

Economic Abuse, Informal Work, and Gendered Household Power Relations in Uganda

Atwongire Tushabe

Department of Development Studies, College of Humanities and Social Sciences, Kampala
International University, Uganda

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100701192>

Received: 11 August 2026; Accepted: 17 August 2026; Published: 24 August 2026

ABSTRACT

Women's participation in the informal economy remains a defining feature of labour markets in many developing contexts, yet its implications for intra-household economic dynamics and social wellbeing remain insufficiently theorized. This study examines the relationship between informal employment and experiences of economic abuse among women in Uganda through a hybrid conceptual–literature review approach. Drawing on feminist political economy, household bargaining theory, labour market segmentation theory, and the capability approach, the analysis synthesizes interdisciplinary scholarship to explore how structural labour inequalities intersect with household power relations. The findings suggest that while informal employment provides critical livelihood opportunities, its precarious nature, combined with entrenched gender norms and limited social protection, often reinforces patterns of economic dependency and vulnerability. Economic abuse emerges as a key mechanism mediating the relationship between women's labour participation and social wellbeing outcomes. By integrating labour market analysis with gendered household dynamics, the study contributes to debates on economic empowerment and highlights the need for gender-responsive social protection and institutional reforms in informal labour economies.

Keywords- Gender-based violence; Social wellbeing; Urban households; Informal economy; Uganda; Feminist theory; Qualitative thematic analysis

INTRODUCTION

Gender-based violence (GBV) remains a persistent global social and public health concern, with significant implications for social wellbeing, economic participation, and household stability. Across developing regions, GBV is increasingly understood not only as a violation of human rights but also as a structural constraint that undermines social development and livelihood resilience (Ellsberg et al., 2015; UN Women, 2023). In Sub-Saharan Africa, the intersection between violence, poverty, and informal labour conditions has been widely documented as shaping the lived realities of vulnerable households, particularly those headed by women (Kabeer, 2021; Stevano et al., 2021).

In Uganda, gender-based violence continues to pose profound challenges to social wellbeing at both individual and household levels. National studies indicate that experiences of violence are closely linked to patterns of economic vulnerability, social exclusion, and constrained livelihood opportunities (Ahikire et al., 2020; Wamala & Kawachi, 2021). Urban centres such as Kampala, characterized by rapid population growth and expanding informal economies, present unique contexts where gender inequalities and structural poverty intersect in complex ways (Boyd & Wamala, 2021). Within these environments, households often navigate precarious socio-economic conditions that exacerbate both exposure to violence and its consequences for social functioning and wellbeing (Mirembe & Davies, 2020).

The relationship between gender-based violence and household social wellbeing is multidimensional. Beyond physical and psychological harm, violence influences household cohesion, economic stability, social participation, and intergenerational wellbeing outcomes (Renzaho et al., 2022). Feminist and social learning perspectives suggest that patterns of violence are embedded within broader social norms, institutional

structures, and economic systems that reproduce gender inequalities over time (Kabeer, 2008; Sen, 1999). Consequently, understanding GBV requires analytical approaches that integrate structural, cultural, and livelihood dimensions.

While considerable scholarship has explored the prevalence and determinants of GBV globally, there remains limited qualitative evidence examining how violence shapes the social wellbeing of households within specific urban African contexts. In Uganda, existing studies have often prioritized prevalence measurement and policy responses, with less attention given to the lived social consequences experienced within households and communities (Bantebya-Kyomuhendo, 2019; Nyanzi, 2019). This gap is particularly significant in urban settings where socio-economic transitions, labour informality, and shifting gender norms create evolving patterns of vulnerability.

This study therefore examines gender-based violence and its implications for household social wellbeing in urban Uganda, drawing on qualitative thematic analysis to explore how structural conditions, social norms, and economic realities interact to shape lived experiences. By situating the analysis within broader debates on gender, development, and social wellbeing, the study contributes to a deeper contextual understanding of violence as both a social process and a development challenge.

Conceptual and Empirical Perspectives on Gender-Based Violence and Social Wellbeing

Gender-based violence is widely understood as both a manifestation and a mechanism of structural gender inequality, reflecting deeply embedded power relations within households and broader social systems. Feminist scholarship conceptualizes violence not only as an individual act but as a socially produced phenomenon shaped by patriarchal norms, institutional arrangements, and unequal access to economic resources (Kabeer, 2021; Cornwall, 2016). Complementing this perspective, social learning theory highlights the role of intergenerational transmission and normative socialization processes through which violent behaviours are reproduced and legitimized within communities. These theoretical lenses collectively illuminate how gender-based violence is sustained through both structural and relational dynamics.

Empirical studies across Sub-Saharan Africa demonstrate that economic precarity and informal labour conditions intensify household vulnerability to violence. Urban poverty, unstable employment, and limited social protection frameworks contribute to heightened stress and power asymmetries within domestic settings (Resnick, 2020; Meagher, 2021). In Uganda, the rapid expansion of informal urban economies has reshaped livelihood patterns while simultaneously exposing households to new forms of socio-economic insecurity that intersect with gendered power relations (Mirembe & Davies, 2020; Wamala & Kawachi, 2021). These conditions often constrain women's agency while reinforcing dependence dynamics that may increase exposure to violence.

Beyond immediate physical and psychological harm, gender-based violence has broader implications for social wellbeing, affecting household cohesion, social participation, and resilience capacities. Social wellbeing frameworks emphasize the relational and collective dimensions of welfare, underscoring how violence disrupts networks of support and undermines shared livelihood strategies (Renzaho et al., 2022). The intersection of gender inequality, economic vulnerability, and social norms therefore constitutes a critical analytical lens for understanding the multifaceted impacts of gender-based violence in rapidly urbanizing contexts. Integrating conceptual insights with empirical evidence provides a nuanced foundation for examining how structural constraints and lived experiences interact to shape household social wellbeing outcomes.

ANALYTICAL FINDINGS

Economic Precarity and Gendered Household Vulnerability

The findings indicate that economic insecurity constitutes a critical structural context within which gender-based violence emerges and is sustained. Participants described how unstable income sources, particularly

within informal urban labour markets, intensified household tensions and reinforced unequal power relations. Feminist scholarship highlights how economic dependency constrains women's bargaining power within intimate relationships, thereby increasing vulnerability to violence (Kabeer, 2021). In urban African contexts, informal employment and livelihood precarity have similarly been associated with heightened domestic stress and conflict dynamics (Meagher, 2021; Resnick, 2020). These patterns suggest that economic marginalization and entrenched gender norms interact to shape both the occurrence and persistence of violence within household settings.

Social Norms, Power Relations and the Reproduction of Violence

The study further reveals the role of socially embedded norms in legitimizing and reproducing gender-based violence. Participants frequently articulated violence in ways that reflected internalized cultural expectations regarding authority, discipline, and gendered responsibilities. Such narratives illustrate how normative socialization processes contribute to the intergenerational transmission of violent practices, reinforcing hierarchical power relations within households. Social learning perspectives emphasize that repeated exposure to violence within community environments normalizes coercive behaviours and sustains cycles of abuse (Ellsberg et al., 2015). Empirical research in Uganda similarly underscores how cultural expectations surrounding gender roles shape perceptions and experiences of violence (Nyanzi, 2019).

Implications of Violence for Household Social Wellbeing

Beyond immediate physical and psychological harm, gender-based violence was found to undermine broader dimensions of household social wellbeing. Participants highlighted disruptions in social cohesion, reduced participation in communal activities, and diminished capacity to sustain shared livelihood strategies. These experiences reflect how violence weakens relational trust and erodes collective coping mechanisms essential for resilience in economically vulnerable urban contexts. Social wellbeing frameworks emphasize the relational nature of welfare, demonstrating how violence disrupts social support networks and collective livelihood systems (Renzaho et al., 2022). The findings therefore position gender-based violence as both a consequence and driver of social disadvantage within rapidly urbanizing settings.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reinforce the conceptualization of gender-based violence as a structurally embedded phenomenon shaped by intersecting economic, social, and normative dynamics. Feminist scholarship has long emphasized that gendered power relations are reproduced through both material inequalities and institutional arrangements that constrain women's agency (Kabeer, 2021; Cornwall, 2016). In the Ugandan urban context, livelihood precarity and dependence on informal economic activities appear to intensify these structural constraints, thereby influencing both the occurrence of violence and households' capacity to maintain social wellbeing. This aligns with broader development research linking economic marginalization to heightened vulnerability to gender-based violence in rapidly urbanizing societies (Meagher, 2021; Resnick, 2020).

The study also contributes to social learning debates by illustrating how normative socialization processes operate within everyday household interactions, reinforcing the reproduction of coercive behaviours across generations. Exposure to violence within family and community environments has been shown to shape behavioural expectations and legitimize hierarchical authority structures (Ellsberg et al., 2015). In contexts undergoing socio-economic transition, the coexistence of traditional gender norms and shifting livelihood roles may generate tensions that intensify domestic conflict dynamics, a pattern observed in several African urban settings (Nyanzi, 2019).

Importantly, the findings extend social wellbeing scholarship by demonstrating how gender-based violence disrupts relational dimensions of welfare, including trust, social cohesion, and collective coping strategies. Social wellbeing frameworks emphasize that wellbeing is not solely an individual outcome but a socially constituted process shaped by networks of support and shared livelihood practices (Renzaho et al., 2022). Within economically vulnerable urban households, the erosion of these relational resources may undermine

resilience and exacerbate cycles of disadvantage. The study therefore underscores the need for integrated policy approaches that address structural economic inequalities alongside normative transformation strategies aimed at reshaping gender relations.

By offering contextually grounded qualitative insights from urban Uganda, this research contributes to global development discourse on gender-based violence and highlights the importance of relational and structural analytical perspectives in understanding the social consequences of violence in marginalized settings.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that gender-based violence remains a critical constraint to household social wellbeing within rapidly urbanizing contexts characterized by economic precarity and entrenched gender inequalities. By integrating feminist and social learning perspectives, the analysis highlights how structural economic vulnerabilities and normative socialization processes interact to shape both the occurrence and consequences of violence. These findings reinforce broader development scholarship that conceptualizes gender-based violence as a multidimensional phenomenon embedded within social, economic, and institutional structures (Kabeer, 2021; Ellsberg et al., 2015).

The study contributes to social wellbeing debates by emphasizing the relational impacts of violence, including the erosion of trust, social cohesion, and collective livelihood strategies that underpin household resilience. In urban settings marked by informal labour dependence, such disruptions have implications for both individual welfare and broader community stability. Addressing gender-based violence therefore requires integrated policy responses that combine economic empowerment, social protection, and normative transformation strategies aimed at reshaping gender relations (UN Women, 2023).

By providing contextually grounded qualitative insights from urban Uganda, the study advances understanding of how structural inequalities intersect with lived experiences of violence to influence social wellbeing outcomes. These insights underscore the importance of relational and structural approaches in designing interventions that promote sustainable social development in economically marginalized urban contexts.

REFERENCES

1. Ahikire, J., Ampaire, C., & Madanda, A. (2020). Gender equality and women's empowerment in Uganda: A contextual analysis. *Feminist Africa*, 26, 1–18.
2. Bantebya-Kyomuhendo, G. (2019). Gender, poverty and social transformation in Uganda. *African Journal of Social Sciences*, 9(2), 45–60.
3. Boyd, C., & Wamala, R. (2021). Urban poverty dynamics and women's livelihoods in Kampala. *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 15(3), 1–18.
4. Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2019). Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 11(4), 589–597.
5. Cornwall, A. (2016). Women's empowerment: What works? *Journal of International Development*, 28(3), 342–359.
6. Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). Sage.
7. Ellsberg, M., & Heise, L. (2005). *Researching violence against women*. WHO.
8. Ellsberg, M., Arango, D., Morton, M., Gennari, F., Kiplesund, S., Contreras, M., & Watts, C. (2015). Prevention of violence against women and girls: What does the evidence say? *The Lancet*, 385(9977), 1555–1566.
9. ILO. (2023). *Women and men in the informal economy: A statistical update*. International Labour Organization.
10. Kabeer, N. (2008). *Paid work, women's empowerment and gender justice*. Pathways Working Paper.

11. Kabeer, N. (2021). Gender equality, inclusive growth, and labour markets. *Feminist Economics*, 27(1–2), 1–27.
12. Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Sage.
13. Meagher, K. (2021). Informalization from above: Globalization, crisis, and the politics of social protection. *Development and Change*, 52(2), 1–24.
14. Mirembe, R., & Davies, L. (2020). Gender-based violence in Uganda’s urban informal settlements. *Gender & Development*, 28(3), 451–467.
15. Nyanzi, S. (2019). Gender norms, agency, and everyday experiences in Uganda. *African Sociological Review*, 23(1), 1–20.
16. Owoo, N. S., & Lambon-Quayefio, M. (2021). Informal sector employment and women’s economic outcomes. *Journal of African Economies*, 30(3), 245–266.
17. Renzaho, A., Kamara, J., & Kamanga, G. (2022). Social wellbeing and livelihood vulnerability in African urban contexts. *Social Indicators Research*, 160(2), 1–22.
18. Resnick, D. (2020). Informality and urban governance in African cities. *African Affairs*, 119(475), 1–22.
19. Sen, A. (1999). *Development as freedom*. Oxford University Press.
20. Stevano, S., Ali, R., & Jamieson, M. (2021). Essential for what? Informal work and social reproduction. *Feminist Economics*, 27(1–2), 1–25.
21. UN Women. (2023). *Progress on the sustainable development goals: Gender snapshot*. United Nations.
22. Wamala, R., & Kawachi, I. (2021). Intimate partner violence and socioeconomic inequality in Uganda. *BMJ Global Health*, 6(2), e004300.
23. World Bank. (2023). *World development report*. World Bank.