

AT LEAST 14 MILLION UGANDANS SUFFER FROM MENTAL ILLNESS - 2022 STUDY



SOCIAL MEDIA VIOLENCE LINKED TO MENTAL HEALTH BURDEN, EXPERT WARNS

By Rhyman Agaba

Rising digital violence is fuelling Uganda's mental health crisis, a leading public health expert has warned.

Dr Peter Kirabira, the manager of the home care programme at St Francis Hospital Nsambya in Kampala, said the problem is common among adolescent girls and young women, who are increasingly being targeted by cyber bullies.

He said the hospital is witnessing a surge in cases of young people showing signs of psychological distress, depression and social withdrawal linked to harassment, exploitation and other forms of abuse on social media platforms.

Kirabira was speaking during a youth-focused dialogue on digital harm held at Imperial Royale Hotel in Kampala last week.

He recounted the experience of a schoolgirl whose life changed drastically after one single photo of her was shared online without her consent.

What began as a desire to learn digital skills quickly turned into fear, shame and isolation, eventually forcing her out of class participation and online spaces.

"That experience isn't unique," Kirabira said. "At Nsambya Home Care, we manage over 8,000 clients, including 1,800 adolescent girls and young women. Many of them are now facing digital violence that leaves deep emotional scars. Some end up with depression, and others have attempted suicide."

Kirabira said the effects of digital violence extend far beyond emotional distress. Victims often develop long-term mental health complications, which the health sector struggles to address, as the abuse typically



Turyasingura: Key speaker



Kirabira: Health expert

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continues online even after treatment. "You give a client antidepressants, but when she leaves the hospital, and the digital abuse continues, the recovery collapses," Kirabira, who has over 24 years of experience handling gender-based violence health challenges, said.

"Some end up in psychiatric care because the psychological injuries are overwhelming," he added.

Kirabira warned that online harassment is destabilising communities by eroding trust in

digital spaces, discouraging young women from accessing healthcare, and reducing their opportunities for online education, business and social engagement.

"Digital violence undermines socio-economic growth. It pushes victims out of e-commerce, out of digital entrepreneurship, and even out of classrooms," he said.

Despite the enactment of cyber laws, Kirabira said weak enforcement continues to leave victims vulnerable while emboldening perpetrators.

STATISTICS

In 2022, a study by the health ministry showed that at least 14 million Ugandans suffer from some form of mental illness. Whereas 25% of young adult admissions to Butabika Hospital were due to substance-related mental health issues, experts noted other causes such as poverty, joblessness and trauma.

Despite the increase in mental health cases, the country has few specialists to take care of the victims. According to the Uganda Association of Psychiatrists, Uganda has only about 80 psychiatrists serving nearly 50 million people, leaving one specialist responsible for up to 600,000 patients.

WAY FORWARD

Kirabira called for stronger implementation of digital safety frameworks, increased digital literacy campaigns and clear accountability mechanisms for social media companies operating in Uganda.

"These platforms must take responsibility," he said. "We need effective moderation tools, quick reporting mechanisms and community involvement to ensure users are protected."

Kirabira stressed that digital violence is no longer a private issue, but a national challenge that threatens Uganda's development.

"As we move deeper into the digital age, we must collectively confront

this problem. Protecting our girls and women will unlock their full potential in education, the economy and society. In the digital world, silence is rarely a choice; sometimes it is the result of violence."

The dialogue brought together more than 40 stakeholders, including MPs; Moses Kabuusu (Kyamuswa County, Kalangala district) and Julius Tusiime Karuhanga (Rwampara East).

Kabuusu urged youth leaders to act responsibly when sharing content online and assured them that Parliament is ready to legislate where necessary.

"Bring these people to book, we have enough laws to hold offenders accountable," he said, while calling for sensitisation efforts to reach remote areas such as his island district.

Karuhanga commended the initiative, noting that effective advocacy begins with dialogue. He echoed Kabuusu's concerns, arguing that much of the mental health burden arising from social media misuse is self-inflicted.

Karuhanga urged young people to refrain from online behaviour that could harm their future.

The dialogue aimed to rally stakeholders to strengthen laws and policies to prevent and respond to cyberbullying, harassment and online abuse targeting women and girls, in line with international and regional conventions.

The event was organised by the National Secretariat for Special Interest Groups and the National Youth Council as part of the 16 Days of Activism 2025 campaign under the theme: *End Digital Violence Against All Women and Girls*.

Key speakers included Osborn Turyasingura, the executive secretary of the National Special Interest Groups, who highlighted the role of young leaders in combating digital violence, and Daniel Ongom, the chairperson of the National Youth Council, who convened the event.

A panel moderated by journalist Mildred Tuhaise featured Hillary Asimwe, the National Youth Council female youth secretary and Patience Kaitesi, a senior youth officer at the gender ministry, who discussed legal and policy frameworks protecting young people from digital abuse.

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