

Sport and Abuse in Uganda

Subjects: Social Issues

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Uganda, officially known as the Republic of Uganda, is a landlocked country in east central Africa and is one of the 49 sub-Saharan countries. It is bordered by Kenya in the east, the Democratic Republic of Congo in the west, South Sudan in the north and Tanzania and Rwanda in the south and southwest, respectively. It is also known as the 'Pearl of Africa', which is an expression affiliated to Winston Churchill who used it to describe the country's flora and fauna. There are 49 ethnic groups in Uganda.

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1. The History of Sport in Uganda

Sport has a rich and diverse history in Uganda, dating back to ancient times when indigenous games and competitions were a prominent part of the culture. However, the modern history of sports in Uganda began to take shape during the colonial era when British colonialists introduced various sports, such as cricket, rugby, and athletics. The country's first sports clubs and facilities were established during this period. Post-independence, in 1962, Uganda gained recognition on the global sports stage when John Akii-Bua won the 400 m hurdles gold medal at the 1972 Munich Olympics, marking a significant milestone in the nation's sporting history ([Uganda Olympic Committee 2020](#)). Since then, Uganda has continued to make strides in various sports, with a growing emphasis on football, athletics, boxing, and rugby ([Wood 2014](#)). This historical backdrop has contributed to the development of a vibrant sports culture in the country, which continues to evolve to this day.

In contemporary Uganda, sport continues to hold a special place in the hearts of its citizens. Football, in particular, is a national obsession, with local clubs such as Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA) and SC Villa enjoying widespread support. Cricket and rugby also have dedicated followings, and athletics has produced several world-class athletes, including Stephen Kiprotich, who won the marathon at the 2012 London Olympics. Moreover, there has been a concerted effort to promote sports participation among children and young people in Uganda, with numerous sports development programs and initiatives aimed at nurturing talent and fostering a healthy lifestyle.

In terms of current sports participation rates among children and young people in Uganda, there has been a noticeable increase in recent years. The government, along with various non-governmental organizations and sporting bodies, has been actively promoting sports at the grassroots level to harness and nurture young talent ([Athletics World 2018](#)). Schools across the country now include sports programmes as part of their curriculum, ensuring that children have opportunities to engage in physical activities and discover their sporting interests. Furthermore, the growth of community sports clubs, especially in urban areas, has provided young Ugandans with access to more structured and competitive sports environments. As a result, there has been a rise in the number of children and young people participating in sports, both at the recreational and competitive levels.

To provide some data on sports participation rates among children and young people in Uganda, recent surveys conducted by the Ministry of Education, Sports, and Culture indicate that approximately 70% of primary and secondary school students actively participate in various sports and physical activities. This is a significant increase compared with previous decades. Additionally, data from the Uganda Bureau of Statistics reveals that youth involvement in organized sports clubs and leagues has seen a steady rise, with nearly 40% of young people aged 15 to 24 engaging in such activities. These statistics reflect a growing enthusiasm for sports among Uganda's youth, highlighting the potential for further development and success on both national and international sporting stages ([Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture 2017](#); [UNICEF 2018](#)).

2. Abuse and Maltreatment in Uganda

Violence and abuse in Uganda remain significant challenges, affecting various segments of the population. Domestic violence, particularly against women and children, is prevalent, with alarming rates of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, ([UNICEF 2020](#)). According to the first ever national survey on violence against children in Uganda, 3 in 4 young adults experienced some form of violence during childhood. One in three young adults experienced at least two forms of violence of either a sexual, physical or emotional nature during their childhood. Half of all 18-to-24-year-old Ugandans believe it is acceptable for a man to beat his wife ([UNICEF 2018](#)). Additionally, the country grapples with political violence, human rights violations, and armed conflict in certain regions, leading to the displacement of communities and a cycle of violence ([Human Rights Watch 2020](#)). Efforts to address these issues have been made through legislative measures and civil society organizations' advocacy, yet the fight against violence and abuse in Uganda continues to be an ongoing struggle ([Amnesty International 2020](#)). Child labour, child marriage, and female genital mutilation (FGM) also remain pervasive issues. The United Nations and various NGOs are actively engaged in efforts to combat these problems and promote human rights in Uganda, but sustained commitment and comprehensive strategies are needed to bring about lasting change.

Annually, at least 35 per cent of Ugandan girls and 16 percent of Ugandan boys between 13 and 17 years of age experience sexual violence ([UVACS 2018](#)). Moreover, more than 8 million Ugandan children are considered vulnerable to various forms of maltreatment, of which sexual violence is experienced by 26 girls daily ([UNICEF 2019](#)). This may result in physical injury, mental distress, self-harm, contemplation of suicide and sexually transmitted infections ([UVACS 2018](#)). Research suggests that, among other causal factors for the rampant child abuse and children's rights violations prevalent in Uganda, the low overall prioritization of child protection and children's rights and the cultural differences regarding child protection play important roles ([Renzaho et al. 2018](#)).

3. Sport, Abuse and Maltreatment in Uganda

The discourse around sport is one within which children's rights may be defied. Among other variables, the sport ethic of emotional, mental, and physical toughness for winning at all costs leaves participants vulnerable to abuse ([Brackenridge 2002](#)). Different terms (e.g., abuse, interpersonal violence, exploitation) are used to describe harms children may experience in sociocultural settings such as sport ([Blakemore et al. 2017](#); [Rhind and Owusu-Sekyere 2017](#); [Stirling 2009](#)). The all-encompassing term "maltreatment" is often used to describe a range of harmful behaviours and acts towards children ([Fortier et al. 2020](#); [Gattis and Moore 2022](#)). Emerging evidence over the past three decades demonstrates that children who play sports are subjected to various forms of maltreatment across different countries and competitive levels ([Rhind and Owusu-Sekyere 2017](#)). There is evidence of sexual abuse ([Bjørnseth and Szabo 2018](#); [Fasting et al. 2004](#)), emotional abuse ([Gervis et al. 2016](#); [Rhind et al. 2015a](#)), physical abuse ([Alexander et al. 2011](#); [Vertommen et al. 2016](#)), neglect ([McPherson et al. 2017](#); [Rhind et al. 2015b](#)), and bullying ([Evans et al. 2016](#)).

Despite the inherent subjectivity of the topic, which highlights the need for diverse study populations and locations, most of the extant literature on maltreatment in sport as emerged from Europe and North America. A 2021 study found that Ghanaian, Indian, and Brazilian athletes navigate multi-layered and highly contextual interpersonal and systemic forms of maltreatment that can be qualitatively different from that experienced by athletes from the Global North ([Rutland et al. 2022](#)). These and other data emphasize the importance of sampling geo-culturally diverse sport stakeholders—especially from under resourced settings such as sub-Saharan Africa ([Mkumbuzi et al. 2021](#))—and integrating first-person perspectives into sport safeguarding policies, programmes and interventions tailored to local contexts.

In Uganda, much of the sport-related research on sport for development themes (i.e., employment, empowerment, gender equity, and personal development through sport), and on the degree and magnitude of maltreatment against athletes is unknown ([Hayhurst 2013](#); [Hayhurst et al. 2014](#)). While the Uganda Olympic Committee has instituted several federation-specific policies, codes of conduct, rules, and regulations to prevent athlete maltreatment ([Amoding 2021](#); [USF 2018](#)), many cases of abuse still go unreported and safeguarding processes remain largely incomplete ([Raising Voices 2017](#)). The International Safeguards for Children and Sport are a set of actions that youth-serving sport organizations can implement to ensure participants' safety. This framework provides a mechanism for safeguarding strategies to be developed in various local contexts ([Mountjoy et al. 2015](#)), but knowledge is limited regarding the best way to translate this framework for Global South sports settings ([Brackenridge et al. 2012](#); [Rhind et al. 2017](#)).

Some studies ([Rutland et al. 2022](#)) suggest that athletes who live in countries with fewer resources may have different priorities and experiences related to maltreatment. However, this is impossible to confirm, given the scarcity of accessible empirical data. To our knowledge, since the mid-2000s, only two peer-reviewed empirical studies on maltreatment in sport

have originated from Africa (Zambia, Kenya). Thus, the prevalence and consequences of interpersonal violence on youth athletes in African sport contexts is not well known. In Zambia, [Solstad and Strandbu \(2019\)](#) found that (i) unequal power relations in sport (often gendered, where girls were seen as more vulnerable and exposed to 'devastating' risks such as unsolicited sex and unplanned pregnancies, though this is also non-gendered, i.e., hierarchical cultures of silence), (ii) coaching ideals (misguided ways of motivating athletes), and (iii) athletic ideals (being tough and more resilient as a point of pride) in their sport culture, were the primary threats and risks related to maltreatment. These threats and risks in sport were also situated within the wider local context. Authors conclude that "safeguarding in sport continues to exist in the tension between protecting athletes from harm on the one hand and subscribing to a culture that promotes the ideals 'faster, higher, stronger' on the other" and that there is a "need to discuss critically how glorification of toughness and resilience might contribute to normalize harmful practices in sport".

In Kenya, [Rintaugu et al. \(2014\)](#) found that, of 339 university female athletes, 64.4% had experienced sexual harassment, the most common forms of which were sexually offensive looks, comments, and unwanted comments on attractiveness in public. The majority of perpetrators were spectators, with sexual harassment occurring mostly on the playing fields. Physical complaints after these episodes included headache, fatigue and insomnia, and the majority of athletes sampled did not know whether their universities had any policy specific to maltreatment in sport.

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