

BY ALEX ASHABA

Concern over unsafe abortions by teenage Masindi girls

MASINDI. Teenage girls in Masindi District are increasingly turning to unsafe herbal mixtures and crude home remedies to end unwanted pregnancies.

Health workers and community leaders warn that the practice, driven by poverty, fear of stigma, and limited access to reproductive health information, is escalating into a public health crisis.

They say pregnant teens get these unsafe concoctions from local herbalists and peers.

They cite areas where the vice is rampant as Kijura, Kyema, Kihande, Nyanjahya, and several landing sites in Budongo Sub-county.

Health workers say these illegal unsafe abortion methods cause infections, and damage to the reproductive system.

Aisha (not her real name), a 16-year-

old from Kyema Village, says fear pushed her into using a bitter herbal mixture to end her two-month pregnancy.

"I was scared. I had no money, and I couldn't tell my parents. I bought herbs from a woman at the market in Masindi Town who told me to drink them at night. After taking them, I got very strong stomach pain for many hours, and then I started bleeding for more than three days," she says.

She says she continues to suffer from persistent lower abdominal pain.

In Kijura and Kirasa, suburbs of Masindi Municipality, several teenage girls say they personally know someone who has attempted to abort using the unsafe and illegal methods.

They say some boil herbal mixtures recommended by peers, while others swallow excessive amounts of painkill-

ers, detergent, bitter plant roots, or concoctions sold by unscrupulous people.

Maria (not her real name), a Senior Three student, says she tried aborting using herbs because she feared disappointing her family.

"I was only 16 and still in school. I couldn't tell my parents. A friend gave me herbs and told me to boil them and drink the water. I took them and collapsed after heavy bleeding."

She adds that she survived only because neighbours rushed her to Masindi Hospital in time.

In Kijanja Village, a 17-year-old girl says she hid her bleeding for two days after taking a herbal mixture given by a friend.

"I could not tell my mother. She would beat me. I fainted before my relatives, who then realised I needed urgent medical attention," she says.

Ms Gertrude Tusiime, a nurse at a private clinic in Kijura, says they receive at least two teenage girls weekly with signs of incomplete abortion, infection, or severe bleeding.

"Most of the girls come after taking herbs or chemicals. They fear coming early because they don't want people to know they're pregnant. By the time we see them, their wombs are already infected or damaged. Some may never have children in the future. It is very sad," she says.

Ms Tusiime adds that the district urgently needs stronger community education on pregnancy prevention, confidential counselling spaces, and youth-friendly services that teenagers can trust.

Mr Richard Mukasa, a teacher at Bujenje Primary School, says schools are losing girls.

"We lost three girls in just one term because of pregnancy. Some stop coming after they realise they are expecting. Others attempt unsafe methods and fall sick. The lack of open conversations about reproductive health is costing us many young lives," he says.

Teen pregnancy

Uganda continues to face high rates of teenage pregnancy. National data shows that about one in four teenage girls becomes pregnant each year.

The Guttmacher Institute estimates that 57,000 girls aged 15 to 19 undergo abortions annually in Uganda, most of them unsafe due to legal restrictions.

Abortion in Uganda is illegal unless performed by a licensed medical doctor in a situation where the woman's life is deemed to be at risk.