

For many survivors, the physical pain is matched by stigma, fear and long-term trauma.

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Unsafe abortions continue to quietly claim the lives of women in Busoga Sub-region, with medical experts warning that the scale of the crisis is far bigger than official figures suggest.

According to the 2024/2025 Annual Maternal, Newborn, and Child Health (MNCH) and Maternal and Perinatal Death Surveillance and Response (MPDSR) report, Uganda's maternal mortality ratio stands at 189 deaths per 100,000 live births. About four percent of these deaths are attributed to complications arising from unsafe abortions.

However, health experts say the situation in Busoga is more severe. Speaking during a media engagement organised by the Health Journalists Network Uganda (HEJNU) in Jinja, Dr Aggrey Bameka, a member of the Association of Obstetricians and Gynecologists of Uganda, said unsafe abortions account for about seven percent of pregnancy-related deaths in the sub-region.

"Abortion cases, especially in the first trimester, are often underreported. Some women mistake early pregnancy loss for a delayed or heavy period, while others seek help from traditional healers or private providers. Stigma and fear of legal consequences also keep many cases out of official records," he said.

He explained that hospitals frequently receive women in critical condition after failed attempts to terminate pregnancies using unsafe methods or through unqualified individuals.

"We receive patients with perforated uteruses, damaged intestines, severe infections, and excessive bleeding. Some end up losing their uterus, while others die from complications," Dr Bameka, also a gynaecologist at Buwenge General Hospital in Jinja District, said. Data shared at the meeting further indicate that while unsafe abortion is often associated with teenagers, statistics indicate that 63 percent of women who

How abortion is eating away Busoga's future



To curb unintended pregnancies, doctors urge mothers to adopt immediate postpartum family planning. Unsafe abortions account for about seven percent of pregnancy-related deaths in Busoga Sub-region. PHOTO/SHUTTERSTOCK

die due to unsafe abortions are aged 25 years and above.

"Unsafe abortion is no longer mainly a teenage problem. Today, many women seeking abortions are adults, often married and sometimes accompanied by their spouses, and some even turn to unlicensed herbalists," Dr Bameka said.

He noted that misinformation around childbirth, particularly caesarean sections, is pushing some women into risky decisions.

To curb unintended pregnancies, Dr Bameka urged mothers to adopt im-

mediate postpartum family planning, saying contraception started soon after childbirth helps women recover and plan future pregnancies safely.

Dr Bameka said unintended pregnancies remain the main driver of unsafe abortions. Other contributing factors include domestic violence, financial instability, unstable relationships, and low use of modern contraceptives.

"Many women do not embrace long-term family planning methods that can last between three and 10 years, yet these are more effective in

preventing unplanned pregnancies," he said.

Dr Simon Peter Kayondo, an obstetrician and gynaecologist, said Uganda's modern contraceptive prevalence rate remains low at about 38 percent.

"Many people fear long-term methods, yet they are the most effective in preventing unplanned pregnancies," Dr Kayondo noted.

He said stigma and fear of arrest often delay women from seeking timely medical care.

"Some women report bleeding for weeks before coming to the hospital because they fear being judged or arrested, yet post-abortion care is available to every woman regardless of how the

KEY FACTS

- Uganda's maternal mortality ratio is 189 deaths per 100,000 live births.
- About four percent of maternal deaths nationally are linked to unsafe abortions.
- In Busoga, unsafe abortions account for seven percent of pregnancy-related deaths.
- 63 percent of women who die from unsafe abortion are aged 25 years and above.
- Uganda's modern contraceptive prevalence rate stands at about 38 percent.

abortion started, and it is free of charge in government hospitals," he said.

Dr Kayondo called for expanded harm-reduction strategies, stronger counselling, and improved post-abortion care services. He warned that unsafe abortion carries deep social and economic consequences, including stigma, family rejection, psychological trauma, and financial strain due to costly treatment.

One survivor, who asked to remain anonymous, recounted her ordeal. "I had an unsafe abortion while still in school during Covid-19. I took herbal medicine and suffered pain for weeks. I eventually collapsed at home. At the hospital, doctors confirmed the fetus had died. The experience, the pain, and the bleeding were traumatic. I also spent a lot of money," she said.

Legal expert Paul Watuwa clarified that abortion in Uganda is not entirely illegal but is highly restricted. "The law protects the unborn child but provides exceptions where the mother's life is in danger. Outside those circumstances, procuring abortion remains a criminal offence," Mr Watuwa said.

