

By Betty Amankwiri

A new study by a group of Makerere University researchers has established that COVID-19 restrictions on trade and transport have pushed many women and girls in the slums into prostitution.

The research, done by three lecturers in the College of Humanities and Social Sciences, revealed that in some families, mothers and their underage daughters engaged openly in the sex work business, most times with the approval of their husbands, in order to sustain their families.

"During one of the focused group discussions, a man said he caught his wife with another man, and she asked him, 'where do you think the food you eat comes from?' He had no choice but to keep quiet," said Dr Veneranda Mbabazi, a senior lecturer in the department of religion and peace studies.

Mbabazi, who was part of the research team, said the restrictions that came with COVID-19 saw many men in the slums of Katanga, Kikoni, Kivulu and Kisenyi lose their legitimacy as family heads since they could no longer provide for the family. Many had lost their jobs when businesses were shutdown.

#### SEX FOR POSHO AND BEANS

The researchers said the women and girls went as low as exchanging their bodies for maize flour and beans so as to be able to feed their families.

The study, 'Building peaceful urban communities in Kampala City Amidst COVID-19 and beyond' was done with funding from the Research and Innovation Fund (RIF), which was set up by Makerere University and funded by the Government.

It was conducted by Dr Samson Barigye, a lecturer in the department of religion and peace studies, Dr Mbabazi and Dr Charlotte Matumbo.

The trio set out to find the types and nature of conflicts in Kampala's slum areas as a result of COVID-19. They also sought to build the capacity of slum leaders to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on the slum population and to establish a community-owned mechanism for conflict resolution.

The study found that while many women and girls were pushed into prostitution, the men were being

# COVID-19: SLUM WOMEN FORCED INTO SEX FOR MONEY – REPORT

PHOTO BY IMAN KABUVE



**Dixon Kamukama, Pastor Martin Ssempe and Charlotte Matumbo interacting after the COVID-19 research dissemination event at Makerere University yesterday**

denied their conjugal rights, thereby exacerbating conflicts in the family.

Matumbo said the study found that this was the result of the return of children from school due to their being closed as a preventive measure against the spread of COVID-19.

"Many slums are single-roomed. The parents sleep in the same room with their children. So, the women found it hard to give into their husbands conjugal demands," she said.

Matumbo said the women were

also stressed as a result of family responsibilities and would deny their husbands sex as a punishment for their inability to provide.

She said this led to gender-based violence, family separation and violence against children. In most

instances, she said, the children run to the streets in search of safety.

Mbabazi, in her presentation of the findings, said conflicts between landlords and tenants was also exacerbated since many tenants lost their sources of income and were unable to pay rent.

Other study findings include neglect of the elderly, widows, persons with disabilities, orphans and the terminally ill. Others are inaccessibility of medical services, increased malnutrition, early and forced marriages as well as unwanted pregnancies.

## FUTURE

Barigye, who was the principal researcher, said there is need for the Government to establish a centre for street children, especially for those who were pushed onto the streets as a consequence of COVID-19.

He said there is also a need to establish a mechanism for inclusion and participation of usually excluded groups of the population – the orphans, elderly, widows and street children, and give them assistance based on their expressed needs.

"Residents of urban slums will continue experiencing the consequences of COVID-19 for the foreseeable future. As such there is need to continue giving food and other essential services to the most vulnerable groups in these areas," he said.