

Tap water in several schools has been disconnected due to non-payment of bills while water sources in certain communities have been vandalised.

BY DAVID SEKAYINGA

**A** persistent shortage of safe and clean water in Kalangala schools is worsening menstrual hygiene challenges for thousands of girls, forcing many to miss lessons during their periods, authorities have said.

Kalangala District has 77 schools spread across 11 of its 64 habitable islands, but only 35 percent have access to safe and clean water. Also, more than half of the schools lack incinerators or proper disposal facilities, leaving many girls with no option but to throw used pads in pit-latrines.

School administrators said most schools depend on rainwater or unsafe lake water, making it difficult for girls to manage menstruation with dignity.

"If we fail to get water from the lake, girls do not clean themselves and end up staying away from class to avoid embarrassment," Ms Margret Kenshubi, the head teacher of St Victor Mulabana Primary School, explained during an interview last Tuesday.

She added: "Some children tell us they are unwell, but when we follow up, we discover they feared being embarrassed because water was not available."

St Victor Mulabana Primary School, with 480 pupils, relies on rainwater stored in tanks. During dry spells, pupils walk about 100 metres to the lake to fetch water, despite the risk of being attacked by crocodiles.

"We rely on fishermen to alert us about crocodiles. When no one is around, children cannot go to the lake until we are certain it is safe," Ms Kenshubi said. The school has a double four-stance pit latrine for girls, but it lacks a functional water system.

"There is a pit-latrine we advise them to use, but they fear it because it is far and everyone sees them walking there. It is difficult for them to maintain cleanliness at school so they decide to stay at home," she added.

The same crisis extends across the seven sub-counties of Kalangala, with challenges more severe in remote islands.

In Bunyama Parish (Bujumba Sub-county), the only water source at Bunyama Primary School was vandal-

# Water crisis worsens learners' menstrual woes in Kalangala



Pupils at one of the schools where water supply was cut off in Kalangala District due to accumulated bills. PHOTO/DAVID SEKAYINGA

ised, forcing girls to fetch water from the lake. At Betta and Bugoma primary schools – both in Mugoye Sub-county, tap water was disconnected due to unpaid bills.

"We owe Kalangala Infrastructure Services (KIS) Shs2 million. After failing to clear the bill, the water was cut off," Ms Innocent Marie Nandutto, the head

teacher of Betta Primary School, said.

She said Oil Palm Uganda Limited (OPUL) now occasionally sends a water bowser to the school to clean pit-latrines and classrooms. Girls also rely on that water for personal hygiene.

Kalangala District Education Officer Deo Nseko confirmed that inadequate water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH)

facilities remain a major challenge in the island district.

"Some schools lack enough pit-latrines, washrooms, and water, which compromises sanitation and hygiene," he said.

The 2023 Menstrual Health Guidelines for schools require every school to have adequate water supply, separate toilets for girls, boys and learners with disabilities as well as water, toilet paper and soap. It further says a school should

have changing rooms and washrooms for girls and incinerators or safe disposal facilities. However, several schools in Kalangala cannot meet these standards due to funding and infrastructure gaps.

A 2017 sector performance report by the Ministry of Water and Environment and the Ministry of Education and Sports indicates national WASH standards are far from being met.

"One toilet for every 40 children is the standard, but today the ratio stands at 1:71," part of the report states.

The Kalangala District water officer, Mr Lawrence Lweera, said the Shs195 million allocation to the district water department per year is not enough.

"With this allocation, the district can only build one water system every three years because each costs more than Shs300 million," he said.

Mr Lweera added: "We need additional funding to expand safe water coverage to schools."

Kalangala District Health Secretary Irene Nakanwagi said government water systems are often placed in areas with larger populations, leaving out some schools that are located far away.

She cited Misonzi Landing Site in Bufumira Sub-county, where a community water project exists, but Lulamba Primary School remains unserved because additional funding to extend the system was unavailable.

"We are engaging KIS to introduce a separate water tariff for schools and health centres," she said, adding that newly-constructed seed schools in the district also lack appropriate sanitation facilities, especially for girls.

"Government did not follow guidelines for girls' toilets. Before construction starts, building plans must include washrooms," Ms Nakanwagi said.

Mr Godfrey Adubi, the Kalangala District health inspector, warned that girls who lack access to clean water risk contracting infections such as candida and other diseases from unsafe lake water.

"Girls risk infections affecting their private parts. Fetching unsafe water exposes them to cholera and dysentery," he said, adding that a lack of WASH facilities contributes to increased absenteeism during menstruation. The district's school dropout rate currently stands at 34 percent.

## SCHOOL GETS HELP

Amref Uganda, under its Heroes for Gender Transformative Action programme, last week launched a solar-powered water system in Mulabana Parish to address the issue.

The Shs310 million project will supply water to St Victor Mulabana Primary School, Mulabana Health Centre II, Mabigo and Lwabalega villages, benefiting more than 2,000 residents.

"We have also built a girls' toilet

with washrooms, changing rooms, water, soap and an incinerator for safe disposal of pads," Mr Issa Sematimba Kasozi, the WASH project manager, said.

He said the new facilities will allow girls to manage their periods safely and privately, giving them confidence to stay in school.

The School Management Committee vice chairperson, Mr Ronald Mugerwa, said parents had raised Shs1.7 million to start a water project at St Victor Mulabana Primary School. However, this money was

not enough. "The money collected shall now be used to maintain the school's water source," Mr Mugerwa said.

Hilary Namaganda, a pupil of St Victor Mulabana Primary School, says several girls, like herself, will no longer miss lessons because there is now a functional water system.

"They have taught us how to use reusable pads and maintain personal hygiene, and sometimes give us modern pads. This has helped us stay in school," she said.