

Unsafe teen abortions fuel reproductive health crisis

MASINDI. Teenage girls in Masindi District are increasingly turning to unsafe herbal mixtures and crude home methods to terminate unwanted pregnancies.

Health workers and community leaders warn that the practice, driven by poverty, fear of stigma, and limited access to reproductive health information, is slowly escalating into a public health emergency, especially in rural and peri-urban areas like Kijura, Kyema, Kihande, Nyangahya, and several landing sites in Budongo Sub-county.

Girls interviewed say they choose herbs because they cannot afford medical services, fear being judged by health workers or their families, or simply do not know where to seek confidential and safe care.

They say as a result, many resort to roadside vendors, peers, or local herbalists who offer concoctions believed to "remove" pregnancies. Health workers say these choices often end in dangerous complications, severe infections, and long-term reproductive damage.

Aisha (not her real name), a 16-year-old from Kyema Village, says she termi-

nated her two-month pregnancy using bitter herbs due to fear.

"I was scared. I had no money, and I couldn't tell my parents. I bought herbs from a woman at the market in Masindi Town, who told me to drink them at night. After taking them, I got severe stomach pain for many hours, and then I started bleeding for more than three days," she says.

She says she stayed home throughout the ordeal for fear of being questioned, but she still suffers from persistent lower abdominal pain to this day.

Similarly, Maria (not her real name), a Senior Three student, says she became pregnant at 16 and was afraid to tell her parents.

"A friend gave me herbs and told me to boil them and drink the water. I took them for two days and collapsed after heavy bleeding," she says.

Maria adds that she survived only because neighbours rushed her to Masindi Hospital in time.

In Kijanja Village, a 17-year-old girl says she hid her bleeding for two days

Issue.
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- Ms Getrude Tusiime, a nurse.

after taking a herbal mixture given to her by a friend.

"I could not tell my mother. She would beat me, but it was fortunate I fainted before my relatives, who realised I needed urgent medical attention," she says.

In Kijura and Kirasa, suburbs of Masindi Municipality, several teenage girls told this reporter that they personally know someone who has used herbs or attempted unsafe abortion methods after becoming pregnant.

They say some boil strong herbal mixtures recommended by friends, while others swallow large amounts of painkillers, detergent, bitter plant roots, or concoctions secretly sold by roadside women.

Uganda continues to face high rates of teenage pregnancy. According to national data, about one in four teenage girls becomes pregnant each year.

The Guttmacher Institute estimates that 57,000 girls aged 15 to 19 undergo abortions annually in Uganda, most of them unsafe due to legal restrictions, stigma, and lack of access to youth-friendly reproductive health services.

Health workers across Masindi say they see the consequences of these silent attempts every week.

Ms Getrude Tusiime, a nurse at a private clinic in Kijura, says they receive at least two teenage girls weekly with signs of incomplete abortion, infection, or severe bleeding.

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early because they don't want people to know they're pregnant. By the time we see them, their wombs are already infected or damaged. Some may never have children in the future. It is very sad," she says.

Ms Tusiime says the district urgently needs stronger community education about pregnancy prevention, confidential counselling spaces, and youth-friendly services that teenagers can trust.

Mr Richard Mukasa, a teacher at Bujenje Primary School, says schools are quietly losing girls.

"We lost three girls in just one term because of pregnancy. Some stop coming after they realise they are expecting. Others attempt unsafe methods and fall sick. The lack of open conversations about reproductive health is costing us many young lives and futures," he says.

He says the combination of cultural silence, poverty, limited access to contraception, and fear of judgment has created a cycle where girls feel trapped with no safe options.