

Bridging the Justice Gap: Actionable Solutions for Domestic Violence Survivors in Uganda



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Dedicated to people-centred justice

This study was co-funded by the European Union and German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ). HiiL is grateful to the Governance and Security Programme - Justice, Law and Order Secretariat (JLOS) at the Ministry of Justice and Constitutional Affairs, for their partnership and technical support throughout the project.



Informal Justice Provider Workshop, Kampala, March 2026

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Executive Summary

Domestic violence is one of the most severe and frequent justice problems in Uganda. HiiL's 2024 Justice Needs and Satisfaction (JNS) survey data revealed that four out of every ten adult Ugandan women had experienced domestic violence in the previous year. These unresolved disputes carry devastating physical and societal consequences. According to the Uganda Police Force, 208 lives were lost to domestic violence in 2025 alone. Despite the progressive framework of the Domestic Violence Act of 2010, a profound gap still exists between the protections provided on paper and the daily reality of survivors navigating the justice system.

To begin to bridge this gap, this report applied a people-centred justice (PCJ) lens, shifting the focus away from institutional metrics to prioritise the justice seeker's actual needs and lived reality. Drawing on three years of JNS quantitative data; 45 in-depth qualitative interviews with domestic violence survivors and justice practitioners; and participatory workshops with formal and informal justice practitioners, the research explores the complex journeys of survivors and offers actionable solutions to improve justice delivery.

Survivors' reality: complex justice journeys

When survivors seek help, they face cultural barriers, intense stigma, and heavy hidden costs that frequently lead to case abandonment. Those who persist are forced to navigate a complex justice system, often trapped in exhausting referral loops between Local Councils (LCs), police, and medical facilities without clear guidance.

The research reveals a disconnect between the process of justice and the outcome. While justice providers frequently treat survivors with respect and grant them a voice, yielding high process satisfaction, the system often fails to deliver safe, enforceable resolutions. Survivors are trapped in an arrest paradox, where economic dependence on the perpetrator often forces them to avoid formal prosecution and accept unsafe, temporary reconciliations.

Simultaneously, informal justice practitioners push for reconciliation to maintain social harmony and formal practitioners do so to manage caseloads and judicial backlogs.

This creates an enforcement dilemma. Apologies and commitment letters are largely unenforceable: informal practitioners lack the legal authority to enforce, and formal practitioners lack the operational capacity. As a result, the perpetrators often resume the abuse, leaving survivors in dangerous situations.

Co-designed solutions for people-centred justice

Closing the justice gap does not require designing and funding an entirely new justice system, but rather, re-thinking and re-designing it to work as intended. During participatory workshops, Ugandan justice practitioners collaboratively brainstormed actionable solutions to address the gaps revealed by the data. This report translates those insights into four strategic priorities for policymakers:

- **Countering stigma and decreasing costs:** Actively counter the cultural narratives that blame survivors for "destroying" their families, and systematically eliminate the hidden costs of reporting abuse to ensure justice is genuinely accessible.
- **Streamlining the justice journey:** Improve confusing referral loops by developing "one-stop centres" and bridging the formal-informal divide by linking informal community referrals to formal digital tracking systems.

- **Prioritising desired outcomes and equipping frontline justice practitioners:** Shift away from unenforceable outcomes towards lasting resolutions backed by structured follow-ups. To achieve this, support LCs, Elders, and other community practitioners with standardised "Justice Toolkits", modest operational budgets, and recognition programmes.
- **Linking justice to economic empowerment:** Integrate livelihood support, skills training, and startup capital directly into the justice response. Removing financial vulnerability is essential to preventing survivors from being forced to accept unsafe reconciliations.
- **Shifting to proactivity and continuous data collection:** Move from a reactive model to proactive, early-intervention community protection. Sustain this progress by continuously collecting people-centred data to ensure policies remain aligned with the people's evolving realities.

True people-centred justice means ensuring that no survivor is ever forced to choose between their economic survival and their fundamental right to a life free from violence.

1.

Introduction

Domestic violence is not a marginal issue in Uganda, it is a widespread, persistent, and escalating problem. HiiL's Justice Needs and Satisfaction surveys (JNS) consistently demonstrate that domestic violence is one of the most severe and frequent justice problems faced by Ugandans.¹ In the 2020 JNS, when people were asked to identify their most serious legal problem, domestic violence was by far the most common, with 42% of

people who reported justice problems stating that it was the most serious. This was significantly higher than the other problem categories, such as land disputes (14%) and family problems (10%). The nature of this violence is multifaceted and complex. The 2020 data reveals that survivors suffer equally from emotional abuse (33%) and physical abuse (33%), followed by intimidation (22%), and severe economic deprivation (8%).

Physical and sexual abuse against women within the household context

The 2024 JNS revealed that domestic violence is notably higher among women and young people (ages 18-39), with the Eastern region showing the highest incidence. Approximately 41% of Ugandan women who report legal problems have experienced domestic violence in the previous year, equating to about 39% of all Ugandan women. In other words, four out of ten Ugandan adult women have experienced some form of domestic violence in the past year.

Source: Policy Brief: Evidence-based, people-centred justice in Uganda, 2024, HiiL and Uganda Governance and Security Programme

¹ This report will focus on three JNS surveys conducted in Uganda in 2016, 2020, and 2024. To read all of the JNS surveys conducted in Uganda see: [hiil.org/research/justice-needs-and-satisfaction-in-uganda](https://www.hiil.org/research/justice-needs-and-satisfaction-in-uganda).

² HiiL & Uganda Governance and Security Programme (JLOS) Secretariat (2024). *Evidence-based, people-centred justice in Uganda. Policy Brief*. <https://www.hiil.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Policy-brief-JNS-and-Justice-Leaders-Forum.pdf>

While domestic violence affects all demographics, the JNS data consistently reveals a disparity among men and women. In the 2016 JNS survey, women represented 73% of those reporting a domestic violence problem, while in 2024 they represented 62% of those reporting it.

The roots of this violence are deeply embedded in societal structures. In Uganda, domestic violence is often driven by economic dependence, patriarchal cultural norms, and disputes over property and land.³ When domestic violence problems are left unresolved, the consequences can be fatal. According to the 2025 Annual Crime Report, published by the Uganda Police Force, 208 people lost their lives to domestic violence in 2025 alone.⁴ This is a 13.7% increase from 2024, indicating a growing crisis driven by unresolved disputes, economic stress, and a lack of effective interventions.

In an effort to combat this crisis, the Ugandan government passed the Domestic Violence Act (DVA) in 2010.⁵ This legislation was a critical milestone as it explicitly criminalised

intimate partner violence (IPV). The Act provides a comprehensive definition of domestic violence, recognising not only physical and sexual violence, but also emotional, psychological, and economic abuse. It established penalties for perpetrators and officially mandated specific avenues for survivors to seek justice and protection. However, while the DVA provides a robust legal foundation, the translation of this law into actual protection has remained limited. A gap still exists between the provisions of the Act and the daily reality of survivors and justice providers.

When survivors in Uganda seek help, they navigate a complex dual-track justice system composed of both formal and informal actors, each with distinct benefits and limitations in how they respond to domestic violence. The formal system pathways available to survivors are primarily through the Uganda Police Force (specifically the Child and Family Protection Unit) and the Magistrate Courts. Because the formal system can often be geographically distant or complex to navigate, the vast majority of survivors

turn first to informal, community-based justice mechanisms. This pathway includes Local Council Courts/ Local Councils, traditional elders, and religious leaders. Operating at the grassroots level, these actors serve as the most accessible, affordable, and culturally familiar starting points for dispute resolution.

Understanding why survivors choose the pathway they do, and where they experience friction as they navigate between them, is the central focus of this research. Recognising this dynamic, this report seeks to understand survivors' experiences through the collection and analysis of people-centred data, and move towards brainstorming actionable solutions.

Project Approach and Operationalisation

At its core, people-centred justice (PCJ) shifts the focus away from institutions and instead, places the justice seeker at the centre. A PCJ approach demands that justice is accessible, affordable, easy to understand, and, importantly, capable of delivering fair, lasting outcomes that allow people to safely move on with their lives. By applying this PCJ lens to the Ugandan context, this report evaluates not just how the justice systems function (both formal and informal), but whether they actually solve the problems survivors face. A full overview of the conceptual framework can be found in Annex 2.

The project's model operates under the premise that survivors assess their justice experiences based on four primary factors: process fairness (including voice, neutrality, and respect), fair and applicable outcomes (whether the problem is resolved and enforced), timeliness, and costs.

3 Muwonge, J., & Ahumuza, A. (2025). *Gender Inequality And Family Stability In Rakai District: A Case Study Of Ddwaniro Sub County*. Metropolitan Journal of Academic Multidisciplinary Research (MJAMR). https://www.journals.miu.ac.ug/pages/article.php?article_id=71; Ogland, E. G., Xu, X., Bartkowski, J. P., & Ogland, C. P. (2014). *Intimate Partner Violence Against Married Women in Uganda*. Journal of Family Violence, 29(8), 869–879. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10896-014-9640-3>.

4 Uganda Police Force (2025). *Annual Crime Report 2025*. upf.go.ug/download/annual-crime-report-2025.

5 Government of Uganda (2010). *Domestic Violence Act, 2010, Chapter 123*. <https://ulii.org/en/akn/ug/act/2010/3/eng@2010-04-09>.

What is people-centred justice?

According to the OECD Framework and Good Practice Principles for People-Centred Justice⁶:

A people-centred justice system aims to put people and their legal and justice needs at the centre of the justice system. This means that people-centred justice systems focus – as a priority – on understanding and meeting the legal and justice needs of all people as they experience them, whether or not they recognise those needs as having a legal dimension; and on generating fair outcomes and opportunities to contribute to the overall health and well-being of society, inclusive growth, and the quality of democratic governance. This requires putting people at the centre of justice system reforms and transformations, and developing people-centred justice pathways to ensure that all members of society ultimately have equal access to justice services and legal information. That in turn calls for:

- understanding what exactly people's needs and experiences are
- developing and implementing policies and services that meet those needs, and removing barriers to access as part of a holistic vision for a people-centred justice ecosystem.

⁶ OECD (2021). *OECD Framework and Good Practice Principles for People-Centred Justice*. <https://doi.org/10.1787/cdc3bde7-en>.



To operationalise this framework, we employed the following key definitions:

Domestic Violence⁷: A type of legal problem characterised by physical, sexual, psychological, or emotional abuse occurring between people in a close relationship. A key element is the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator. This most commonly refers to violence between:

- Intimate partners, whether married, cohabiting, or dating.
- Family members, such as violence against children, parents, or elders.
- Other members of a household.
- Psychological and Emotional Abuse: This includes intimidation, threats, coercion, humiliation, and controlling behaviour that undermines a person's sense of self-worth and security.
- Sexual Abuse: Any form of non-consensual sexual contact.
- Economic Abuse: Controlling or withholding financial resources to limit a person's independence.

Types of domestic violence include:

- Physical Abuse: Acts causing physical harm, such as hitting, slapping, pushing, or using weapons.

⁷ Inter-Agency Standing Committee (2015). *Guidelines for Integrating Gender-Based Violence Interventions in Humanitarian Action: Reducing Risk, promoting resilience and aiding recovery*. <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/working-group/iasc-guidelines-integrating-gender-based-violence-interventions-humanitarian-action-2015>.

Justice User: Anyone who has experienced a legal problem, regardless of whether they actively seek resolution, attempt to resolve it on their own, or take no action at all.

Justice Provider: An individual or organisation systematically involved in resolving legal problems. This includes both:

- Formal Justice Providers: entities sanctioned by the state and operating within the established legal framework, including formal courts, police, and state prosecutors.
- Informal Justice Providers⁸: this includes a wide range of individuals and community-based resources that people trust and utilise to resolve disputes. These often operate outside of the formal legal system but are crucial for access to justice in many communities. Examples include: Local Council Courts (LCCs), cultural and religious leaders, and community elders.

Justice Outcomes⁹: A positive result or change in well-being that a person with a legal problem achieves through the resolution process. This is the quality and impact of the justice journey and its resolution from the perspective of the user.

General justice outcomes include:

- Understanding what happened
- Acknowledgement of role or responsibility
- Fair distribution of resources or responsibilities
- Damage restoration
- Relational restoration

“What works best” or best practices:

We define “what works best” as the effectiveness of an intervention is not judged by institutional metrics (for example: case clearance rates) but from the survivor’s perspective. “What works best” is therefore defined by the principles of people-centered justice. An intervention is considered effective if it delivers:

- A fair process (e.g., feeling heard, being treated with respect, receives clarity).
- A fair and sustainable outcome (e.g., safety is ensured, the resolution is enforced).
- Timely resolution.
- Affordable and proportionate costs, considering the financial, emotional, and time investment required from the user.

⁸ Despite Local Councils being part of the government structure and having legal recognition, the research considers them as informal structures because of how they operate in practice, the nature of the justice they deliver at the grassroots level, and their position outside of the formal judiciary.

⁹ Read more about justice outcomes: dashboard.hiil.org/publications/focusing-on-outcomes-for-people.



Research Questions

To move beyond simply identifying the problem toward building actionable solutions, this research was guided by four key questions:

1. What do victims of domestic violence need, expect and receive from formal and informal justice in Uganda?

The goal is to understand the gap between what domestic violence survivors want and need from the justice system, and what they currently experience. These needs and experiences were assessed based on four primary factors: process, outcomes, timeliness, and costs.

2. Which interventions work best to quickly and fairly resolve and address domestic violence justice needs?

The research aims to understand “what works” from the justice seekers’ perspective. This involves comparing the effectiveness of different interventions available in Uganda, with a particular focus on the Local Council Courts given that domestic violence cases fall within their remit and they are one of the most commonly used sources of help in Uganda.

3. How can knowledge about the users be turned into designs for better justice and legal services?

A main objective of this project is to ensure that data is not just collected but is actively used to inform the design and delivery of justice services. This question addresses the critical step of translating data into action.

4. Which strategies incentivise justice actors to commit to people-centred justice and work evidence-based with the users in mind?

For people-centred justice to become embedded in the system, justice actors must be motivated to adopt its principles. Therefore, the research explores the necessary incentives and enabling conditions for this shift, with a distinction between formal and informal justice actors.

Methodology

To answer these research questions, this project utilised a comprehensive mixed-methods approach that moved from understanding broad data trends to collaboratively designing solutions. To do this, we first conducted quantitative data analysis of the 2016, 2020, and 2024 Justice Needs and Satisfaction (JNS) survey datasets. This allowed us to analyse the national

prevalence of domestic violence, track typical justice pathways, and evaluate resolution rates of domestic violence survivors over time.

To understand the “why” behind the numbers, the quantitative analysis was paired with qualitative in-depth interviews. We conducted 30 semi-structured interviews with justice users (survivors) and 15 interviews with justice providers. These interviews mapped real-world justice journeys, capturing the distinct expectations, friction points, and barriers faced by both users and providers on a daily basis.

Recognising that data collection alone is not enough to change daily practice, the final phase employed a participatory research approach. We held two participatory workshops in Kampala, with 26 informal and 17 formal justice practitioners. Rather than simply presenting the data to them, stakeholders actively worked with the data, analysing the findings, discussing root causes, and collaboratively brainstorming concrete, low-cost improvements to their daily services, which are detailed in Section 4 of this report.

The research design and interview protocols, as well as the preliminary findings, were validated with experts in a Steering Committee to ensure

they were well-suited to the sensitive nature of the topic, the experiences of the survivors, and the overall Ugandan context. The Steering Committee was co-chaired by the Governance and Security Programme (GSP) and HiiL, and made up of stakeholders from different institutions and civil society organisations such as GSP/ JLOS secretariat, Uganda Police Force, Uganda Prisons Service (UPS), Law Development Centre (LDC)/Legal Aid Clinic (LAC), Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS), Ministry of Local Government (MoLG), Legal Aid Service Provider’s Network (LASPNET) and the Judiciary.

While this triangulated approach provides a holistic view of the justice landscape, there are limitations to this research. Specifically, the qualitative sample size of 45 interviews is relatively small. Meaning that while the narratives provide rich context, they cannot be considered representative of all the experiences of all Ugandans or all justice providers across the country. Additionally, slight variations in the survey instruments used across the 2016, 2020, and 2024 JNS surveys made direct comparisons of the datasets more complex. Therefore, the data is presented here separately rather than as direct longitudinal comparisons. A complete, detailed overview of the methodology and data collection tools can be found in Annex 1.

2.

Complex justice journeys

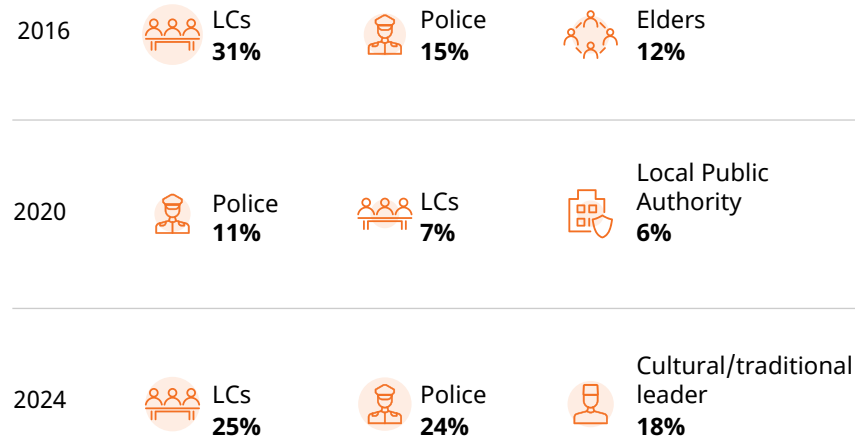
The justice journey for a domestic violence survivor in Uganda is rarely linear. The typical justice journey almost always begins within people's informal social networks: family, friends, and neighbours. Survivors turn to these people for help and advice about what they should do to resolve the problem. However, oftentimes, this informal social network acts as a barrier to justice, rather than a support system. Survivors reported being told that no good would come of reporting to the justice system so it was not worth the effort, others were told to endure the abuse for the sake of the family.

One survivor shared, "My friends told me to stay and take care of the children. His relatives also said I should stay because we already have children." Another survivor stated, "When people started to know what

was happening, many of them would say 'sorry but just endure'. They said I was going to destroy my marriage if I went to the police. I should just play my part as a wife, and not cause violence with my words." This societal stigma and pressure causes a lot of shame in survivors who do report their domestic violence problem. Many feel as though they are destroying their own family, unnecessarily harming the perpetrator, or bringing more conflict into the community. Consequently, many survivors only turn to a third-party source of help once the violence reaches a dangerous level, oftentimes at the point of being hospitalised.

Once survivors do seek third-party help, Local Councils (LCs) and police are the most common justice providers they turn to across the 2016, 2020, and 2024 JNS surveys.

TOP 3 SOURCES OF HELP PER YEAR
Excludes social network and direct negotiation



These percentages represent the percent of all people who reported a domestic violence problem who selected each source of help, in each respective JNS survey. (2016 n = 615, 2020 n = 1308, 2024 n = 1821)

LCs, in particular the LC Chairperson who leads both the Local Council and the Local Council Court, play a critical linking role in people’s justice journeys.¹⁰ People often turn to LCs due to their proximity to the community, low cost, and for their role as a respected authority. The LC Chairpersons we spoke with provided a detailed picture of what their role and process typically looks like. They shared that they regularly provide dispute resolution services, acting

as informal investigators, mediators, conciliators, and counsellors to community members. Their initial intervention typically begins with providing a private, calm space to allow survivors to speak freely, feeling safe and heard. Following this intake, the Chairperson often conducts informal fact-finding missions to verify the story. As one LC Chairperson explained, “Before asking the husband, I get one of the neighbors who tells me everything that goes on.” Once they

have this context, the Chairperson will then summon the alleged perpetrator, frequently inviting parents, community elders, or other household members to facilitate a mediation session. During these mediation sessions, LCs focus on giving both sides an equal opportunity to speak, aiming to calm the situation down and counselling the parties on the dangers and legal risks of domestic violence. If the conflict can be managed locally, LCs help the parties negotiate a resolution. This commonly results in a mediated apology, a written agreement signed by both parties, or occasionally informal compensation. Some LCs we spoke with said they avoid getting involved in matters of compensation while others said they may ask the perpetrator to cover the survivor’s medical costs or suggest buying a gift for the survivor as a gesture of remorse. Furthermore, LCs often conduct an assessment of how safe the situation is for the survivor. If a perpetrator remains angry or threatening, the LC may advise the survivor against returning home immediately and help to coordinate with trusted neighbours to watch over the situation.



Normally the women come to report. Sometimes it is a neighbor who reports. I write the complaint, then I create time to go and meet with these people at home just to go and judge the situation. If I find there is a problem, I will talk to an elder, and we plan for a meeting to get to the real cause. Most times it is alcohol or maybe rumours of cheating. We try to calm the situation. If it is something we can handle, we talk with them until we agree on the way forward. Maybe the man accepts to stop beating. Maybe the woman also accepts something she needs to improve. We write the agreement and everyone signs. But in some cases the violence is too much, so I refer them to the police.

- LC1 Chairperson

¹⁰ Throughout this report we will mainly use the terms “LC” and “LC Chairperson”. Not all cases that come to the Local Council go before the Local Council Court for a judgement. Most commonly, the LC Chairperson directly mediates the cases and is the main provider of services.

Beyond providing direct services, LCs regularly act as a bridge to the formal system, referring survivors to the police and hospitals. One LC reflected on her mandate as a Chairperson, noting, “Specifically for domestic violence you will want to understand if the victim needs any other help that you may not be able to offer and you may need to refer them to the police or hospital for health care depending on the magnitude of the problem. So you need to assess before you sit the two parties down to reconcile them.”

However, while highly accessible, the LCs deep embeddedness within the community can act as a double-edged sword. Operating within close communities means LCs are sometimes perceived as biased or susceptible to influence. Some female survivors reflected that they feel male LC Chairpersons are more likely to side with the male perpetrator, while others expressed concerns over the Chairperson being close with, or even related to, the perpetrator. One survivor shared how her fear of this bias kept her from turning to the LC for help, “No, I didn’t go to the LC because the LC usually sides with the men, and after that your husband can even beat you for reporting him. I’ve seen it with many people.”

Local Councils, Local Council Courts, and Local Council Chairpersons

Local Councils (LCs) in Uganda function as decentralised administrative and executive bodies, operating from the village (LC1) to the district level (LC5). While these councils have historically combined governance and dispute resolution roles, the Local Council Courts Act 2006 Uganda formalised their judicial mandate by establishing Local Council Courts (LCCs) at LC1, LC2, and LC3 levels¹¹. Therefore, while the Local Council is the broader political and administrative entity, the Local Council Court is the specific mechanism mandated to adjudicate civil disputes, customary matters, and minor criminal offenses. Despite this legal distinction, the two entities are deeply intertwined in practice, particularly at the grassroots community levels (LC1 and LC2). The elected leaders of the Local Council, led by the LC Chairperson, simultaneously serve as the community judges who preside over the corresponding Local Council Court¹².

When resolving disputes, LC Chairpersons and their committee provide an accessible, user-friendly alternative to the formal court system. Operating without complex procedural rules or the need for formal legal representation, LCCs conduct hearings in the local language, allowing the Chairpersons to adjudicate cases using community wisdom and local norms. Their primary objective is to enable “popular justice” that emphasises indigenous values of communal harmony, cooperation, compromise and conciliation (Khadiagala 2001, p.64).

LCCs are still tied to the formal justice system, falling under the supervision of the Chief Magistrate on behalf of the High Court and are linked to the formal justice system through a system of appeal options.

Navigating barriers to justice

In addition to being discouraged by their social networks, survivors face a variety of barriers to accessing justice in Uganda, including high cost burdens and confusing processes. While many justice services for domestic violence problems are technically free, survivors bear financial burdens such as the cost of transportation to and from the provider; lost wages from missing work to go report; and informal fees such as for the paper needed to write police reports. One survivor shared, “My income from the shop is small, and whenever I have to report to the police or travel to follow up the case, I close the shop and lose income for the day.” while another avoided reporting to the police at all due to the expected costs, “I refused to go to the police because I knew they would ask for money, money I simply did not have.”

There is also the cost of the time spent to report and follow up on the problem. It often requires long travel to the police station or spending all day waiting to be seen. Additionally, many survivors reported the emotional costs the process of pursuing justice had on them. Several survivors referred to the process as emotionally draining, stressful, frustrating, demanding, and tiring. For some, this led to them abandoning their pursuit for justice altogether.

¹¹ Government of Uganda (2006). *Local Council Courts Act, 2006*. <https://ulii.org/en/akn/ug/act/2006/13/eng@2023-12-31>.

¹² HiiL (2021). *Case Study: Local Council Courts in Uganda*. In *Delivering Justice: Trend Report 2021*. <https://dashboard.hiil.org/publications/trend-report-2021-delivering-justice/case-study-local-council-courts-in-uganda/>.

These financial and emotional costs are exacerbated by vague, confusing referral loops. Survivors bounce between LCs, various police units, and community organisations without clear instructions or case ownership by a single provider. Without one provider who oversees the case from start to finish, who helps guide the survivor to the correct place, survivors end up spending a lot of time trying to understand the process and report feeling emotionally exhausted. Many survivors report this as another reason they ultimately abandoned the justice journey. This frustration was tangible in the survivor's interviews:

”

I actually left the LC's office more confused than when I arrived. When you are already stressed and overwhelmed, you need someone to guide you step by step, but instead I felt like I was being sent blindly to a place with no assurance of help or safety.

”

Unfortunately, the LC was not helpful. He told me to go to town to see someone he recommended but did not clearly explain who that person was or what exactly they did, only that they 'handled family matters' and were not part of the police. Because of that lack of clarity, I never went.

”

My sisters took me to the hospital, and the hospital told us to go and get a police letter first, so we went to the police.

”

So [the police] said, 'First go and try to settle it with the LC. If it fails you, then call us.' Then they wrote their phone number and I went with it.

– In this case the person went to the police first, but when they did not have money for the paper for the police to write the statement, they were sent back to the LC.

”

There should be clear guidance on where to go, who to see, and what support is available. Right now, you are sent from one person to another without real help.

These complex, fragmented pathways illustrate a clear opportunity to move toward a more people-centred justice system. A people-centred justice system prioritises understanding people's needs as they experience them and is designed to meet those specific needs. By systematically

removing these barriers (costs, stigma, shame, etc.), and redesigning the referral pathway to provide clear, guided support from start to finish, the justice system can ensure that survivors are empowered to seek and obtain the safety and outcomes they need.



3.

Disconnect between processes and outcomes

High process satisfaction versus low resolution rates

Despite the complex journeys, a major success of the Ugandan justice system is that providers often deliver high process quality. We assessed the survivors' recounting of their justice journeys by particularly looking at how they spoke about the quality of the justice processes, according to the PCJ conceptual framework. This includes: voice, neutrality, objectivity, respect, clarity, ease, and personalisation of the process.

Both JNS data and survivor interviews indicated that survivors had a voice and were respected when they sought help from a third-party justice provider. 2024 JNS data revealed that 67% of LC users and 66% of police users rated these providers as helpful, or very helpful. During the interviews, survivors also frequently reported feeling they had a voice and were respected. On voice, survivors stated:

”

When I went to the police Family and Child Protection Unit, they gave me a chance to speak freely. They encouraged me to explain everything from the start.

”

I told the whole story from the beginning to the end...I told all that to the LC who listened very carefully.

”

The police were very receptive and the good thing is that they were women and they related with what I was saying. I was open and honest and told my story as it was, and they too were very attentive and even asked me questions.

”

The police encouraged me a lot, I think they saw the fear in me. They helped me be comfortable to tell my problem which I did, and they took notes that were later used as reference.

The providers we spoke with also reflected the importance that they put on giving survivors a chance to tell their story and be heard. For example one elder stated, “A fair process is one where both the man and the woman get the same chance to speak without interruption.” and an LC shared, “First of all, I make sure we talk in a private and calm place where the perpetrator cannot interrupt or intimidate them. I listen to the victim quietly so they feel free to speak.”

Regarding respect, survivors also had quite positive reflections:

“*I must admit, the LC was kind and I did not feel I was being ill-treated at all. Our LC is a grown man and respects people, treats them well, is a good listener and the community too respects him.*

“*The police were calm and very friendly. They were not tough like they usually are. I was not afraid interacting with them. They were respectful and kind, they advised us and were not even shouting.*

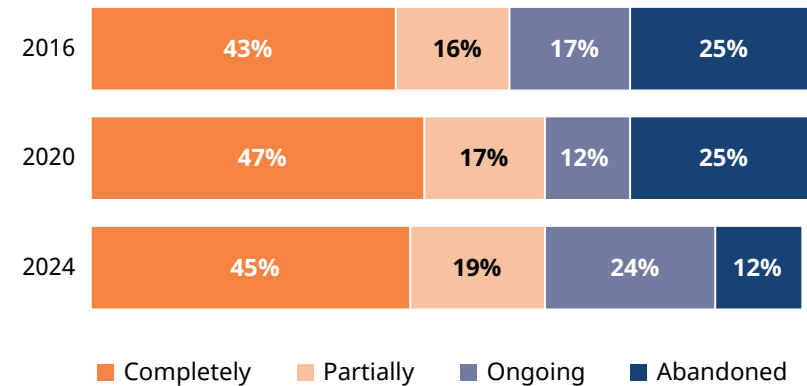
We also saw this reflected by some of the providers we interviewed, who wanted people to feel supported throughout the process. One LC Chairperson stated, “I also reassure them that whatever they share will help us decide the right steps, whether it is referral to hospital, police, or involving elders. My aim is to make them feel that they are not alone and that they came to the right place.” For many survivors simply being listened to and respected by an authority figure provides therapeutic and healing value.

While the quantitative data JNS data indicates a broad, systemic trend of high process satisfaction across the country, it is important to note that this empathetic approach is not a structurally guaranteed right. Because LCs operate informally without strict procedural oversight or standardised trauma training, the quality of the service depends heavily on the personal disposition, cultural views, and the individual empathy of the specific LC Chairperson handling the case. If a survivor encounters a Chairperson who holds deeply patriarchal views, the process could quickly become dismissive rather than therapeutic. This variability underscores the need to provide training to informal providers in order to standardise the process and guarantee a baseline of trauma-informed care across all individuals and cases.

Furthermore, even when survivors do experience a positive process, it still does not necessarily result in a positive outcome. This dynamic reflects a core critique of procedural justice theory. While procedural justice emphasises that feeling heard and respected builds systemic trust, critics warn that an overreliance on a “fair process” can inadvertently neglect or distract from the substantive justice of the outcome,

ultimately masking resolutions that are fundamentally unfair or unsafe¹³. This disconnect is visible in Uganda, where while process satisfaction is high, resolution rates remain low, with only 43% - 47% of domestic violence problems reported as completely resolved across the 2016, 2020, and 2024 JNS surveys, as shown in the chart below.

RESOLUTION STATUS



Resolution status of reported domestic violence problems in each respective JNS survey. N (problems) = 2020: 1188, 2024: 2862). In 2016 respondents were only asked about the resolution status of their most serious problem, 339 people selected domestic violence as their most serious problem.¹⁴

13 MacCoun, R. J. (2005). *Voice, Control, and Belonging: The Double-Edged Sword of Procedural Fairness*. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.lawsocsci.1.041604.115958>; Solum, L. B. (2004). *Procedural Justice*. <https://southern.california.lawreview.com/2004/11/04/procedural-justice-article-by-lawrence-b-solum/>.
 14 For 2016 the percentage = resolution status for domestic violence problems identified as the respondent’s most serious problem, however, 121 respondents did not complete this question, therefore n = 218.

Furthermore, positive processes are often undermined by resource gaps. For example, one survivor reported that the police listened to her story, and she felt they were fully neutral. However, they failed to arrest the perpetrator because they asked the survivor for fuel money to make the arrest, which she did not have. The survivor subsequently abandoned the process and never reached a resolution. Therefore, while positive processes are incredibly valuable and important in addressing survivors' needs, they are insufficient if they are not leading to problem resolutions.

The gap: desired outcomes versus actual outcomes

A key tenet of PCJ is that both process and outcomes are important. A respectful process is somewhat meaningless if it does not lead to an effective outcome. When a system provides survivors with a voice, but fails to secure their physical safety or financial stability, it falls short of delivering justice. Truly people-centred justice is measured by the user's ability to safely move on with their life, not by the closure of a case file.

When looking at the qualitative narratives through this lens, a clear gap emerges between what survivors actually need and what the system is designed to provide. The outcomes survivors receive often do not address their core safety and economic needs. The table below illustrates this stark disconnect between the practical solutions the survivors we interviewed were seeking and the outcomes providers typically delivered:

Survivor's desired outcomes	Outcomes providers deliver
Physical safety	Reconciliation
Shared financial responsibility (such as food, school fees, child support)	Commitment letters
Amicable, peaceful agreement rooted in mutual respect	Closing cases
Enforcement & follow up	Referral to other actors
Clear guidance	-

As highlighted here, survivors are not primarily seeking punitive measures; they desire practical, peaceful solutions. As one survivor explained, "I didn't want conflict or punishment. I only wanted shared responsibility." Another expressed "In a perfect world, I wanted to regain my freedom and peace. I wanted to live without control, fear, or violence and to feel safe and independent again."

In stark contrast, the formal and informal justice systems tend to prioritise reconciliation and community harmony. This disconnect is evident in the 2024 JNS data, which shows that the most common interventions provided by LCs were advice (62%) and mediation (41%). Rather than securing child support or lasting physical safety, survivors receive commitment letters or apologies, which often do not address their core safety and economic needs.

The arrest paradox: why survivors avoid escalation

To understand why this gap between desired and delivered outcomes exists, we need to look at the constraints survivors face, specifically regarding the issue of arrest. Survivors rarely seek to have the perpetrator arrested; only four of the 30 interviewed survivors explicitly requested an arrest.

This reluctance is heavily driven by the survivor's economic dependence on the perpetrator. If a survivor pursues strict formal justice, they risk losing their family's sole provider. As one survivor explained, "If I arrest him, who is going to pay the school fees...?" Providers also recognise this economic trap, with one case manager noting that jailing a breadwinner results in

“all suffering will be on a woman who has five or ten kids.” Furthermore, survivors fear the intense stigma of arrest. They fear being seen by both their families and the community as the one who tore their family apart: “I feared the imprisonment and what his people would say, they would disapprove of my doing that to their own and to the father of the children. I feared being blamed by his relatives,...I also feared the stigma of ‘sending my husband to jail.’... I worried I would be accused of destroying the family.” During the participatory workshops, informal providers reflected that pursuing options beyond reconciliation such as court processes, medical evidence, or relocation is expensive and time-consuming. As a result, reconciliation becomes the most accessible choice.

From a people-centred perspective, this arrest paradox illustrates a systemic failure to align justice delivery with the user’s lived reality. A people-centred system would not force a survivor to choose between physical safety (by arresting the abuser) and the family’s economic survival. Instead, PCJ demands that justice interventions adapt to this reality by, for example, integrating economic support directly into the justice pathway.

The systemic push for reconciliation

Among the justice providers we spoke with, both formal and informal providers overwhelmingly stated that their primary objective when handling domestic violence cases is reconciliation. Rather than pursuing punitive measures, providers focus on restoring peace and preserving the family structure.

Informal providers share a cultural mandate to keep families intact, with an LC Chairperson summarising, “My main goal is always reconciliation... These are families we live with every day, and when a home is unstable, it affects the whole community...A peaceful community starts with peaceful homes.” Similarly, an Elder emphasised this value of community cohesion, stating, “At the end of the day, these people have to get back to an understanding because in this community, we really, really need people to be working very closely to each other. They need to live in harmony.” Formal providers, such as the police, view their mandate through a similarly restorative lens, with one officer stating, “the ultimate goal is that you don’t want families to break. The idea is to unite the families where possible.”

Formal providers are further driven toward reconciliation outcomes by systemic constraints; because formal courts are slow, costly, and plagued by case backlogs, police encourage mediated agreements to manage caseloads and avoid lengthy case timelines. One police officer summarised this institutional preference: “At the end of the day, we as police want to see a reconciliation and not an escalated matter to a higher level of law.”

The enforcement dilemma

This mutual reliance on reconciliation often results in an enforcement dilemma. Mediated agreements are typically formalised via a commitment letter that frequently proves to be ineffective and difficult to enforce.

Informal providers face a structural lack of power to enforce outcomes. While they can mediate commitments, they lack the legal authority to compel compliance. One LC Chairperson summarised this frustration, “We have no true power to do anything. Someone agrees to stop beating and then they break it, you can’t do anything.” Conversely, formal justice

providers have the legal authority to enforce outcomes that informal providers lack. And in some cases, simply having this power acts as a deterrent to perpetrators, with one survivor stating, “[The police] said if he continues with the violence, they’ll arrest him and put it on the radio. That’s when things somehow got better. Because he fears his reputation, he stopped beating me.” However, while it holds both deterrence and enforcement power, formal providers face resource constraints and unmanageable caseloads which prevent them from monitoring compliance or enforcing outcomes.

Ultimately, survivors report that perpetrators often reoffend shortly after the resolution, and with no enforcement mechanisms or follow up procedures in place, survivors can be left in dangerous situations. Several survivors highlighted the fragility of these reconciliation outcomes:

”

The LC called the man and me. We met him and he counselled us and I thought the man had changed... After around a month, he beat me again.

”

I have not been supported with the children's school fees. The commitment did not last long, after a few terms of partial support he stopped and said that he did not have the money. And the LC did not follow up, when I reached out to give him an update, he told me to go to the police. He was not willing to mediate again.

”

He paid for some months and he stopped again. I suffered and I went to the police and I told them he was not paying. They said they will call him. But whenever I would go and ask them, they would say they are following up.

”

It helped a little, for a short while, but later when he would go to drink and still come back and beat me. I just kept quiet.

These quotes also reveal that for many women, once the resolution is not enforced and the problem resumes, they are disheartened from going through the justice process again and often give up at this point. In its current state, the reliance on unmonitored commitment letters often does not serve the survivor's needs. A people-centred design requires shifting away from quick solutions to close cases to investing in the operational capacity to ensure these agreements meet the needs of all parties, and to continue monitoring post-agreement. This point becomes particularly clear as one survivor puts it, "I believed the police would look for him and intervene, but they never did. I also trusted that the clan elders, being highly respected, would influence him to stop the violence. Yet the same night after that meeting, he kicked down the door of our house, beat me again, and even choked me almost to death. That experience shattered my faith in the systems that are supposed to protect us."



4.

Participatory workshops with justice providers

Data collection alone is rarely sufficient to change daily practice. To ensure this research translates knowledge about justice users experiences into tangible improvements, this research employed a participatory approach. Following the data collection phase, two interactive workshops were held in Kampala in March 2026. The first workshop had 26 attendees who represented the informal justice system, including LC representatives, religious leaders, paralegals, CSOs, community leaders

and justice innovators. The second workshop had 17 representatives of the formal justice system, including Judiciary, Uganda Law Reform Commission, Uganda Police Force, Law Development Centre, Uganda Prisons Service, Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA), and the Ministry of Local Government. By bringing these stakeholders together, the workshops embodied the PCJ principle of evidence-based, collaborative design.



Informal Justice Provider Workshop, Kampala, March 2026

Presented with the preliminary research findings, the stakeholders discussed the data and collaboratively brainstormed concrete, actionable solutions to bridge the gap between survivor needs and current justice delivery.

To improve survivors' journeys, practitioners focused on co-designing actionable, low-cost improvements to their daily service delivery. Several specific, promising solutions emerged from the sessions:

Community justice hubs ("One-Stop Centres")

To decrease case abandonment rates often caused by referral fatigue, informal practitioners proposed piloting parish-level "one-stop centres". By integrating local administration, legal aid, and potentially even medical services, while also providing translation into local languages and sign language, the solution could reduce the financial and emotional exhaustion survivors face when bouncing between different offices. This solution would particularly benefit vulnerable groups such as minorities and people with disabilities who face an even harder time accessing justice services.

Bridging the digital divide in case management

There is an opportunity to improve communication between justice providers, both formal and informal. While the formal systems have digital case management systems, LCs primarily operate on a manual, paper-based system. Providers brainstormed the creation of a simplified tracking mechanism that links LC physical referral letters to existing formal digital systems, ensuring survivors do not fall through the cracks when referred.

Specialised domestic violence courts

To prevent cases from stalling in the formal sector, the Judiciary and formal actors proposed fast-tracking domestic violence cases through specialised, dedicated court sessions, drastically reducing the time a survivor must wait for a formal resolution.

Standardising restorative justice approaches

Because survivors often opt for reconciliation over other approaches (such as arrest and restraining or adjudication) due to economic realities, the ongoing rollout of the national ADR policy presents an opportunity. Crucially, it is important to standardise legal safeguards to ensure that reconciliation outcomes secure the survivor's safety and are enforceable.

Furthermore, acknowledging the trauma and the psychological wounds caused by domestic violence, participants emphasised the need for integrated psychosocial support. They suggested that the government could provide community mental health practitioners for both survivors and perpetrators, as well as safe shelters for exceptionally dangerous cases.

The data revealed that while LCs are highly accessible, they are sometimes perceived as biased or susceptible to influence. To protect the neutrality of community justice, informal providers brainstormed a structural shift, the creation of community juries and assessors. To increase transparency and reduce the fear of bias from a single Chairperson, providers proposed having ordinary respected community members sit on justice committees as peers or "assessors." This democratises the mediation process, ensuring that the survivor feels the panel is truly neutral and inclusive.

Both formal and informal providers acknowledged the enforcement dilemma, where mediated apology and commitment letter resolutions are not necessarily enforceable. Formal practitioners identified the National Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) policy, passed in February 2025, as the most critical intervention for the formal sector. Because survivors often do not want perpetrators to be arrested, formalising ADR allows the system to deliver restorative justice that survivors



Formal Justice Provider Workshop, Kampala, March 2026

seek, such as shared responsibility, while providing the structured, ethical oversight necessary to ensure these agreements are legally sound and safe.

To address the lack of follow-up, informal practitioners suggested shifting from a reactive model to a proactive one. They proposed integrating religious leaders and respected community elders into the post-resolution phase to actively follow up with the families and ensure the perpetrator is abiding by the mediated agreement.

Addressing economic root causes

A recurring theme across all discussions was that economic dependence traps survivors in abusive homes, often forcing them to accept unsafe reconciliations. However, practitioners highlighted that this economic vulnerability cannot be separated from the cultural norms that enforce it, such as traditional gender expectations that limit a

woman's financial independence. To address this, providers recommended integrating livelihood support and economic empowerment mechanisms into the justice response. Providing survivors with skills training or startup capital directly addresses the financial vulnerability that causes survivors to accept unsafe outcomes.

One workshop participant from the formal sector noted that a large number of domestic conflict cases stem from interconnected economic and cultural causes, particularly noting family disputes over estates. Often, traditional cultural norms dictate that women should not inherit property, leaving them economically destitute and often trapped in abusive environments when a spouse or father passes away. The formal sector recommended a nationwide push to sensitise communities on writing wills and proper estate planning, particularly to ensure that women have legal protection to receive their entitled inheritance. This awareness-raising approach aims to directly prevent the cultural and economic conflicts that often escalate into physical violence.

5.

Incentives and tools for change

Transitioning to a people-centred justice approach requires more than data on people's experiences or policy directives; it requires highly motivated justice practitioners who are equipped to implement these changes. To understand which strategies effectively incentivise justice practitioners to commit to people-centred justice, it is important to examine their operational realities and intrinsic motivations.

Informal leaders, such as LC Chairpersons, Elders, and Community Officers are motivated by their close connection with the community, many expressed that they want to see families, and the broader community, happy and at peace. As one LC explained, "As a leader in the community, you want a peaceful community where there is no violence." These informal actors are also motivated by the respect and esteem they get from helping their community, and expressed a desire for more official recognition of their work to increase their motivation. Formal providers, expressed being similarly motivated by the community and seeing justice achieved. Some are also driven by a sense of national duty

and the respect they gain from their position, with one police officer noting, "Because I am serving my nation. That is why I love my work."

Despite these underlying motivations, justice providers critically lack the fundamental tools required to deliver people-centred justice. During the qualitative interviews and participatory workshops, both formal and informal practitioners reported lacking many of the basic operational resources needed. Both LCs and police officers reported lacking funds for fuel to visit families and follow up on cases, while police also expressed that they deal with high caseloads and not enough time to properly follow each and every case. Modest operational budget increases (such as stipends for stationery and transport) would empower providers to properly document cases, safely monitor the enforcement of agreements, and prevent the cost of justice from being passed down to survivors. Having the ability to properly provide justice services and see the impact of positive, lasting outcomes for survivors would serve as a strong motivator for both formal and informal practitioners.

Additionally, all of the members of the Local Council Executive Committee, including the Chairperson, are elected positions and often they do not have any formal legal training. Chairpersons, and the Executive Committee who decide in Local Council Court matters, are being thrown into complex domestic violence disputes without adequate knowledge, training, or information resources. As one Chairperson stated, “I don’t know the laws very well. When we are elected as chairpersons, we are not taken anywhere for training. We need the training, surely.”

Many of the Elders and other community leaders are in the same position, lacking formal legal training but often put in situations where they need it. Highlighting this vulnerability, one Elder shared, “What would help us a lot is more training to understand the deeper issues people face, especially women, because most times they are the ones who suffer quietly. If we had more knowledge on how to identify signs of serious abuse, trauma, or fear before they are even reported to us, it would guide us to respond better to their needs”, he went on to add, “Also, if there were clear guidelines showing which cases should be handled at community level and which ones must go straight to police, it would help us not to make mistakes.”



Resources requested by justice providers:

During the participatory workshops, informal providers translated these systemic gaps into a request for core resources to help them standardise their services and guarantee a minimum standard of care:

- **Continuous professional training:** Providers need capacity building on the Domestic Violence Act, trauma-informed care, and conflict resolution so they can better handle cases and recognise the red flags where reconciliation is an unsafe approach.
- **Standardised Justice Toolkits:** Workshop participants advocated for simple “justice toolkits” that could be distributed to informal providers, offering clear guidance on how to handle cases and when to refer them onwards. Equipping providers with clear referral pathways in their local language empowers them to guide survivors accurately and prevents dangerous procedural mistakes.
- **Accessible information materials:** Providers need accessible information, education, and communication materials, such as pamphlets on domestic violence, available in local languages, to be distributed in communities to increase the legal capabilities of the providers and to raise awareness among citizens themselves.

Finally, the informal provider workshop participants suggested that because informal actors are highly motivated by community respect, creating formal recognition programs would serve as a powerful incentive. By publicly recognising and certifying LC leaders and Elders who successfully complete legal training and demonstrate excellent, neutral dispute resolution practices, the system can leverage their intrinsic motivation. Designating outstanding local leaders as “Justice Champions” would strongly motivate these community leaders to rigorously apply people-centred principles and uphold higher standards in their daily work.

6.

Recommendations towards closing the justice gap

The findings of this report, combining comprehensive JNS data with deep qualitative narratives and practitioner workshops, reveal a complex reality. While justice providers in Uganda frequently treat domestic violence survivors with respect throughout their justice journeys, the system struggles to deliver the safe, enforceable, and economically viable outcomes survivors need. The exhausting maze of referrals, the reliance on unenforceable commitment letters, and the lack of operational tools, leave both survivors and providers stuck with undesirable outcomes.

However, the participatory workshops demonstrated that justice practitioners possess the insight, readiness, and motivation to change this. To secure lasting, safe outcomes, and maintain the quality processes, bold rethinking, rooted in the people-centred justice approach, is urgently needed in the following systemic areas:

1

Countering the role of cultural barriers, shame, and stigma:

Survivors frequently encounter informal social networks that act as barriers rather than support systems, pressuring them to endure the abuse for the sake of the family. This leaves survivors feeling ashamed to report violence or fearful of being blamed for “destroying” their families. Future justice interventions must actively counter these barriers, empowering survivors to seek help without facing community backlash or ostracisation.

2

Decreasing the costs of accessing justice:

The financial, emotional, and time burdens of seeking justice are primary causes for case abandonment, particularly regarding formal processes. While many services are technically free, survivors often bear heavy hidden costs. These include transportation across long distances, lost daily wages, and informal fees. To ensure justice is genuinely accessible, systemic efforts must be made to eliminate these hidden costs and decrease the economic toll of reporting abuse.

3

Redesigning the referral pathways between community, informal, and formal providers: Currently, the justice journey is fragmented. Survivors are trapped in exhausting, vague referral loops, bouncing between Local Councils, police units, community organisations, and medical facilities without clear instructions or designated case ownership. A PCJ redesign must create clear guided pathways that bridge the gap between the informal and formal justice systems and build in guidance for survivors.

4

Prioritising the outcomes that survivors themselves need: Currently the formal and informal justice systems often prioritise swift reconciliation and the clearing of case backlogs over substantive justice. A people-centred approach must pivot to prioritise the outcomes that victims themselves desire: immediate physical safety, shared financial responsibility, and amicable agreements rooted in mutual respect. Crucially, stakeholders must recognise that without follow up or enforcement, an outcome cannot be effective. Because informal providers lack enforcement power and formal providers lack monitoring capacity, perpetrators frequently reoffend. The system must move beyond unenforceable outcomes toward lasting resolutions backed by regular, structured follow-ups.

5

Linking justice to economic empowerment: A recurring theme across the data is that economic dependence traps survivors in abusive homes, often forcing them to accept unsafe reconciliations. It needs to be further explored how justice interventions might be paired with economic support. As recommended by practitioners, creating programmes that integrate livelihood support, skills training, and startup capital directly into the justice response addresses the core financial vulnerability that causes survivors to accept unsafe outcomes. By removing this vulnerability, the justice system can significantly reduce both recurring problems and case abandonment.

6

Shifting to proactivity: The current domestic violence response in Uganda is highly reactive. Driven by shame, fear of economic loss, and a lack of clear pathways, many survivors only seek third-party help once the violence reaches a critical, dangerous level. Justice mechanisms must be redesigned to offer proactive protection and early intervention, equipping communities to identify and de-escalate disputes long before the abuse reaches a life-threatening stage.

7

Continuous people-centred data collection: To ensure that policies and service designs remain aligned with people's realities, it is crucial to continue collecting people-centred data. This includes expanding research to capture broader regions, diverse cultural contexts, and the unique challenges faced by vulnerable groups. Embedding these feedback loops into policy design ensures that the justice system remains continuously responsive to the actual needs of the people it serves.

Ultimately, closing the justice gap for domestic violence survivors in Uganda does not require upending the justice system, but rather empowering it to work as intended. The interviews and participatory workshops demonstrated that both formal and informal justice actors possess the deep community knowledge and intrinsic motivation required to drive change. By equipping justice providers with the right tools, bridging the operational silos between institutions, and centering the safety and economic reality of the survivor in every resolution, Uganda can transform its justice pathways from a confusing maze into a reliable safety net. True people-centred justice means ensuring that survivors are not forced to choose between their economic survival and their fundamental right to a life free from violence.

Annex 1: Methodology

Quantitative Methodology

This phase of the research involved the analysis of 3 JNS survey datasets (2016, 2020, 2024) specifically focusing on people who reported domestic violence related problems. The analysis concentrated on:

- **Prevalence:** We analysed the prevalence of domestic violence problems over time to understand the scale of the problem and its depth within Ugandan society.
- **Typical pathways and resolution rates:** We mapped the survivors' justice journeys, identifying which formal and informal justice providers they most frequently turn to, how often their problems are resolved, and how helpful these providers are.

Qualitative Methodology

This phase of the research focused on obtaining the depth and context to better understand the numbers in the JNS surveys. We designed 2 semi-structured interview protocols: one for domestic violence survivors and one for justice providers. These protocols included ethical considerations for the interviewers, informed consent forms, sampling methods, and so on.

Within these protocols we included interview guides which served as the framework of guiding questions to support the interview conversation, the interviews themselves were semi-structured. The interview guides were organised around the project's theoretical framework, with sections focused on the four key dimensions of people-centered justice: process fairness, fair outcomes, timeliness, and costs. The interview guide for survivors focused on their justice journeys, needs

and expectations, their experiences with different providers, perceptions of the final outcome, and its long term impact. The justice provider interview guides focused on the providers perspectives, how they understand their roles, the procedures they follow, challenges faced, what motivates them, and what tools they need. The interview protocols were validated with the expert Steering Committee to ensure they were well-suited to the sensitive nature of the topic, the experiences of the victims, and the overall context.

We also conducted a small-scale pilot of the interview protocols with 2 justice users and 2 justice providers in order to test the clarity, refine our survivor-centred trauma-informed approach, and ensure the interview process is safe and respectful for participants. HiIL contracted two Ugandan researchers to conduct all of the in-depth interviews face to face. The researchers were trained on the conceptual framework of the project and the interview protocols.

The project employed a purposive, non-random sampling plan to identify interview participants. HiIL and the researchers collaborated with local

partners, CSOs, and LCs themselves to help identify and contact participants. The key selection criterion was direct experience with domestic violence. We aimed to have a diverse sample that included individuals from both rural and urban communities. We selected a mix of justice practitioners from both formal and informal sectors to capture a range of institutional perspectives. Providers included: LC Chairpersons, police officers, community case workers from CSOs, a cultural leader, elders, and social workers.

We employed a thematic analysis of the qualitative data with a hybrid approach to coding. We started with a set of codes directly derived from the theoretical framework (e.g., "voice," "neutrality," "fairness," "respect," "timeliness"), while also creating new thematic codes which emerged from the participants' narratives, capturing unexpected themes and insights.

The preliminary findings from both the quantitative and qualitative data were presented to the Steering Committee in a validation session prior to the participatory workshops. Stakeholders were able to triangulate some of the key findings and provide further context.



Formal Justice Provider Workshop,
Kampala, March 2026

Participatory Research

The project also included an element of participatory research via two workshops with formal and informal justice practitioners. The workshops served two key purposes. First, they provide an opportunity to share the research findings with practitioners who directly handle domestic violence cases, enabling them to better understand the lived experiences and expectations of survivors. Second, the workshops acted as a research exercise to observe and document how justice practitioners interpreted the findings, identified service gaps, and proposed actionable improvements that can make justice processes more people-centred and responsive to survivors. One of the researchers was present for both workshops to record observations and capture the dynamics in the room.

Annex 2: Conceptual Framework

To ensure clarity and a shared understanding of the project's core ideas, this section defines the key concepts underpinning the research questions and methodology. These concepts are based in the people-centered justice approach.

The theoretical framework of people-centred justice for addressing justice problems

People-centred design is about understanding users' needs, expectations, experiences, contexts, and behaviours. Our model of people-centred justice for fair resolution of domestic violence problems operates under the premise that those who utilise the justice system assess their experiences based on four primary factors: process, outcomes, timeliness, and costs. The following are the key indicators for each of these dimensions:

Process fairness

- Voice: ability to tell their part of the story
- Neutrality: the dispute resolution is conducted by an unbiased and impartial third party
- Objectivity: procedural and substantive rules are applied equally to the parties
- Respect: the process is respectful

- Clarity: the process is based on clear and truthful information
- Ease: the process is easy
- Personalisation: the process is adjusted to the needs of the survivor

Fair and applicable outcomes

- Fairness of the outcome
- The problem is resolved
- The resolution is enforced/ adhered to
- Parties benefit from long-term outcomes from the fair resolution of the problem

Timeliness

- The problem is addressed in a reasonable time

Costs of justice

- The various costs of justice are affordable, reasonable and proportionate.

Additional concepts

Justice User

Anyone who has experienced a legal problem, regardless of whether they have taken action to resolve it. This includes:

- Individuals who actively seek a resolution through formal or informal justice mechanisms.
- Those who attempt to resolve their legal problems on their own.
- People who take no action at all to resolve their problem.

Justice Provider

An individual or organisation that is (to an extent) systematically involved in the resolution of legal problems. This broad definition intentionally moves beyond traditional legal institutions to encompass the full spectrum of resources people turn to when facing a justice issue.

Formal Justice Providers: These are entities sanctioned by the state and operating within the established legal framework. Examples include:

- Courts and tribunals
- Lawyers and paralegals
- Police and other law enforcement agencies
- Local Council Court providers (Chairperson, Vice-chairperson, etc.)

Informal Justice Providers: This category includes a wide range of individuals and community-based resources that people trust and utilize to resolve disputes. These often operate outside of the formal legal system but are crucial for access to justice in many communities. Examples include:

- Community elders and traditional leaders derive their authority from customary law, cultural practices, and social standing within their community)
- Religious leaders and institutions
- Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and civil society organisations providing legal aid and support

Domestic Violence¹⁵

A type of legal problem characterized by physical, sexual, psychological, or emotional abuse occurring between people in a close relationship. A key element is the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator. This most commonly refers to violence between:

- Intimate partners, whether married, cohabiting, or dating.
- Family members, such as violence against children, parents, or elders.
- Other members of a household.

Types of domestic violence include:

- **Physical Abuse:** Acts causing physical harm, such as hitting, slapping, pushing, or using weapons.
- **Psychological and Emotional Abuse:** This includes intimidation, threats, coercion, humiliation, and controlling behavior that undermines a person's sense of self-worth and security.
- **Sexual Abuse:** Any form of non-consensual sexual contact.
- **Economic Abuse:** Controlling or withholding financial resources to limit a person's independence.

Intervention

In this project, an "intervention" refers to any action, process, or service a domestic violence survivor might use to seek help or resolve their justice problem. This is a broad definition that encompasses the full ecosystem of justice providers in Uganda, including:

- Informal justice mechanisms: Such as engaging with Local Council Courts (LCCs), traditional leaders, or religious leaders.
- Formal justice mechanisms: Such as reporting to the police or pursuing a case in the formal courts.
- Specific justice services: This also includes the specific actions taken by these justice practitioners or services they might provide; such as information, advice, dispute resolution, etc.

¹⁵ Inter-Agency Standing Committee (2015). *Guidelines for Integrating Gender-Based Violence Interventions in Humanitarian Action: Reducing Risk, promoting resilience and aiding recovery*. <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/working-group/iasc-guidelines-integrating-gender-based-violence-interventions-humanitarian-action-2015>.

Legal and Justice Services

Similar to intervention, legal and/or justice services encompass the range of processes and interventions that help people resolve their legal problems. These services might include, but are not limited to:

- **Information:** Providing people with knowledge about their rights, options, and the procedures for resolving a legal problem. This is often the first step in a justice journey.
- **Assistance and Advice:** Providing people with tailored guidance that enables people to act on their justice problems. Unlike information, which is neutral, advice applies legal knowledge to an individual's circumstances and recommends a course of action.
- **Dispute resolution services:** Dispute resolution may occur through various pathways, services around dispute resolution might include:
 - **Adjudication:** Formal process whereby a decision is made by an authorised legal entity, i.e. a court
 - **Negotiation and Mediation:** Facilitated discussions aimed at reaching a mutual agreement between parties, often involving a neutral third party.
 - **Arbitration:** Alternative out-of-court method of resolving legal disputes where parties present their cases to a neutral, independent third party who issues a final and legally binding decision.

Justice Journey

Refers to the journey a person takes from the moment they recognise they have a legal problem until an eventual resolution (or abandoning the effort to get a resolution). The journey includes every decision made and every actor engaged along the way – the search for legal information and advice as well as taking actions to try to resolve the problem, either by directly engaging the other party, via a third party or through a combination of both. Mapping these journeys helps us understand real-world justice-seeking behavior.

Justice Outcomes¹⁶

A positive result or change in well-being that a person with a legal problem achieves through the resolution process. This is the quality and impact of the justice journey and its resolution from the perspective of the user. General justice outcomes include:

- Understanding what happened
- Acknowledgement of role or responsibility
- Fair distribution of resources or responsibilities
- Damage restoration
- Relational restoration
- Harmony within the community
- Security
- Prevention

Justice Resolution

The conclusion of a legal problem, achieved through any means, as perceived and reported by the person who experienced it. Key here is whether the justice user considers the problem to be over. It is important to note that a resolution in itself is not automatically a just or fair outcome, it simply represents the conclusion of the problem.

Justice Gap

The gap between the justice needs people have, the outcomes and resolutions they seek and what they actually receive. The gap represents the unmet needs for resolution, fairness, timeliness, and effectiveness. This project aims to understand this gap for domestic violence survivors in Uganda and identify solutions to close it.

Formal justice

This refers to the justice system provided by the state. It includes institutions like the formal courts (i.e. Magistrates, High Courts, Family and Children's courts), police and state prosecutors. These bodies operate based on codified laws and official procedures.

¹⁶ Read more about justice outcomes: <https://dashboard.hiil.org/publications/focusing-on-outcomes-for-people/>

Informal justice

This refers to community-based dispute resolution mechanisms that operate outside the state's formal structure but are often the first and most accessible source of help for many people. In the Ugandan context, this primarily includes Local Council Courts (LCCs), as well as cultural and religious leaders, community mediators, and elders. These mechanisms often rely on local norms, customary laws and traditions.

"What works best" or best practices

Research Question 2 asks, *Which interventions work best to quickly and fairly resolve and address domestic violence justice needs?*

We define "what works best" as the effectiveness of an intervention is not judged by institutional metrics (for example: case clearance rates) but from the survivor's perspective. "What works best" is therefore defined by the principles of people-centered justice. An intervention is considered effective if it delivers:

- A fair process (e.g., feeling heard, being treated with respect, receives clarity).
- A fair and sustainable outcome (e.g., safety is ensured, the resolution is enforced).
- Timely resolution.
- Affordable and proportionate costs, considering the financial, emotional, and time investment required from the user.

Defining "designs for better justice services"

Research Question 3 asks, *How can knowledge about the users be turned into designs for better justice and legal services?*

- **Designs for better justice services:** In this context, "design" refers to the intentional structuring of justice processes, policies, and services to be people-centred – more accessible, equitable, and responsive to the needs of the people they serve.
- **The process of design:** The design process for such people-centred justice services applies a human-centered design approach to the justice system. Through a collaborative, participatory process, a diverse group of stakeholders will actively create data-driven, evidence-based solutions. During participatory workshops stakeholders will:
 - Analyse the people-centred data presented to them.
 - Collaboratively brainstorm and develop concrete, practical and low-cost improvements or solutions which address the most pressing justice needs.
 - The focus is on co-creating actionable solutions that are grounded in the lived experiences of survivors.

*Informal Justice Provider Workshop,
Kampala, March 2026*



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About Hiil

The Hague Institute for Innovation of Law (Hiil) is an organisation dedicated to ensuring that justice is accessible, affordable, and easy to understand. We call this people-centred justice. By collaborating with justice providers, including ministries of justice and judiciaries, we develop solutions that enable more individuals to prevent or resolve their justice challenges. This not only benefits people directly but also fosters safe, stable societies where economic growth, innovation, and entrepreneurship thrive.

Our work spans multiple countries, with programmes in Uganda, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Tunisia, Niger, Burkina Faso, the Netherlands, Iraq and Syria.

For more information, data, and insights, visit:

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This publication was co-funded by the European Union and German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ).

Its contents are the sole responsibility of Hiil and do not necessarily reflect the views of the EU or BMZ.



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