

Bugisu grandparents burdened with abandoned children

BY PHOEBE MASONGOLE

MBALE. At 68, Margaret Nabuduwa from a rural village in Butiru Town Council in Manafwa District thought her days of raising babies were long behind her. But every evening, she warms porridge for her one-year-old grandson before helping the other two older grandchildren with homework under the dim light of a paraffin lamp.

"My daughter passed on two years ago after child gave birth. The baby's father ran on hearing she was pregnant. Now these children are mine," she says.

Across Bugisu region, grandparents, many elderly and frail, are stepping in as primary caregivers to children left behind by maternal deaths, teenage pregnancies, labour migration, or absent fathers. What was once an occasional family arrangement has quietly

evolved into a growing social concern in most communities.

Community leaders and social workers also say several children raised without one or both parents is rising. Some are left behind when young mothers go to the Middle East in search of domestic work. In many cases, fathers abandon their duties altogether.

Mr Titus Watenga, an officer in Compassion International (Child Development Centres) in Mbale District, says the pattern is worrying.

"More households are headed by grandparents with three, four, or even five grandchildren. The reasons vary, but the burden is falling heavily on the elderly," he said. He adds that economic hardship has made it difficult for young families to stay together.

"Many young men are unemployed. Some feel unable to provide and walk

away. Others deny responsibility and the children suffer," he says.

For instance, Nabuduwa survives on subsistence farming. During harvest seasons, she sells a few bags of maize to pay school fees. When a child falls sick, she uses herbal medicine or goes in line for medicine in health facilities.

"Sometimes I choose between buying medicine and buying food," she says. "At my age, it is not easy to dig every day, but I have no option."

72-year-old Joel Wekesa from Bumusi Village in Manafwa District said he looks after three grandchildren after their mother left for Saudi Arabia for work five years ago.

"She promised to send money every month, but after a few months, the flow became sporadic. When school fees delay, they miss school," he says.

Ms Rita Namara, a social worker at

CURE children's hospital of Uganda, said parental absence is causing lasting psychological effects.

"I have seen grandparents struggling with children with disabilities. They carry them despite their weak bodies," she said.

She adds, "Children may struggle with feelings of abandonment. Even when grandparents provide love, the emotional gap left by parents can affect self-esteem, discipline and behaviour. Adolescents, especially need guidance that elderly caregivers may find difficult to provide," she says.

Beyond finances, the World Health Organisation and Help Age International say that elderly caregivers face serious physical challenges such as fatigue, chronic illness, and limited mobility.

These health burdens reduce effective supervision and, in some cases, con-

tribute to behavioral challenges among children under their care. This has also led to school drop.

Mr Joseph Bikala, head teacher of Bumwangu Primary School in Namisindwa District, says many of the pupils who frequently miss class come from grandparent-led households.

"Fees are paid late or never. Some lack uniforms and books. Others stay home during planting or harvest seasons to help in gardens because their grandparents are too old," he says.

Rev Daniel Wabwire, a religious leader in Mbale, believes shifting social norms are partly to blame. "In the past, community pressure ensured fathers took responsibility. Now there is less accountability. Some young men father children and disappear," he says.

Ms Sarah Kalenda, the probation officer in Mbale City, said, the rise in grandparent-led households, without adequate social support, has indirectly increased the number of children drifting to urban centres and the streets.