the challenges faced by women and girls, especially as climate change has become a growing threat to communities across Uganda. The effects of climate change manifested through increase in temperatures, floods, droughts, and unpredictable weather patterns are having a disproportionately negative impact on women and girls. As agriculture, the main livelihood for many, is increasingly impacted by changing climates, women, who often bear the responsibility for household farming and water collection, find themselves facing greater economic hardships.

The displacement caused by climate disasters such as floods or droughts leaves women and girls even more vulnerable to violence. In camps or temporary settlements, they face increased risks of sexual exploitation, trafficking, and abuse. These crises not only disrupt their lives but also make it harder for them to access the vital support services they need to recover from violence. Economic insecurity, exacerbated by climate-induced crop failure and food shortages, has also led to increased incidences of early marriage, as families struggling to cope marry off their daughters as a means of survival.

The intersection of gender-based violence and climate change highlights the urgent need for a more integrated response. We must acknowledge that women and girls are disproportionately affected by climate change due to their roles in managing resources like water and food, as well as their limited access to decision-making processes in both the home and the community. This lack of representation and power in climate adaptation processes leaves them vulnerable to further harm.

At the same time, climate-induced poverty and displacement has led to an increase in domestic violence, as families experience heightened stress and uncertainty. Women and girls, particularly those living in rural areas or informal settlements, find themselves at even greater risk of abuse, with few resources or support

systems available to protect them. This intersection between gender-based violence and the effects of climate change demands a holistic approach that addresses both the immediate needs of survivors and the broader systemic issues that contribute to their vulnerability.

As Uganda observes the 16 Days of Activism, we must recognize that ending gender-based violence cannot be separated from our work to address the root causes of inequality, including the impacts of climate change. The Beijing Declaration, which is celebrating its 30th anniversary this year, has laid the foundation for advancing women's rights globally. However, it is clear that to truly end violence against women and girls, we must also ensure that women are empowered to face the challenges brought about by environmental changes. This means addressing the disproportionate impact of climate change on women and girls and integrating their voices in solutions that promote environmental and social resilience.

We must strengthen legal protections for women, ensuring that they have access to justice, especially in the aftermath of climate disasters. We must ensure that women's voices are heard in climate policy discussions and decision-making processes at all levels. Women must not only be beneficiaries of climate action but also leaders in shaping the solutions that affect their lives. Moreover, we need to invest in survivor-centered support systems that provide women and girls with the necessary services to recover from violence, whether it's legal assistance, healthcare, economic empowerment, or safe spaces.

As we reflect on the UNiTE campaign's 2024 theme, "Towards Beijing +30," we are reminded that the fight against gender-based violence is not just a matter of enforcing laws or policies. It requires a societal shift that dismantles the structural barriers of inequality, acknowledges the intersectional impacts of climate change, and works collectively to create a future where women and girls can live free from violence and fear.

Now, more than ever, it is essential that we act with urgency. Together, we can build a safer, more equitable society where women and girls are not only free from violence but also empowered to lead and thrive in the face of the climate crisis.

Zurah Asanda

Paradigm for Social Justice and Development