

# Ending obstetric fistula, restoring dignity for every woman and girl in Uganda

The International Day to End Obstetric Fistula, which falls on May 23, calls on all of us to protect, restore and deliver on the rights and dignity of women and girls by ensuring continued access to lifesaving Sexual Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) and maternal health services. For Uganda, the commemoration must be used as a strategic accountability moment to mobilise national commitment towards eliminating the backlog of obstetric fistula cases and preventing every new case.

The strength of a nation's healthcare system is reflected in how effectively it protects women and girls, during childbirth and prevents avoidable maternal injuries such as obstetric fistula.

Female obstetric fistula is a devastating but preventable childbirth injury affecting mostly young women across Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, caused by prolonged, obstructed labour that leaves women with continuous leakage of urine or stool. Women enduring this condition face severe chronic health issues alongside intense shame, isolation and social segregation, underscoring the urgent need for investment in safe, respectful and quality maternal and newborn care.

Obstetric fistula represents far more than a health crisis; it serves as an indicator of systemic weaknesses, including obstructed labour, poverty, gender disparity and inadequate referral networks. Current estimates suggest that women face a backlog and waiting periods exceeding eight years, with the current health system managing to treat only one in three cases within the first year of injury. True healing requires a holistic approach that goes beyond surgical intervention to include psychosocial care, economic opportunities and successful community reintegration to fully restore a survivor's dignity. While Uganda has made important progress, the unfinished agenda remains significant. Quality of care gaps persist and adolescent pregnancy — a known risk factor for obstetric fistula — remains high

at approximately 24%. These realities remind us that progress in fistula support must now be deepened, made more equitable and translated into lived dignity for every woman and girl.

Ending obstetric fistula requires an integrated approach that spans prevention through quality maternal health services, timely referral, safe surgery, psychosocial support, rehabilitation and social reintegration. It also requires listening to survivors and ensuring that their experiences directly inform policy, programming and accountability. We commend the Government of Uganda for its continued leadership and

commitment to strengthening maternal health and advancing the human capital development agenda. Alongside this leadership, the partnership between the Embassy of Iceland and the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) has supported vulnerable women and girls whose lives have been affected by obstetric fistula and has helped to bridge the gap between isolation and integration, facilitating vital access to safe surgeries to clear the backlog and providing the holistic rehabilitation necessary for women to rebuild their livelihoods.

The fight against obstetric fistula does not happen in isolation; it is part of an integrated story across a woman's life course. A girl who understands her body and manages menstruation with dignity is more likely to remain in school and a young woman who can access respectful sexual and reproductive health services is better able to make an informed choice about when to become pregnant. Furthermore, a pregnant woman supported by quality antenatal care is more likely to have pregnancy-induced high blood pressure detected early, while a mother attended by a skilled midwife within a functional health system is protected from prolonged, obstructed labour and other

complications. When this system fails and a woman develops obstetric fistula, our collective responsibility is to ensure she receives not only surgical repair, but a full restoration of dignity, livelihood, belonging and hope. This is the mandate of UNFPA and a commitment of the embassy of Iceland in Uganda put into action.

Together with the Government of Uganda, we at UNFPA and the Embassy of Iceland reaffirm our shared commitment to move beyond commemoration towards accelerated action. This moment calls for more than isolated observances; it demands a co-ordinated national movement that brings together leadership, communities, health systems and partners around one common goal — safeguarding the health, human rights and bodily dignity of women, girls and young people across Uganda. Through stronger collaboration, sustained investment and collective accountability, we can advance more decisively towards ending obstetric fistula.

*The writers are: The head of mission of the Embassy of Iceland in Uganda and the country representative of UNFPA*



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