

SOME WOMEN DELIVER IN BOATS WHILE TRYING TO REACH HEALTH FACILITIES

Portable scanner transforms maternal care in Kalangala

KALANGALA

By Samuel Nkuba

Every pregnant mother is expected to undergo at least two ultrasound scans; one at five months and another at nine months to safeguard both her life and that of her unborn child.

However, for many women living on Kalangala's scattered islands, accessing these essential services remains a distant dream.

Fred Kabanda, who is in charge of Mulabana Health Centre II in Bujjumba sub-county, said a significant number of expectant mothers do not undergo scans.

"It is vital to know if the baby inside was formed well at five months, then later to understand its weight, gender, the fluid in the womb if it is enough, and to check whether there are no complications," he said.

Kabanda said while health workers can conduct physical examinations, they are limited in detecting internal conditions without imaging technology.

"We can check what is on the surface, but not what is inside, leaving it to machines known as scans," he said.

Despite its importance, ultrasound access is constrained by policy and geography. Government guidelines authorise scanning services only at health centre IV level.

In Kalangala district, which comprises 64 inhabited islands with 16 health centres, only two facilities, including Kalangala Health Centre IV,

are permitted to offer the service.

Kabanda said many mothers referred for scans fail to travel because of prohibitive transport costs.

For an island woman, accessing scanning services can cost over sh100,000. This amount covers boat transport to and from the islands, accommodation and, in some cases, fees at a private facility.

The situation is compounded by social challenges. Many women are single mothers, abandoned after conception. Some struggle to survive by relying on multiple partners for basic necessities.

The consequences of limited scanning services are severe. Cases of ectopic pregnancies, premature births and emergency caesarean sections are common. Some women even give birth in boats while attempting to reach health facilities, a frequent occurrence in Kalangala.

In 2024, Honest Katusiime, 27, a resident of Kussu landing site in Bufumira sub-county, experienced a tragic loss attributed to delayed scanning.

"The tragedy happened after getting these scanning services during a health outreach on Kitobo Island by Bridge to Health [a non-governmental organisation], where they discovered my eight-days-dead twins. I had to go for advanced health care," she said.

RESTORING HOPE

Hope has emerged following the donation of more than 10 handheld ultrasound scanners and three digital stethoscopes by Bridge to Health after

DOCTOR LAUDS INNOVATION

Dr Frank Kisakye, who is in charge of Kalangala Health Centre IV, said the handheld devices have streamlined workflow at the facility.

"I don't need to transport a patient across the hospital for imaging. I can bring the device into the room, do the exam, disinfect it and move on," he said.

a week-long health camp organised in partnership with Kalangala Health Centre IV.

Dr Michael Suuna, a medical officer at Bukasa Health Centre IV, described the new diagnostic tools as transformative.

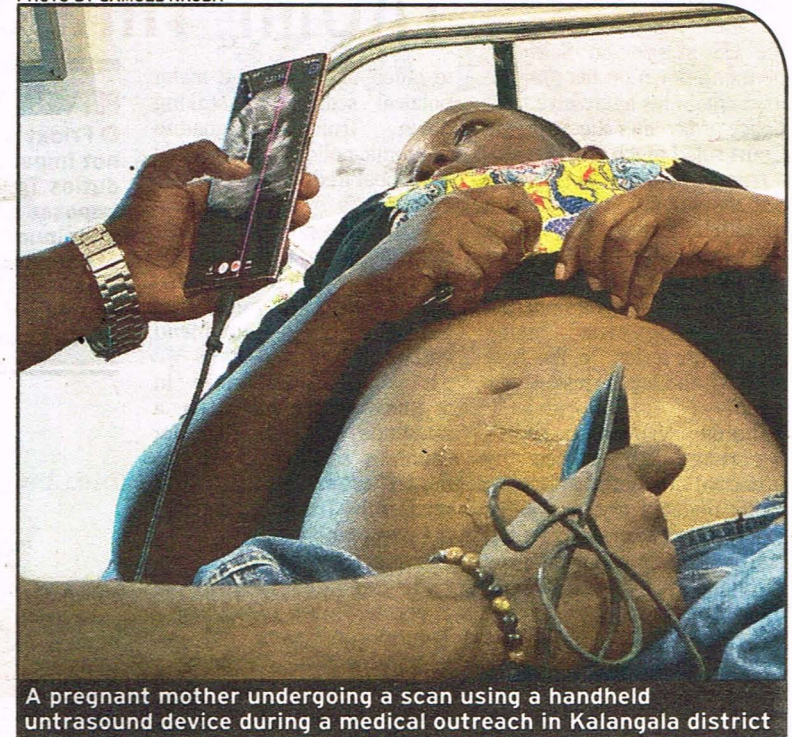
"These advanced stethoscopes allow us to clearly hear heart, lung and abdominal sounds that may indicate disease more accurately and faster than normal stethoscopes," he said.

He said in noisy environments, subtle heart sounds can easily be missed with conventional equipment. Digital stethoscopes enhance clarity and incorporate artificial intelligence to support accurate diagnosis.

"That improves patient outcomes because you make the right diagnosis at the right time," Suuna said.

The portable ultrasound devices are particularly valuable in areas with unreliable electricity since they can be connected to smartphones.

PHOTO BY SAMUEL NKUBA



A pregnant mother undergoing a scan using a handheld ultrasound device during a medical outreach in Kalangala district

Dr Ami Kurzweil, an emergency medicine physician based in California and director of Ultrasound Fellowships at Eisenhower Medical Centre in the US, highlighted the broader impact of portable imaging in low-resource settings.

He said portable ultrasound devices such as the Butterfly iQ, which use "ultrasound-on-a-chip" technology and connect to smartphones, are revolutionising diagnosis in remote areas.

"Ultrasound allows us to see inside the body, the liver, kidneys, heart and lungs. Without it, you miss critical conditions," Kurzweil said.

He cited a case during the outreach where an infant was found to have a heart defect.

"Within 30 seconds, you can identify a serious problem and arrange a referral. Without the technology, you might miss that," Kurzweil said.

STRUCTURAL CHALLENGES REMAIN

Despite the technological breakthrough, Kalangala Woman MP Helen Nakimuli said staffing and infrastructure shortages continue to

undermine service delivery.

She said a scanning machine at Bukasa Health Centre IV remains non-functional due to lack of trained personnel.

"It does not make sense for a patient to visit a nearby facility only to be referred elsewhere because of lack of equipment or staff. It is better for the Government to allocate resources with responsible personnel," she said.

On many islands, medical outreaches remain a lifeline. Health workers often improvise; at times hanging intravenous drips on trees to serve patients in areas without permanent facilities. For some residents, the options are limited to self-medication without diagnosis or waiting for periodic outreach camps.

Haruna Mujabi endured four days of severe stomach pain before seeking help at one such camp.

"When I heard of it, my colleague drove me and I got scanned, treated until I was feeling better," he says.

During the recent medical camp, 1,600 patients across the islands were diagnosed and treated for various conditions, including dental problems.