

# HER VISION

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Teenage mothers and gender-based violence survivors are either enrolled back in school or skilled



The teenage pregnancy rate in Kalangala district has dropped from 32% to 19%

## TEENAGE PREGNANCY, DEFILEMENT CASES DROP IN KALANGALA

**KALANGALA HAS ALWAYS RANKED AMONG THE DISTRICTS WITH HIGH RATES OF TEENAGE PREGNANCIES, DEFILEMENT AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE. BY 13 YEARS, MANY GIRLS ARE EITHER PREGNANT, BREASTFEEDING OR ARE ENGAGING IN TRANSACTIONAL SEX. HOWEVER, DISTRICT OFFICIALS REPORT A SHARP DROP IN THE ABOVE CASES, RITAH MUKASA WRITES**

**B**ased on the 2024 National Population and Housing Census data, Kalangala, an island district, has a population of over 74,000 people. Of these, more than 29,000 are women, representing 39%. Children (0-17 years) are 27,000. However, most of these women and children have experienced physical and sexual violence. Willy Nkumbi, the district senior probation and social affairs officer, says over the last six years, a lot has happened on ground. The district, Police and other stakeholders under the Heroes for Gender Transformative Action consortium have put up a concerted fight against sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), HIV and teenage pregnancies. And their sweat has paid off. The teenage pregnancy rate has dropped from 32% to 19%. Simply put; 32 out of every 100 girls (aged 15-19) had experienced at least one pregnancy. From 2021-2023,

Kalangala recorded 60% prevalence of SGBV among women aged 15-49, with over 30 cases registered monthly. These have dropped to 20%. Besides, defilement was widespread at 26% with aggravated defilement (5-6 years) standing at 15% and 26% for girls between 14-17 years. "Majority of these girls were defiled by older men," Nkumbi says. And many perpetrators would get away with it. Currently, defilement stands at 22%. Nkumbi breaks it down further: "For every 100 girls that are below 14 years, about 26% of them had been defiled by 2021." Moreover, the HIV prevalence was also high at 18% but it has since fallen to 13.1%. Though still high, Nkumbi says, looking back where it all started at 36%, they have a reason to smile. Bufumira and Mugoye sub-counties were the most high-risk areas. Bufumira sub-county chief Gideon

Mayambala hails the different stakeholders for the work well done. He says defilement and SGBV cases were rampant. But things have changed greatly. Communities can now identify, report and follow up cases. **A GLOOMY PICTURE** Immaculate Akello, the SGBV project manager under MIFUMI, a women rights organisation, paints a gloomy picture of the situation in Kalangala before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. "You would find 13-year-old girls dressed skimpily, working in bars," she says. Some parents turned into pimps. They would 'sell' off their own children, saying: "It was easier to make money that way." To them, money was more important than keeping their children in school.

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# KALANGALA RISES ABOVE TEEN PREGNANCY RATES

GRAPHIC BY BRIAN SSEKAMATTE

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It did not matter that they exposed them to HIV and other risks.

Beyond that, children would also be trafficked from the mainland districts to work in bars, restaurants and lodges. By 14 years, Akello says: "Many girls would be sexually active." To her, this injustice was compounded by the fact that men outnumber women. Therefore, men compete for the few single women available. Add to this the fishermen's mantra that; "in the islands, every girl with breasts is ripe for sex or marriage."

Based on this, older men would poach young girls. Some younger than their grandchildren. And the community seemed to have normalised that reckless lifestyle.

The majority of the fishermen's lives rotate around sex, alcohol and drugs. Akello is quick to add that incest and aggravated defilement were also rampant. She remembers the first case they handled of an older man in Mutambala Island who defiled a three-year-old. "It was devastating," Akello says. But the neighbours handed him to the Police and he was later convicted.

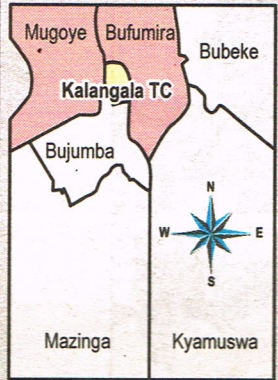
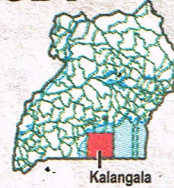
Moreover, SGBV was also the order of the day; fuelled by men, women and young girls. For example, an 18-year-old girl would separate from her partner and move in with a neighbour, just to get back at him for whatever wrong he did to her. Fights would ensue.

Away from that, in Mugoye sub-county, Erisa Kagwa, the community development officer, says men used to flock to bars, guesthouses and restaurants that employed young waitresses whom they called 'virgins'. This fuelled child trafficking and prostitution. Many teenagers would be trafficked from the mainland to milk money from the fishermen.

However, boys were not safe either. Many engaged in sex and in economic activities like fishing that took them away from school.

## Kalangala: Fight against SGBV and teenage pregnancy

- Total Population (2024): 74,000+
- Women: 29,000+ (39%)
- Children (0-17 years): 27,000



### Sexual & Gender-Based Violence (SGBV) prevalence:

60% among women (15-49 yrs) (2021-2023)

Now: Stands at 20%

• 30+ cases registered monthly

Teenage pregnancy rate (15-19 years)

2021-2023: 32%

Now: 19%

Worse still, it was difficult to arrest offenders because of the high mobility of the Kalangala population. They keep crisscrossing different islands. For example, when you try to arrest a perpetrator, he runs to another island and changes his identity.

Empowering the communities was also difficult because those you train this week will migrate to another island the next week.

### COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT

This milestone has not been a one job, but a joint effort of the Government and its partners under the Heroes for Gender Transformative Action Consortium. Together, they have invested time and billions of shillings in Kalangala for the last six years. They include; the Netherlands and Iceland Embassies, MIFUMI, AMREF and Cordaid.

Nkumbi, who is also the focal person for the Heroes programme, says they began by empowering

communities to identify, report and follow up cases. This has yielded fruit. Currently, Ruth Kwagala, a legal officer, says case reporting has risen to 68% and the conviction rate in Kalangala for sexual offences is around 80% thanks to the High Court in place.

Previously, the district had only the magistrate court, making the legal process slow. The Heroes programme is in nine districts, but of all, Kalangala has the highest completion of cases in court. Other districts are; Iganga, Bugiri, Namayingo, Mbale, Bukwo, Kween, Mayuge and Budaka. Majority of the victims report cases and they show up in court to bear witness. Those who come from faraway islands are transported and sheltered.

Lucy Athieno, MIFUMI's monitoring, evaluation, research and learning manager, says the consortium has also built a formidable grassroots force. The force includes; 150 prevention and response champions in different

communities plus five survivor support groups. Each group has 60 members. They do door-to-door home visits while identifying girls who are at risk of early marriage and sex exploitation. Those that dropped out of school are enrolled back or skilled.

One such is 16-year-old Mariah. Her mother, Dorothy Nanteza, says: "Raising children in Kalangala is challenging. I produced nine children, but lost seven. My surviving daughter also dropped out of school in Primary five. She is now a single mother at 16 years. I thank the Heroes programme for enrolling her on a hairdressing course. With that skill she will be able to provide for her baby."

Meanwhile, parents too are counselled. These champions work hand in hand with para social workers who help to report cases.

"We also go to schools and talk to children about sexuality education," she says. Children are empowered to avoid early sex. They also report men who try to exploit them.

Beyond that, MIFUMI has also trained community-based organisations, paralegals, local councils, informal sector, religious and cultural leaders to hold the perpetrators accountable. This has made community outreaches and legal aid clinics easy and effective. For example, last October, they held a gender-based violence (GBV) criminal session and received 44 cases.

Nkumbi says: "We were able to get conviction for over 30 cases. Others are pending."

But before this, many cases had been reported in Kasekulo, Mutambala and Beta islands because of the awareness. Health workers were also trained to collect evidence. The Police also support in carrying out quick evidence collection and court arrangements.

### ADVICE CENTRES AND GBV SHELTER

Initially, the long distances made it hard for some victims to report cases. For this, in 2023, a SGBV shelter was established in Kalangala to

provide a safe space for survivors. Here, survivors and their witnesses are sheltered while their cases are handled.

Flavia Babirye, the manager,

remembers a time they spent over sh1m to transport a victim and her witnesses for court sessions. They were from Bubeke island, which is about 130km away. Such constraints would kill cases. So, the shelter came in handy. Before, they would host them in guesthouses. Since 2023, they have sheltered over 300 victims of child-to-child sex, defilement, child trafficking plus GBV. Child-to-child sex cases involve minors. For example, a 14-year-old with a 15-year-old and with these, they offer counselling.

But also child trafficking is prevalent. Babirye recently handled a case of a 17-year-old girl who was trafficked from Bukomansimbi district by a 55-year-old man who had planned to marry her. The neighbours protested and the man was arrested.

In addition, Kalangala has three advice centres, which are community-based structures, where the survivors report cases, receive counselling and legal support. They also do peer-to-peer sessions. Through the advice centres, Athieno says they have helped 1,168 survivors.

### HEROES CONSORTIUM IS LEAVING, WHAT NEXT FOR KALANGALA?

This August, the Heroes consortium will be exiting Kalangala. However, the question remains of whether the gains they have achieved will be secured. Babirye is worried about Kalangala's mobile population.

"When the individuals we have empowered, leave to other places, the situation will go back to zero," she says.

But the good news is, they have built the capacity of the district officials, the Police and local leaders who will work hand in hand with the champions in the communities. The steering committee has also made commitments to build on the gains.

Fred Badda, the resident district commissioner, pledged to mobilise the district stakeholders and "Ensure we have a budget for this project." He also committed to look for other donors to ensure continuity in addition to putting up an economic project that will sustain the shelter, advice centres and volunteers.

Also, detective sergeant Kazibwe the deputy district CID officer for Kalangala, says they will engage the headquarters for support to ensure the work goes on.

### ABOUT KALANGALA

Kalangala district is made up of 84 islands that form Ssesse Islands. These islands are scattered across Lake Victoria, but only 64 are inhabited. The district headquarters are located on Bugala, the biggest island. Kalangala was upgraded to a district in 1989, having been a sub-district of Masaka district. It has two counties, six sub-counties and one town council. The main economic activities are fishing and oil palm growing.

## WHAT COMMUNITY MEMBERS SAY

### Erisa Kagwa, community development officer, Mugoye sub-county

The Heroes' consortium has done an amazing job in combating gender-based violence and teenage pregnancy cases. Defilement has also reduced because men fear the repercussions. In my area, bars no longer employ teenagers. But the human trafficking problem persists because people are looking for cheap labour in their gardens and homes.

### Godfrey Mukasa, district principal assistant secretary

We thank our partners, especially the Kingdom of the Netherlands and the Iceland embassy. They have supported us greatly in minimising sexual and gender-based violence. They have also supported over 70 young mothers and school dropouts to

acquire skills. We shall do all we can to sustain these initiatives.

### Abbas Kizito Miro, district planner

Kalangala has been transformed but sustaining these gains might not be feasible because our budget is tight. We do not even realise 60% of our local revenue. We pray for more donors.

### Resty Nakawungu, district vice-chairperson

The COVID-19 lockdown hit us hard. The situation was worse in Mazinga islands, where I come from. Many girls became pregnant and dropped out of school. But also, poverty is rampant. Kalangala depended on the lake but that is no more. But also many parents are negligent. They look on as their children get spoiled.



Nkumbi says defilement was widespread