

# **Uganda's Gender Divide and Moves towards Equality**

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## ***Abstract***

*In Uganda women are considered anything but equal to their male counterparts due to a lack of education, cultural beliefs, and low access and acceptance of birth control. Most women have been forced into accepting the role of second-class citizens. However, when women are educated their lives change drastically. They have opportunities to provide for themselves and their families, which alters the poverty cycle. Instead of marrying at young adolescent ages, they will wait until they are older and ready for a family. This article focuses on how programs promoting education for women, creating job opportunities for women, and accepting birth control empowers women. The women of Uganda deserve a chance to be equal to men in hope for better lives.*

## **I. Introduction**

In 2010, Uganda had a population of 33.4 million, of which statistically exactly half (50.0 percent) were female.<sup>1</sup> Most Ugandan women are being suppressed by their male counterparts, particularly their husbands. These women have little to zero choice on what happens in their lives, and the lack of female education is a major reason for this. Giving Ugandan women an education would allow them to earn their own income. Most of these women are stuck because they have no way of providing for themselves and for their children. These women need empowerment by implementing a variety of educational programs, including programs that help to improve the acceptance of birth control in Ugandan society.

Women in Uganda have typically no choice over having children. Their husbands force them to have sex and they do not use protection, leaving them with large families to provide for. Most of these women do not even get to have a say in having sex. There is no acceptable reason that a woman should be forced to listen to everything her husband says. The gender divide between men and women in Uganda is remarkable and little progress has been made over the last few decades. Increasing the Ugandan society's acceptance of birth control can give these women more power

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<sup>1</sup> World Bank (2012).

and a say in their marriage. These women need help in order to start to better their lives and to better the lives of their own children.

While some organizations are out there to help them, this is simply not enough. People need to try and help educate these women and stop the gender divide. There is no reason that girls should be married at age 14 or 15 and be a mother soon after that. The women of Uganda need education and birth control in order to overcome this gender divide.

This article examines the struggles the women of Uganda endure. It also looks at the spread of HIV/AIDS and discusses how there is no proper education system for most girls. This article also shows that some organizations are trying to solve these problems and how successful some of these organizations have been. It is structured as follows. The next section (Section II) will provide a brief review of the literature, followed by some empirical background on the socio-economic development of Uganda over the last few decades (Section III). The fourth section then discusses the power of education, the influence birth control could have, the linkage between fertility and health, the impacts a woman's job can have, and how working together as a community will be able to end the suppression of Ugandan women.

## **II. Literature Review**

As being one of the countries with the largest gender divide there have been many publications that discuss this current problem in Uganda. There is a variety of different suggestions for how to solve this problem as well as a considerable amount of criticism for the Ugandan government's attempts at fixing it. The following three publications discuss some of the most important issues revolving around this topic of gender discrimination in Uganda.

- Blacker and Opiyo (2005) wrote an article on "Fertility in Kenya and Uganda: A comparative Study of Trends and Determinants," where they point out that Uganda's women do not want to have many children but that there is a lack of birth control for these women. Ugandan women are getting married at an average age of just below 18 years and typically start having children within a year of getting married. With a lack of birth control and abortions being illegal, these women are stuck with children they cannot provide for. Most women in Uganda have an average of 6 children and are not wealthy enough to provide for all these children. Blacker and Opiyo (2005) also investigate the trends that occur with these women in Uganda and the spread of HIV/AIDS. Many HIV/AIDS infected husbands are not protecting their wives and the women cannot do anything about it. This causes HIV/AIDS to spread, and many of these young mothers are then also giving it to their future children. Blacker and Opiyo stress the desperate need of birth control in Uganda.
- An article by Ann Blanc and Brent Wolff (2001), entitled "Gender and Decision-Making over Condom Use in Two Districts in Uganda," discusses the difficulties women have discussing birth control in general with their husbands. Men typically have all the power in this relationship because they feel they are superior. Most women in Uganda do not want to keep having children but do not know how to bring up the use of a condom with their husbands. They are not educated and even though they have heard of condoms they are not aware that condoms can prevent the transmission of HIV/AIDS. Most of these women are too scared to confront their husbands. Essentially, Blanc and Wolf are trying to spread the

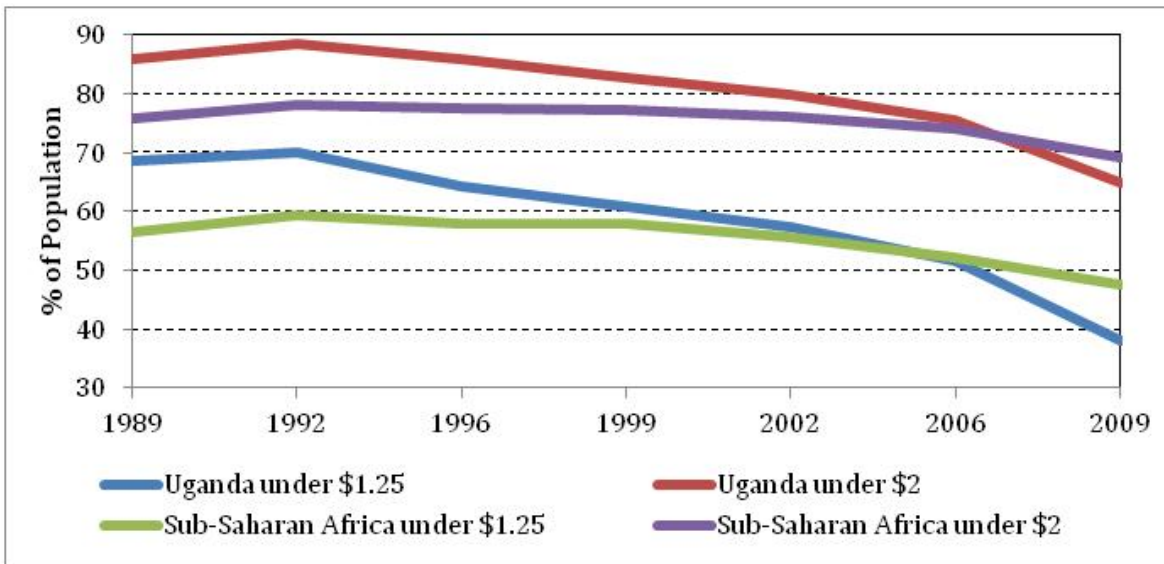
message that women need to be better educated so that they are willing to confront their husbands and can discuss topics such as the use of condoms.

- Nick Wadhams (2009) wrote a *Time Magazine* article on “The Battle in Uganda over Female Condoms.” In this article he explains the Ugandan government’s attempt at making condoms accessible for women in Uganda. With funding from the United Nations, the Ugandan government gave out 100,000 female condoms in efforts to stop the spread of HIV/AIDS. Trying to give women some control over their body, the Ugandan government thought this was a good first step. However, this has received criticism because just handing out condoms is not going to solve the problem. Wadhams believes that the government needs to do more to solve this problem. Additional problems are that the Ugandan society is not accustomed to female condoms. According to the article, many believe that female condoms will take a long time to become accepted into society but the Uganda government believes this is a first step to giving women a choice.

### III. Empirical Background

The ultimate factor to this suppression of women in Uganda is poverty. The women of Uganda cannot provide for their families because they are poor. They cannot try and change their lives because they are not educated. The people of Uganda are suffering through poverty. Currently, 65 percent of the Ugandan population are living on less than \$2.00 a day, while 38 percent are living on less than \$1.25 a day.<sup>2</sup>

**Figure 1: Percent of Population Living in Poverty, 1989-2009**



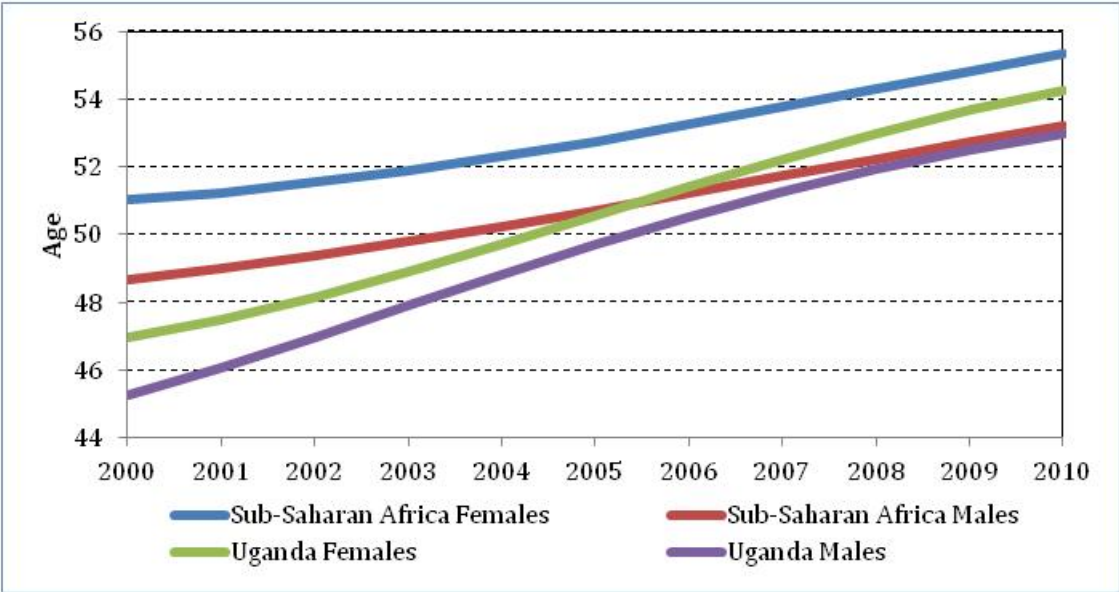
Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2012).

<sup>2</sup> World Bank (2012).

Even though poverty has started to decline in Uganda, these women are still living in it, which makes it difficult for them to have a say in their own lives. Figure 1 shows the decline of poverty in Uganda as well as in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) since about 1992. Until about 2006, Uganda had a greater percentage of their population living under \$2 a day and under \$1.25 a day than SSA. The progress made during the last decade is promising, but the degree of poverty in Uganda is with about 65 percent of the population living below \$2 a day and about 38 percent living below \$1.25 a day still serious.

As shown in Figure 2, despite progress, Uganda’s life expectancy is still low. The life expectancy of a female living in Uganda was 54 years in 2010, which was one year lower than the regional average of 55 years. Fortunately though, the gap in life expectancy between Ugandan and SSA women has become much smaller today than it was for example 10 years ago. The life expectancy for males in Uganda also was substantially below that of SSA males in 2000, but has (with about 53 years) now caught up with that of the average life expectancy of SSA’s males.<sup>3</sup> The fact that the male life expectancy has caught up with SSA, while that for females has not, seems to support the claim that gender discrimination is worse in Uganda than in SSA.

**Figure 2: Life Expectancy Rate, 2000-2009**

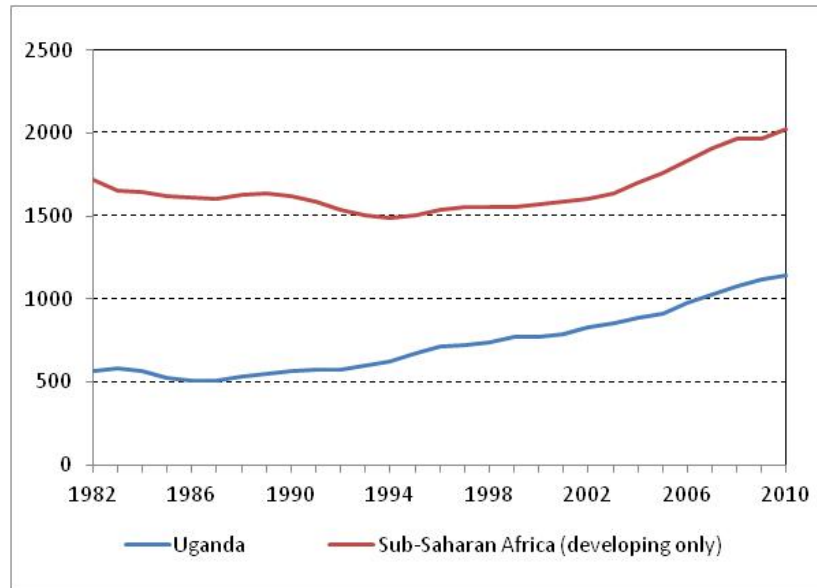


Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2012).

As shown in Figure 3, despite some setbacks due to the 2008 world economic crisis, Uganda has made substantial progress in increasing its GDP per capita, PPP (in constant 2005 international \$) since 1986. Uganda is however still one of the poorest countries in the world, and it is still lacking substantially behind the average of SSA. In 2010, Uganda’s GDP per capita, PPP (constant 2005 international \$) was only slightly more than half of SSA’s PPP-adjusted GDP per capita.

<sup>3</sup> World Bank (2012).

**Figure 3: GDP per capita, PPP (constant 2005 international \$), 1982-2010**



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2012).

## **IV. Discussion**

### **IV.1. The Power of Education**

Uganda is failing at giving females an education, which is allowing the gender divide to exist. Currently, only 65 percent of Ugandan females over the age of 15 are literate, while 83 percent of Ugandan men are literate.<sup>4</sup> This is a significant difference, and it is used by many men to suppress the ambitions of women. Being more educated allows Ugandan men to have more power than Ugandan women. With an education these women could change their lives.

In Uganda, more than 700,000 children between the ages of 6-12 have never attended schools with a majority being female.<sup>5</sup> The lack of a strong education system is affecting this country negatively. Even if children have attended school the problem of low education continues to exist because 2 out of 3 children attending primary school fail to complete primary school.<sup>6</sup> However boys are more likely to finish primary school than girls. In 2009, it was reported that 57.9 percent of boys would finish primary school, compared to 56.4 percent of girls. This recent data reflects a relatively small difference and a considerable improvement compared to 2001, when only 53.1 percent of the girls would complete school compared to 66.6 percent of the boys. Compared to the rest of the region, Uganda's education level is similar to its neighboring countries in recent years. However, in 2009 it was slightly lower than the SSA average, where 57.8 percent of females complete primary school and 59.2 percent of males finish school. Figure 4 shows the elementary school completion rates of children in Uganda and SSA.

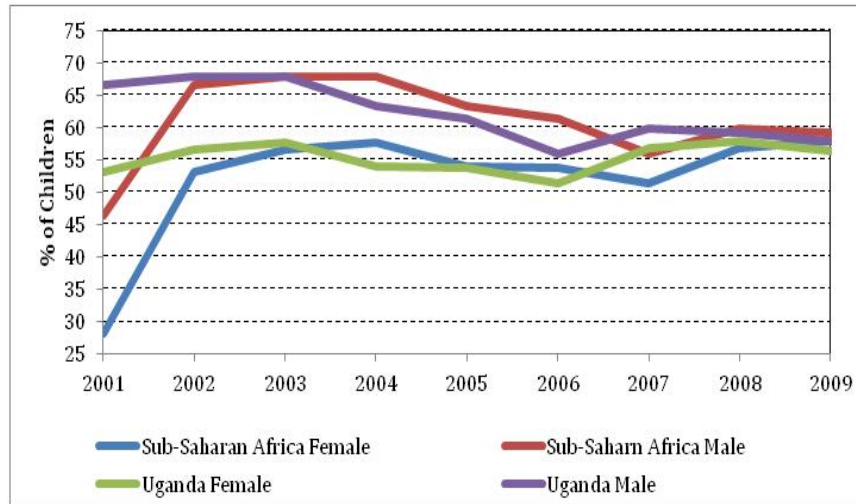
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<sup>4</sup> World Bank (2012).

<sup>5</sup> Nybo (2010).

<sup>6</sup> Nybo (2010).

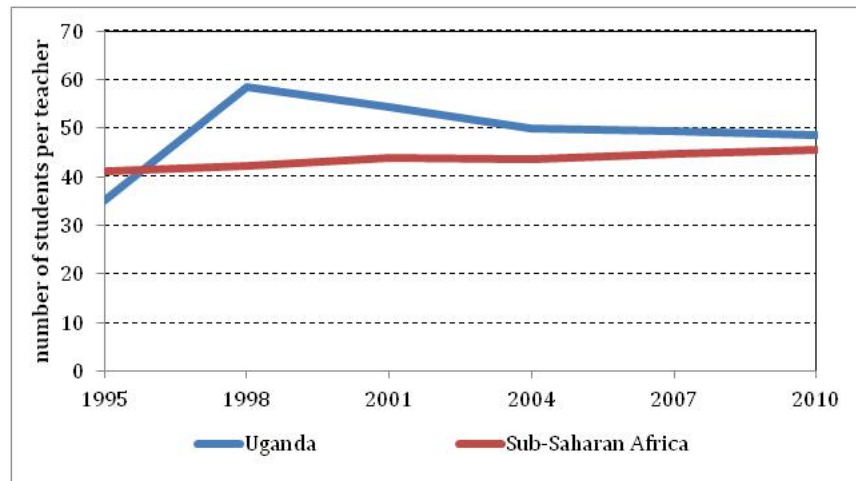
**Figure 4: Percent of Children Who Finish Primary School, 2001-2009**



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2012).

Uganda needs to invest in their youth and reconstruct their education system. Young females particularly need to be educated in order to prolong starting a family and in order to have a chance at earning an income. The number of girls under the age of 14 who are not currently in school continues to grow. In 2010, it was recorded that 265,626 females under the age of 14 were out of school. This is over 100,000 more than in the previous year, when there were 157,153 girls out of school.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, how much can these students who are enrolled actually learn with nearly 50 students per teacher? As shown in Figure 5, Uganda's student teacher ratios are slightly higher than the region's average of 45.6 students per teacher.

**Figure 5: Student Teacher Ratio, 1995-2010**



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2012).

<sup>7</sup> Hope Uganda (2012).

The Girl Effect is an organization that promotes the education of young girls living in poverty. The goal of this organization is to educate these young girls and give them a future so they do not get married off at young ages. A girl who is married off at a young age will continue the poverty cycle because their daughters will most likely not go to school and be married off at a young age, and so on. That is why this organization focuses on young girls' education to end this cycle. Girls who receive an education will 90 percent of the time invest their income into their family compared to the 35 percent of boys who are willing to do the same thing.<sup>8</sup>

The efforts of organizations like The Girl Effect are making a difference. One example is Peace Margaret, an orphan in Uganda, who has finally been able to go back to school (after a 4-year absence because she was forced to be a servant girl to earn money after her parents' death). Now with the support of UNICEF, Margaret has the support she needs in order to stay in school. Margaret said, "Let me go study and maybe in the future become an important person, not a housegirl."<sup>9</sup> These young girls have a desire to learn they just need support in doing so. They do not want to be housegirls and married off into society but if they do not have support, they do not have the finances to do this on their own. By giving young girls an education, it gives them hope for a better future and an end to this gender divide.

#### **IV.2. Influence Birth Control Could Have**

Ugandan women are forced to listen to their husbands because they do not have any say or power in their relationships. By implementing birth control in this society women could be empowered because they can now decide when to have children. Most of these women have on average 6 children.<sup>10</sup> This number is only one less child than the average from 1990, which is shocking because it shows that over the course of 20 years very little has changed. These young women have no choice because their husbands, who are typically much older, are in control. Even though the number of pregnant teens is declining, the fact that 24.9 percent of the females between 15-18 years old are mothers in this society is absolutely ridiculous.<sup>11</sup> Figure 6 below shows the slow decline of this trend.

Uganda has one of the highest population growth rates because birth control is not common. These people are accustomed to having large families with many children. However, the problem with this is that women therefore have no say in the number of children they have. Many of these women do not want many children but are forced to have unprotected sex with their husbands. Men feel that condoms are not necessary which also helps spread diseases such as HIV/Aids. Birth control would empower these women in having a choice with their lives. There is no reason that there should be a gender divide in a marriage. A woman should be able to say when she wants to have sex and not be subject to her husband's desire. Furthermore, only 13 percent of females between the ages of 15-25 use condoms.<sup>12</sup> This number is extremely low and shows the little access that women have to condoms, mostly due to their husbands not allowing them to use condoms.

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<sup>8</sup> Girl Effect (2012).

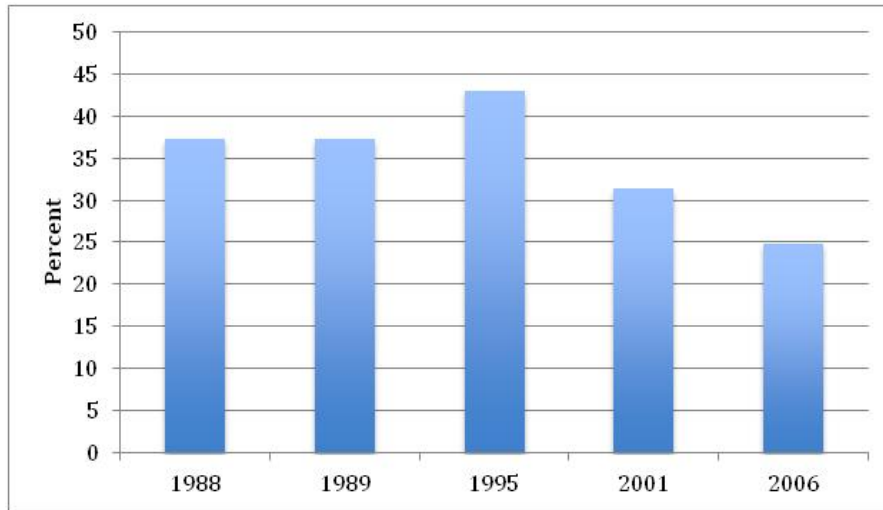
<sup>9</sup> Nybo (2010).

<sup>10</sup> Wadhams (2009).

<sup>11</sup> World Bank (2012).

<sup>12</sup> Blacker and Opiyo (2005).

**Figure 6: Percent of Teenage Mothers, 1988-2006**



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2012).

The implementation of birth control into Uganda would help empower these women. It would allow them to have a choice in their own body. The Ugandan government has tried to help by handing out female condoms. Randomly handing out condoms does not solve this problem. The problem is that males in society do not accept birth control and this has to change in order to protect these women. They do not want to keep having children especially if they are passing down harmful diseases to them. Currently in Uganda there is only a 21 percent contraceptive prevalence, which means only 21 percent of the entire female population use some form of birth control.<sup>13</sup> This is an extremely low number so birth control needs to start being more accessible for women. By making birth control more accessible it is giving women more control over their lives.

### **IV.3. Fertility and Health**

One of the biggest problems of concern for the women of Uganda is the spread of HIV. The use of condoms in this country could help stop the spread of this disease. Uganda is one of the most reproductive countries in the world with most females have on average 6 children.<sup>14</sup> If a mother has HIV she now has just given it to her children. The number of children who are born with HIV continues to grow each year in Uganda. In the past 20 years this number has drastically increased. In 1990 there were only 55,000 children born with HIV. Today that number has more than doubled in 2009 with 150,000 children being born with HIV.<sup>15</sup> Figure 7 shows the growth and more recent stabilization of HIV in Ugandan children.

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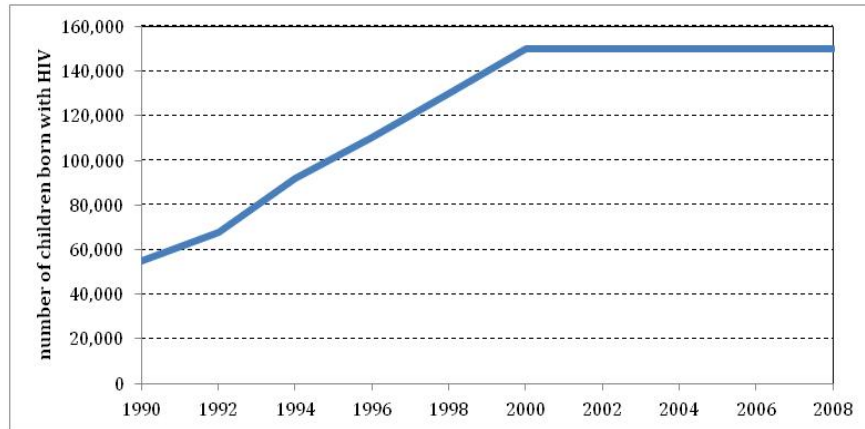
<sup>13</sup> Bunting (2008).

<sup>14</sup> Blanc and Wolf (2001).

<sup>15</sup> World Bank (2012).



**Figure 7: Number of Children Born with HIV, 1990-2008**

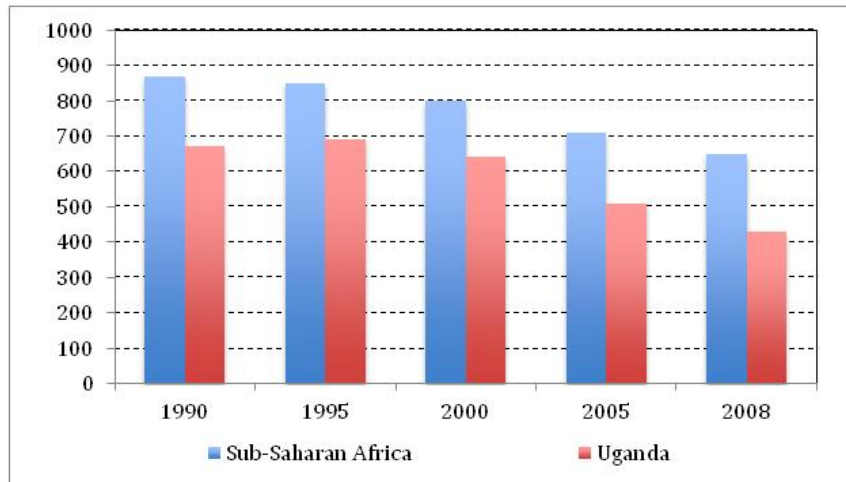


Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2012).

In Uganda many women do not receive the proper medical attention while being pregnant. Many deaths occur during birth because of a lack of facilities for these women as well as a lack of staff. In 2006, only 41.9 percent of Ugandan births were assisted by skilled staff members, which is slightly below that of SSA, where 46.1 percent of births were assisted by skilled staff members.<sup>16</sup>

Having a child in this impoverished country can be dangerous. In Uganda, 430 women die out of every 100,000 births, while 63 infants die for every 1,000 births.<sup>17</sup> While these numbers are lower than the Sub-Saharan African region (see Figure 8 below), these numbers are overall still very high and that is why medical attention needs to be brought to Uganda in order to help these women. Men do not seem to care because they are not the ones at risk during birth.

**Figure 8: Estimated Maternal Mortality Ratio per 100,000 Live Births, 1990-2008**



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2012).

<sup>16</sup> World Bank (2012).

<sup>17</sup> World Bank (2012).

#### IV.4. Effects of Having a Job

Some organizations have devoted themselves to helping the women of Uganda provide for themselves. The main goal of these organizations is to teach these women some kind of skill or trait that they can use to earn money. With this money they can now provide for their family if they have one or provide for themselves, so they are not forced into a marriage. Simply giving these women a way to earn money has drastically changed the course of their lives.

- Krochet Kids International is an organization that was created with the mission of empowering people to rise above poverty. This organization gives poor women the opportunity to make a living for themselves. The company's vision is to, "create sustainable economic development programs that support holistic growth of individuals and communities within developing nations."<sup>18</sup> This is what they have done for the women of Uganda. This organization teaches women in Uganda how to simply crochet a hat. By teaching and training them how to do this they have now provided these women with a steady source of income to provide for their family. These hats are then sold all across the world and each woman signs them, which allows customers to see who made their hat as well as whose lives they have helped. This organization helps empower women because it makes them able to earn a living on their own. Currently there are 150 Ugandan women employed by this organization.<sup>19</sup> One Ugandan woman stated, "I send my gratitude and pray that they should continue to help the vulnerable women outside the program."<sup>20</sup> This program has changed the lives of many women and has given them hope for the future.
- Bead for Life is another organization that has devoted its efforts to empowering the women of Uganda by simply giving them a job. This opportunity has truly changed the lives of these women. Like Krochet Kids this nonprofit organization helps the women of Uganda by training them to make jewelry and then selling it. These women make beaded necklaces and bracelets and get to receive the profits from their work. This organization gives women hope of a better future for their family because it helps them to save money to start their own businesses. In 2011 this organization helped 1,400 families in Uganda.<sup>21</sup> This organization has impacted the people of Uganda tremendously and has helped many women provide for their families. 74 percent of women enrolled in this program are successful at starting their own businesses where they can then be their own bosses. This organization gives the women of this country a chance they never expected to pursue their own careers.

Figure 9 shows the percent of females employed between the ages of 15-24 in Uganda as well as in SSA. In Uganda, this number is declining. In 1994, 63.6 percent of females between these ages were employed. About 15 years later, only 54.4 percent of females between the ages of 15-24 were employed in Uganda.<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, the percentage of females working continues to increase slightly in the region; the SSA numbers are however still below those of Uganda. The fact that a higher percentage of females between the ages of 15-24 are working in Uganda than in SSA does however not necessarily mean that Ugandan women have more say.

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<sup>18</sup> Krochet Kids International (2012).

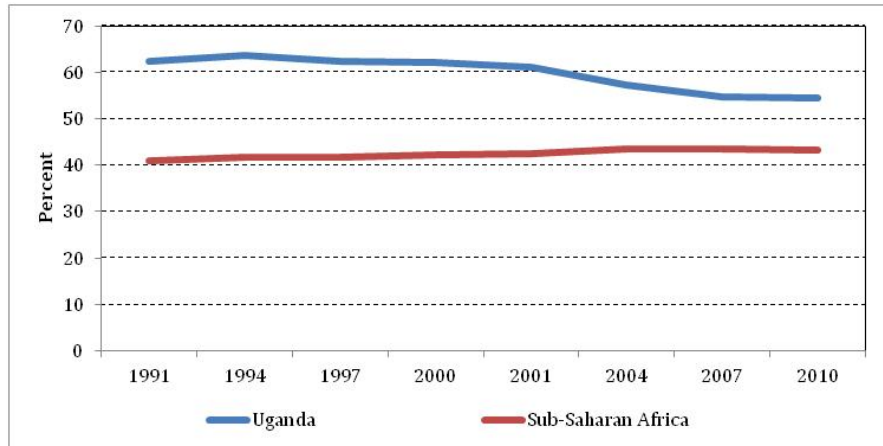
<sup>19</sup> Gustines (2012).

<sup>20</sup> Krochet Kids International (2012).

<sup>21</sup> Bead for Life (2012).

<sup>22</sup> World Bank (2012).

**Figure 9: Percentage of Females Ages 15-24 Employed, 1991-2010**



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2012).

Krochet Kids International and Bead for Life give the women of Uganda hope that more women will have jobs. Having their own income and a steady job allow these women to feel empowered. They now can make decisions in their own life and do not rely on men. Having their own source of income can stop the gender divide. Women do not have to depend on any man or be forced to stay with abusive husbands. There needs to be more organization like these to help the women of Uganda fight against this gender divide. A steady source of income helps these women overcome poverty, which then allows them to overcome the gender divide.

#### **IV.5. Community Outreach**

The women of Uganda need to realize that they are not in this alone. By working together, they will be able to overcome this gender divide. Mothers need to stop marrying off their daughters in order to end this poverty cycle. By working together as a community, they will be able to end this unfair suppression. Placing new community standards such as making child marriage illegal will help these women. By improving the overall living standards in these communities, the quality of life will increase and so will chances of equality.

- Empower a Child is an organization based out of Uganda that rebuilds communities. This organization's goal is to stop poverty in an area by helping the families and children have better lives. They try and improve the quality of life for female children in Uganda. However, this organization works with the community as a whole helping developing new community standards and rules and regulations. All children are to stay in school and become involved in group activities. They change communities as a whole and educate children to believing in gender equality. They have created a healthy living environment for these children called Remand home, where they can live and learn without being forced to work or to get married. Currently there are around 200 children in this program.<sup>23</sup>
- Another organization similar to Empower a Child is the Uganda Rural Fund.<sup>24</sup> This

<sup>23</sup> Empower a Child (2012).

<sup>24</sup> Lillpopp (2012).

organization helps the community as a whole in forming food supplies, building homes, spreading education and helping empower women. This group helps women get elected to community positions so they can now have an important role in community standards. They help Ugandan women form activist groups and show them how they can fight for their rights. This group empowers women because it shows them that they can overcome this divide and have their voices heard.

These two organizations also give women hope for a better future because they are changing the role women play in the community. By instilling the beliefs that it is acceptable for women to form groups and fight back they now have hope. To overcome the gender divide in Uganda, changes have to start in the Ugandan community.

## V. Conclusion

Despite some progress, Uganda remains stuck with a major problem of gender inequality. The women of Uganda need help now in order to become equal to men in society. More organizations needed to be created and or the programs of existing organizations need to be rolled out in order to stop men from suppressing women in Uganda. By implementing a proper education system in Uganda this will not only help create equality between the genders but will benefit society as a whole. Educating the youth of Uganda will help the economy and stop the cycle of poverty. With an education, children of Uganda, particularly young girls, can drastically alter their future and the future of their own children.

Something as simple as birth control could change this country for the better. Uganda needs to start offering more options for birth control, especially for young women. They need to have access to this in order to prevent them from having so many children. And the society needs to learn to socially accept this. With birth control becoming a normal part of everyday life this could slow down population growth rates and help achieving higher GDP per capita growth rates.

People need to take action now and help Uganda to break the gender divide that is ruining the lives of far too many women. By implementing more programs such as Krochet for Kids and Bead for Life, women will have successful jobs and be able to provide for their families. By having a job, an education, and birth control there is no reason they cannot be equal to their male counterparts, and actually better the situation for everybody in Uganda.

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