



UYAHF

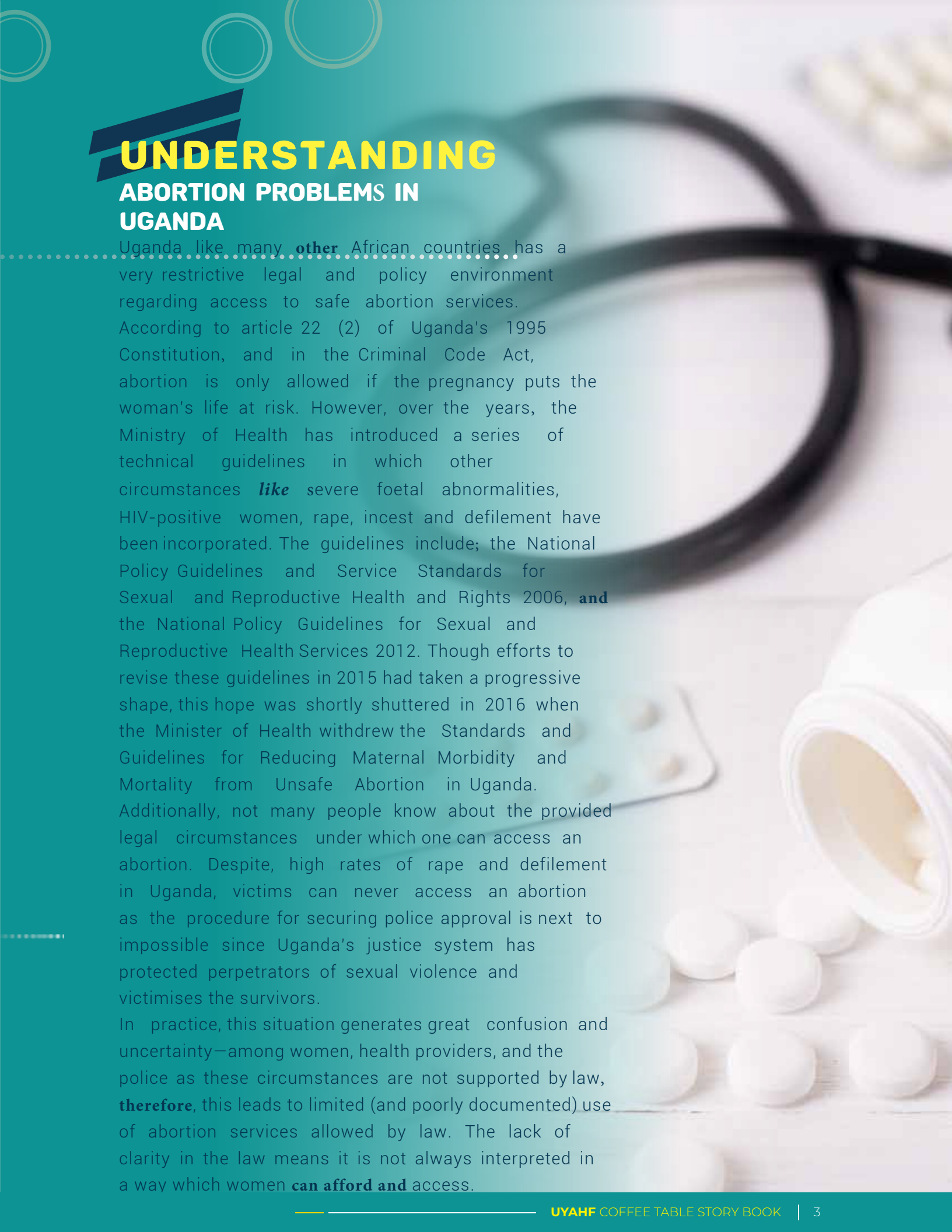
COFFEE TABLE

STORY BOOK

*The Untold Stories on UnSafe
Abortion among Girls in Eastern
Uganda*



UNDERSTANDING ABORTION PROBLEMS IN UGANDA



Uganda like many **other** African countries, has a very restrictive legal and policy environment regarding access to safe abortion services. According to article 22 (2) of Uganda's 1995 Constitution, and in the Criminal Code Act, abortion is only allowed if the pregnancy puts the woman's life at risk. However, over the years, the Ministry of Health has introduced a series of technical guidelines in which other circumstances **like** severe foetal abnormalities, HIV-positive women, rape, incest and defilement have been incorporated. The guidelines include; the National Policy Guidelines and Service Standards for Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights 2006, **and** the National Policy Guidelines for Sexual and Reproductive Health Services 2012. Though efforts to revise these guidelines in 2015 had taken a progressive shape, this hope was shortly shuttered in 2016 when the Minister of Health withdrew the Standards and Guidelines for Reducing Maternal Morbidity and Mortality from Unsafe Abortion in Uganda. Additionally, not many people know about the provided legal circumstances under which one can access an abortion. Despite, high rates of rape and defilement in Uganda, victims can never access an abortion as the procedure for securing police approval is next to impossible since Uganda's justice system has protected perpetrators of sexual violence and victimises the survivors.

In practice, this situation generates great confusion and uncertainty—among women, health providers, and the police as these circumstances are not supported by law, **therefore**, this leads to limited (and poorly documented) use of abortion services allowed by law. The lack of clarity in the law means it is not always interpreted in a way which women **can afford and** access.

Despite these positive advances, sexual and reproductive ill-health remains one of the greatest challenges facing young people in Uganda. Also worth noting is that Uganda's laws and policies still leave a lot of room for the abuse of women and girls' rights to access SRHR services like access to safe abortion. Each year, hundreds of thousands of adolescent girls in Uganda get pregnant while others contract HIV and other STI services. The latest evidence from the Uganda Demographic Health Survey 2016 has showed a rise in teenage pregnancies at 25% from 24% in 2011; with 1 in **every** 4 girls (15 -19 years) already a mother or pregnant with her first child. For many of these girls, pregnancy has little to do with informed choice. Often times, it is a consequence of discrimination, rights violations (including child marriage, rape, and defilement), inadequate education or sexual coercion, limited access to family planning and contraceptive services among others.

More than 300,000 teenagers who get pregnant annually also account for the bulk of unwanted pregnancies, which end up in unintended births or unsafe abortions (estimated at 24%). This increases the risk of maternal mortality and morbidity among adolescent girls. According to Uganda's Reproductive, Maternal, Newborn, Child and Adolescent Health (RMNCAH) sharpened plan 2016/17 – 2019/20, almost 28% of maternal deaths in Uganda occur in young women aged 15 – 24 years. Adolescents aged 15-19 contribute 17.6% deaths due to pregnancy and its related conditions.

According to Guttmacher, approximately half of all the pregnancies among women aged 15-19 in Uganda are unintended, leading to unsafe abortions; 88% of these are among adolescents with an unmet need for modern contraception. The same report notes that, in 2013,, an estimated 314,304 Ugandan women risked their life and health by inducing abortion, a 7% increase from the 2003 estimate of 294,000. According to the UDHS 2011 and UDHS 2016 the major causes of maternal mortality included unsafe abortions at 11%. Guttmacher notes that Uganda has one of the highest rates of unsafe abortion in Eastern Africa. The estimated rate of 54 abortions per 1,000 women of reproductive age is far higher than the average of 39 abortions per 1,000 women for East Africa, Unsafe abortion is one of the leading causes of maternal morbidity and mortality in Uganda. It contributes approximately 26% of the estimated 6,000 maternal deaths every year, and an estimated 40% of admissions for emergency obstetric care. It equally places a huge cost on the public health system; approximately Uganda Shillings 7.5 Billion spent annually to treat complications.

Uganda's restrictive abortion laws permit termination only to save the life of a pregnant woman. However, there are conflicting and restrictive interpretations of the abortion laws that often lead to most health workers refusing to carry out any abortions regardless of the circumstances.

Uganda Youth and Adolescents Health Forum – UYAHF has documented stories and experiences of girls and families that have undergone or lived through the reality of **unsafe** abortion and its complications. The stories and circumstances under which these girls end up opting for unsafe abortions further validates the facts stated above.

Take a glimpse into their lives with us;



Caution:

Some of these stories are graphic and contain recounts of sexual encounters including rape and other forms of violence. This can be triggering to some people and should thus be consumed with caution.

Story 1.

Ketcha Catherine (Not real names)
Speaker

I am 17 years old from Nyangole village.

I was being mistreated at home **and** so it was such a relief **for** me when I got a boyfriend who promised me heaven on earth. We started dating and having unprotected sex. Not long after that, I realized that I was pregnant. This shocking realization frightened me to the point that I ran to my grandmother to hide for some time.

When I told my boyfriend that I was pregnant, he said that he didn't have a budget for a baby or marriage since he was still studying and instead offered me sh. 50,000 to help me carry out an abortion. Although I was a bit sceptical about this decision, I also did not want to have to leave school because of my pregnancy. I informed one of my friends that I wanted to carry out an abortion and she agreed to accompany me to have it 'taken care of'. We went to a certain old woman within the village who helped me carry out the abortion at her house. When she was done, she buried the foetus behind her house.

Since I was still staying with my grandmother, she found out that I had an abortion. She called my mother who was very quick to scold me and remind me that she had always wanted me to focus on my education and not get pregnant. She was also very disappointed with me and started rejecting me because she said that my getting an abortion deemed me a 'murder of a child of God'. On top of the emotional pain that I was feeling due to the stigma from my mother and grandmother, I was also facing physical pains from the abortion. I did not know it then but the abortion had not been successful. I was experiencing a lot of pain in my lower stomach and pus was coming out of my vagina. When the pain became unbearable, I decided to go to a nearby health centre to get it checked. When I got there, they gave me medication and told me that they would have to remove my uterus because it had been damaged during my abortion. This was the hardest point of my life.

To this day, I am haunted by the fact that I will never be able to have a baby ever again. Had I known about any available options to access safe abortion and where to access these services may be I would have opted for one and I would still have my uterus intact. I advise my fellow adolescents to stay away from unsafe abortions because they are bad and can spoil their internal organs, as it did to me. My uterus had to be taken out to save my life. I also call upon health care providers and teachers to commit to providing correct sexuality education to young people because this can help us on making informed choices about our sexual and reproductive health issues.

I want to thank Uganda Youth and Adolescent Health Forum team which has tried to bridge the gap of information on SRHR among many vulnerable and young girls like me. The young mother's forum on safe motherhood that I attended exposed me to a lot of information including my right to demand for sexual reproductive health services and facilities that provide these services without judgement and discrimination.



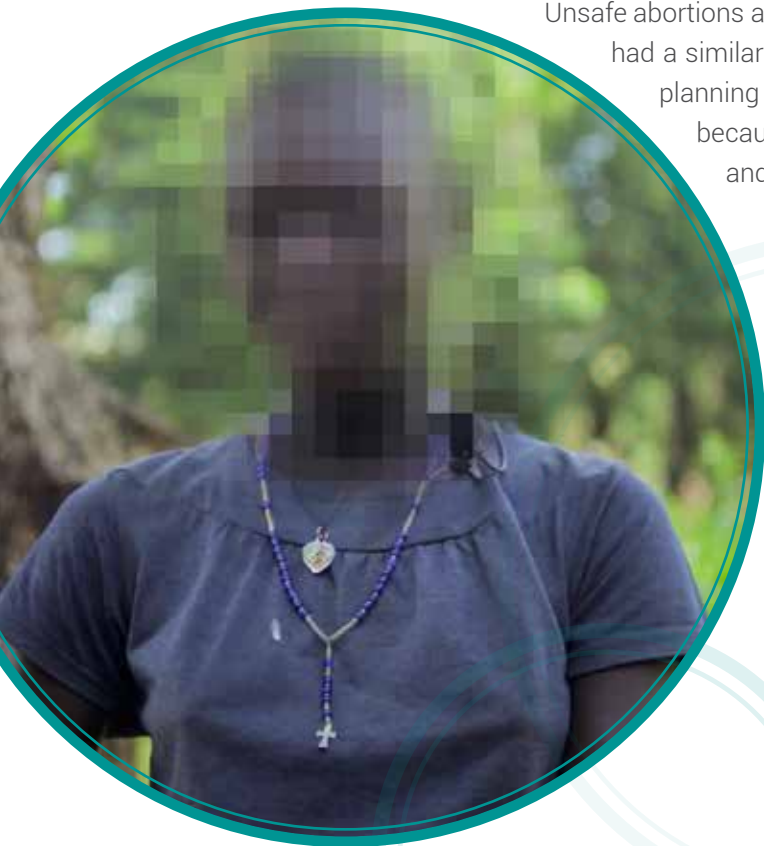
Story 2. Among Mary Claire (Not real names) Speaker

I am 15 years old from Nyangole village.

One day my boyfriend invited me to visit him at his house. He asked me to sleep with him **and** when I declined, he forced himself on me and raped me claiming I shouldn't have visited if I did not want to have sex. By the end of the month, I realized my period hadn't come and I went to the hospital for a check-up. At the hospital, they noticed I had a fever and after the check-up, the doctor informed me that I was pregnant.

On returning home I informed my friends that I was pregnant and on hearing the news they went silent but later advised me to go to my grandmother. I went to her and admitted my mistake that I had conceived, I thought she would beat me but since we are good friends and usually share stories, she didn't beat me. I asked my grandmother if she knew any medication that could help me take out the baby. She quickly gave me local medicine intended to help me abort. After taking the concoction, I bled a lot and felt a lot of pain in my lower abdomen. The pain and blood was too much which made me think that I was going to die.

I visited a nearby health facility immediately and was attended to and I soon became better. Unsafe abortions are a reality in our village and I know many girls here that have had a similar experience to mine. If I had sufficient information on family planning and where to access safe abortion, I could have gone there because at that point, I needed someone who could listen to me and help me get out of the situation I was in.



“ I call upon everyone responsible to support us young girls to have accurate information on sexual reproductive health and facilitate our access to non-judgemental sexual and reproductive health services. ”



Story 3. Namulindwa Brenda (Not real names) Speaker

I am 14 years old from the Butalejja district.

One day I was heading back home at 10:00 pm and along the way I found a group of boys.

They ganged up on me and raped me. After some time, I realized I was pregnant and I informed my grandmother since I was too scared of my father. My grandmother notified my father about my pregnancy and he chased me from home. He told me never to go back to his home. I went over to my grandmothers' place as my last and only place of solace. She asked me what I was going to do about the pregnancy.

I informed her that I had no idea so she gave me some local herbs that I drunk and they forced the foetus out. The foetus came out the following day and my grandmother was responsible for throwing it away. After that, I was in a great deal of pain that refused to subside no matter how many pain killers I took.

When the pain persisted I went to the hospital and explained to the health worker what had happened and they gave me some medication. If I happen to get another unwanted pregnancy after this experience, I would go to the hospital/health worker and not my grandmother.

However, I hope that won't happen either because I really want to continue my education and avoid getting pregnant again.



Story 4.

Angella Nakiito (Not real names)

Speaker

I am 16 years and I am staying with my uncle.

One day my uncle's wife went away and my uncle raped me.

When I realized I was pregnant and I informed my uncle, he quickly left for Kampala on hearing the news. I told my grandmother about it and she was shocked to find out that it was my own uncle who did that to me. She pointed out that my uncle would not agree to support the baby and suggested that I carry out an abortion.

At that time the pregnancy was 3 months and my grandmother looked around for local herbs to help me abort the baby. When I took the herbs, I started feeling a lot of pain and my grandmother asked me to be patient with the pain so that the fetus can come out. I spent a week with this sharp pain and the next week the foetus eventually came out. When it came out my grandmother asked me what I wanted to do with it to which I responded that I wasn't sure. She took it away for disposal but am not sure if she threw it in the bush or latrine.

When she asked me how I was feeling, I told her that I was feeling a lot of pain in my lower abdomen and experiencing backache. She went and got me some painkillers but even after taking the painkillers, the backache didn't go away. Eventually the pain went away. However, I could have gone to the health facility to get more help but I chose instead to rely on my grandmother because I knew that if I went to the health center, they would insult me for conceiving at an early age. After the pain I went through, I will take good care of myself to ensure I don't get pregnant again. I am currently using the injectable contraceptive to ensure that I prevent pregnancy.

I learnt about family planning at the young mothers' forum on safe motherhood that was organised by UYAHF when they visited Butalejja. The nurse ably explained to us all family planning methods and when I went to the health centre the next day, they gave me injectaplan.

I now know that when you conceive while you're still young, you often struggle to look after the baby, may fail to deliver normally since your body hasn't fully grown among other reasons.

My advice to young girls who aren't yet pregnant is, to abstain from sex or get started on family planning method. In case they get pregnant, unsafe abortions isn't the answer because one can die in the process. For the girls who are raped and have no option but to abort like I did, they can reach out to UYAHF to help refer them to health centres that provide safe abortion or they can call the SUUBI Helpline on 0759479995.



Story 5. Hasfa Sulemu Speaker

My daughter didn't inform me that she was pregnant, as you know how these young girls are. I just saw her, got a hunch based on some of her symptoms and asked her if she was pregnant.

She agreed that she was pregnant and I told her that I need her to continue with her education so we need to carry out an abortion.

We agreed to have this abortion done as soon as possible but none of us knew that we would get problems. We went to a traditional healer and my daughter was given herbs to drink. At first, she experienced a lot of pain but nothing was coming out; but eventually, clots started coming out. She lost a lot of blood and out of fear, I rushed her to the hospital after the traditional healer failed to stop the bleeding.

My daughter passed away at the hospital and her death resulted in the high blood pressure that I currently suffer from today. When the people in the community came for the vigil, they said horrible things about me and my husband. Up to date, they say that what we did was very bad and asked us to never do that again. My family faces a lot of stigma in the community because of the abortion and this always stresses me and my other daughters.

I regret my action up to this day and the only reason I didn't take my daughter to the hospital is that I was scared of being arrested since abortions aren't legal in Uganda. I wish I knew better where to access safe abortion services, maybe then I would not have gone to the traditional herbalists in our village. I feel like I can never forgive myself. I advise my fellow parents not to engage in unsafe abortion. Allow girls to access contraceptives in order to avoid unwanted pregnancies.



Story 6.

Nalunga Monica (Not real names)

17 years old, Butalejja district

Covid 19 brought about so many changes and one of them in my homestead was that I had to supplement the family's income since there was no more school. I used to sell items in the market. Going to the market was easy and safe as it was still daytime but returning was tricky since I had to travel when it was dark.

One day, as I was heading back home, I met a gang of boys. They started talking to me and informing me how they liked and admired me. They didn't even wait for my response about their comments, they jumped on me and raped me right there and then.

I was too ashamed so I didn't share this with anyone when I got home. About a month later, I realized I hadn't had my period. The biology teacher had previously taught us about menstruation and the fact that we are able to get pregnant once we start menstruating. The teacher also told me that missing my period may mean that I am pregnant.

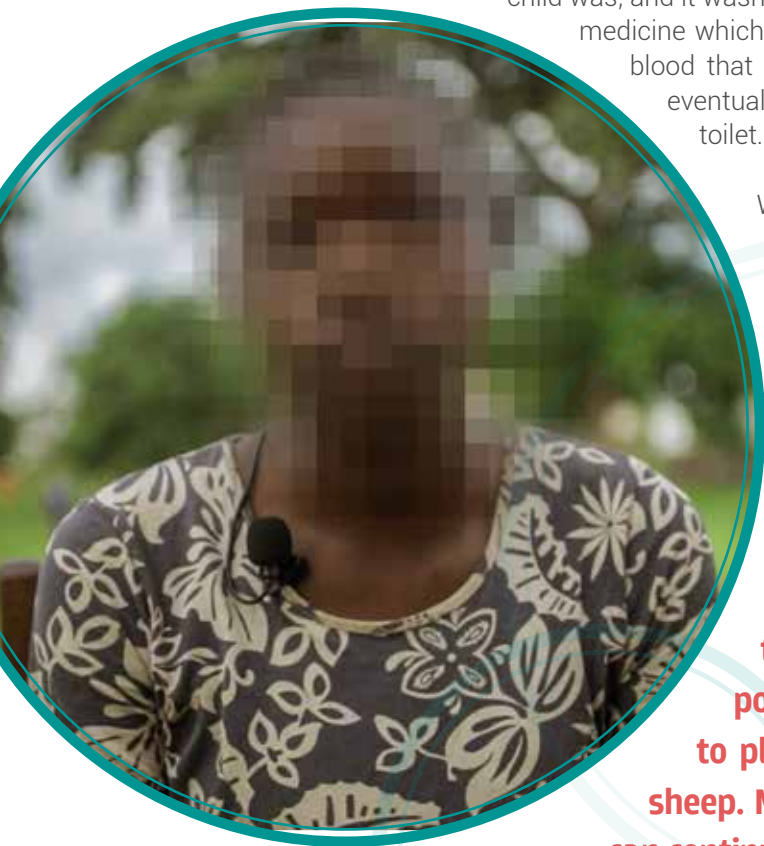
On hearing the news, I was forced to inform my grandmother who I was staying with that I was pregnant and didn't know who the father was since I was gang-raped.

My grandmother advised me that I should carry out an abortion since I wasn't sure who the father of my child was; and it wasn't a good idea to keep it. She gave me a concoction of herbal medicine which I took, and after some time, blood started coming out. The blood that was coming out of me was a lot that I got really scared, eventually, the fetus came out and my grandmother threw it in the toilet.

We failed to control the bleeding and my grandmother took me to the health center where they gave me an injection that stopped the bleeding.

I was very scared that I would die because in the community there were always rumors that girls always die as they try to carry out abortions. After receiving treatment from the hospital, my only worry was people in the community finding out because once they did, I would be stigmatized and referred to as a bad example in the community.

The stigma in the communities is too much to the point that people keep talking about you, pointing fingers at you, some children don't want to play with you; in short, you're treated as black sheep. Most of us carry out these abortions so that we can continue with our studies.



Story 7.

Atim Agnes (Not real names)
18 years, Tororo district

I was struggling with school and lacked scholastic items such as pens, books, uniforms. One day as I was heading to school, I met a man who asked if he could help me since I looked troubled. I quickly narrated to him the challenges I was facing and welcomed his friendship because I needed someone to help me continue with school.

After hearing my narration, he informed me that he would be ready and willing to support me and provide everything that I needed. The friendship went on for a year and I realized I had started falling in love with him because he was good to me and handling all my needs including school requirements.

One day, he invited me to visit him at his place, which I gladly accepted. When it was **evening**, I asked that I leave his place and head home to which he declined and asked me to spend the night at his place.

In the night, he informed me that he wanted to have sex with me. I pleaded with him not to do so because I still wanted to continue with my education but he insisted. "Won't you make me pregnant?" I asked. He told me that he would make sure he doesn't. I accepted to have sex with him only if he wore a condom but he refused and instead forced himself inside of me without a condom.

At the end of that month, I didn't see my period. When the second month came, I still didn't see my period. That is when it hit me that I could be pregnant. I informed him that I was pregnant and he decided to dump me. This left me hopeless because I didn't even know what to do or where to start from.

I sought advice from different people; some telling me to abort and the others not to. Due to the fact that I needed to go back to school, abortion was the ideal option.

In the village, there was an old woman of around 80 years that I went to and paid her sh.30,000 for the services. She handed me herbs which I had to take for three days.

The foetus came out after three days but this was accompanied by a lot of blood and I lost energy. Because of the complications I developed, I was forced to go to the hospital and seek help.

On reaching the hospital, they asked me for money which I didn't have. I asked for help from the man who got me pregnant but he refused to help me. I found a way of requesting my mother for money but I didn't inform her what I was going to use it for.

She gave me the money which I paid at the health facility. I was informed that the process wasn't successful as bits of the foetus had remained in my uterus. The health worker carried out a procedure where my uterus was cleaned out and she handed me some tablets to take. After my experience, **I would advise my fellow adolescents not to carry out unsafe abortions because they are very risky.**



Story 8.

Nabilye Amina (Not real names)
17 years old, Butalejja district

I conceived shortly after the death of my father!

My mother was devastated by the loss of her husband and she resorted to alcohol abuse for her to deal with her grief.

She spent most of the money on buying alcohol and when words reached the family members that mummy had become a drunkard, one of my uncles volunteered to take me to his home so that I can have a change in the environment.

While at my uncle's home, all wasn't well. Shortly after my arrival at his place, he started sneaking into my room every time I got back from school and he would repeatedly rape me. I was scared of informing anyone because I knew no one would believe me and my aunt (my uncle's wife) was very tough. He raped me a couple of times and I eventually got pregnant. I knew that once I informed her that I was pregnant with her husband's child, she would kill me.

I was hopeless and clueless as I didn't even know how to solve this issue since it's my uncle who was responsible for the pregnancy. While I was contemplating what to do, I remembered that there was a herbalist in the village who helped people carry out abortions. I got to know about her through conversations that my friends and I always had while collecting water at the borehole.

The girls always spoke about how she had helped many young girls deal with their unwanted pregnancies. In some cases, they mentioned the names of the girls.

I decided to visit this lady and I shared my story with her and she assured me that she will be in a position to sort me out. I didn't want to waste any time so I asked her to give me whatever was going to remove the baby that was growing inside me. She gave me a concoction which I drunk, shortly after, I started feeling a lot of stomach pain and began to lose a lot of blood.

Eventually, the foetus came out and she threw it away. I spent one week at this woman's place without the knowledge of my uncle since the bleeding hadn't yet stopped.

After one week, I went back to my uncle's place but the bleeding was still too much, my uncle chased me away and I came back to the herbalist's place. I was afraid of going to a hospital because I knew my uncle and I would be arrested since I was a minor.

The bleeding later stopped but the pain in my stomach has become a part of me now. When I went to this lady, I wasn't aware of the consequences because I did not know about abortions.

In my village once people find out that you have carried out an abortion, you become the central topic of the village; people mock and laugh at you whenever they find you and the stigma is unimaginable. That is why I have kept it a secret up to now.



Story 9.

Amina Gift (Not real names)

17 years, Tororo

During the lockdown, since schools were closed, I had a lot of free time. In July, my boyfriend invited me to go and pay him a visit. When I did, we ended up having unprotected sex.

In August, I waited for my period in vain. I went to a nearby clinic and carried out a pregnancy test which came out positive.

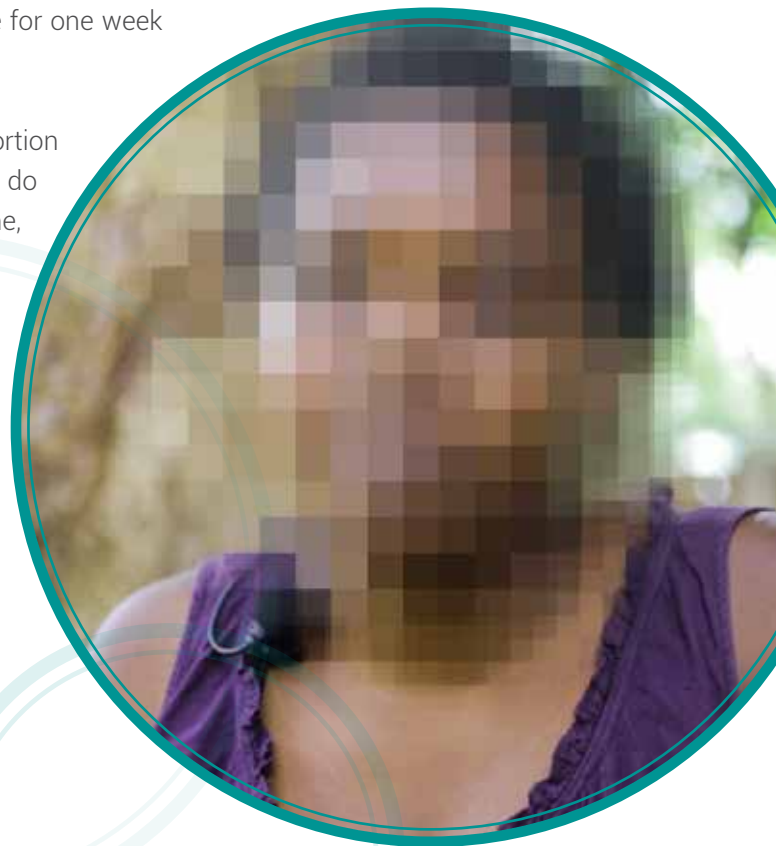
I informed my boyfriend that I was pregnant but he didn't care at all. I then decided to inform one of my friends. My friend told me that since my boyfriend was not supportive, we should go to the clinic so that they can help us abort.

My friend and I went to the clinic and informed the nurse that we wanted to carry out an abortion. The nurse gave me tablets (I didn't find out what they are called) and told me to take two tablets. My friend and I went home and I told her not to tell my mother.

I took the tablets and slept for around 4 hours. When I woke up, I saw blood coming out so I decided to pad myself. I padded myself for 2 days but I was very weak and had a terrible headache. My friend stayed with me at home for one week as she was monitoring me.

I never informed my mother about the pregnancy or abortion because she is very tough. I was scared of what she would do to me. I am grateful to my friend because she didn't judge me, kept our secret, and was there for me.

In my area, if people get to know that you have aborted, they say negative things about you like; that you sleep with peoples' husbands. I think there needs to be less stigma from health workers because unsafe abortion can cause death and girls should feel safe to approach health workers.



Story 10. Semakula Gyagenda

Guardian to a victim of unsafe abortion, Mbale

In 2016 one of the girls, I was taking care of got pregnant at the age of 17 and decided to carry out an abortion.

She informed her peers who secretly took her to a traditional doctor to help her get rid of the pregnancy. She thought of it as a safe way but it wasn't. The traditional doctor used a piece of metal from a bicycle to remove the foetus.

She was rushed to the hospital but unfortunately, she ended up losing her uterus.

She didn't have enough knowledge about unsafe abortion and the risks, but because of peer influence, she did it without knowing what might happen.

On returning to the community, she faced stigma, especially from the men and boys. They called her all sorts of negative names and she is no longer referred to as a woman because she has no uterus. The stigma was too much on her in that her parents were forced to take her to another village so that she can heal both physically and mentally. Luckily, now she is doing well and taking good care of herself.

To prevent such incidents from happening, parents need to spend more time with their children. There are times when we are so busy, parents come back late, go out early, we don't give enough time to our children or support them. Let us offer them age-appropriate sexuality education, inform them about the dangers of teenage pregnancy and unsafe abortion.

Some parents have encouraged their children to take up family planning but have you informed them about STIs and HIV? The biggest drivers to teenage pregnancy and unsafe abortion? One word: poverty. Parents, people in the community, leaders, must all come together and think of how to economically empower adolescents.



Story 11. Sr. Lillian .A. Enaku

Nursing officer Busiu Health center IV, Mbale district

COVID-19 did more harm than good. As a nursing Officer, I witnessed immense teenage pregnancies and child marriages.

The fact that most of these girls are below 17 years of age, they decide to find ways of terminating these unwanted pregnancies so that they can continue with school and survive the shame and stigma from the community.

They are not ready to keep the babies because it comes from a set of bad circumstances such as rape, incest, manipulations, ignorance, and sometimes the person responsible for the pregnancy has denied responsibility for the pregnancy. That is why they are determined to get rid of these unwanted pregnancies.

Unsafe abortions are common because girls are scared of reactions from the health workers and also stigma and judgment from the community. Many of the young girls whom I interacted with said they undertook unsafe abortions out of fear of their parents and relatives.

These unsafe abortions are carried out within the communities, clinics and with the help of Traditional Birth Attendants (TBA). It's easy for them to reach out to these people for help because they are not costly and are certain that they will not hand them over to the police and be arrested.

They also fear that their parents and relatives will find out; so they only come to us when there is a complication. Adolescent girls come to the health facility for Post Abortion Care (PAC) when they are in pain, shock, already anaemic, have a damaged uterus, have retained products of conception, among others.

Sometimes the girls don't make it to health facilities. We are lucky to have never experienced death on-site, but some girls have died because they don't arrive in time.

During the provision of PAC services, I treat incomplete and unsafe abortion complications, encourage family planning and contraceptives use for them to prevent unwanted pregnancies and counsel them. This treatment is to help them prevent pain, treat infections, further complications, and even death.

In our culture, people still believe that abortion is done by promiscuous people and murderers. There is still a lot of sensitization needed in the community so that they see it as having control over one's body. As health workers, we need to be more friendly when attending to these adolescents, carry out sensitization in the communities, and ensure the right SRHR information is shared.



Story 12. Suzan Namutebi

Nurse, Butalejja Health Centre III

Some adolescents can't avoid sex especially those who don't want to go without sex or those who experience sexual violence.

The challenge is that many people have failed to get to terms with these realities. For sexually active adolescents, we advise them to always use condoms or come to the health center and get a family planning method that suits them.

During my interactions with the adolescents who come to the health facility, the commonest reason they give for carrying out unsafe abortions is that hospitals are very expensive and they don't want to ask their parents for help because they will expose themselves as being pregnant.

Some of these girls speak to their friends who know these drugs and herbs that they can use to aid unsafe abortions. For example, one of the girls informed me that when you take a lot of Flagyl tablets, the pregnancy comes out and some know about misoprostol so they use it.

As a health worker, I try to talk to the girls, not to carry out unsafe abortions as the effects can be deadly and may make them infertile. Some girls have come to us with so much bleeding or pain, or they are anaemic.

The law in Uganda permits safe abortions under some circumstances. The law permits it when the girl is very young, when she is still a child, and also the law permits when the baby will risk the life of the mother or if the baby will be born with some difficulties.

I want to make sure policy makers get more involved and make sure we sensitize the communities about carrying out an abortion in case someone's life is in danger, or if she is still a child.



Story 13.

Naula mary

VHT, butalejja

Parent's irresponsibility plays a huge role in these unwanted pregnancies.

Some of these parents are very irresponsible, they send their teenage daughters to sell snacks and vegetables such as Bagiya, tomatoes among others in the market at night.

This puts the girls in a very vulnerable situation. I have interacted with many girls that shared with me that they were raped as they were returning home from the markets.

In Butaleja district, individuals that carry out abortions face a lot of stigma. So, these young girls usually connive with their grandmothers, mothers, friends, and Traditional Birth Attendants (TBA) who give them local herbs to drink or use to help them terminate their pregnancies.

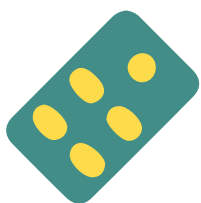
These concoctions have led to the death of some adolescents while others survive but are left with scars such as the loss of their uteruses.

I always speak to these adolescent girls and advise them to always go and seek advice from health workers since they are qualified but they don't agree.

They claim these health workers are rude, others fear being arrested since they are still young among other reasons.

Health workers need to stop being judgemental when dealing with these adolescents because it's their attitudes that force these adolescents to shun hospitals and resort to these risky acts.

In 2019, Butaleja town council lost 21 adolescents to unsafe abortions.



Story 14. Nabwire Justine

Senior Woman teacher, Mbale school of the deaf

The closure of schools has left children with disabilities vulnerable.

I work with deaf children as a teacher and enjoy working here. All the experience I have acquired over the years, this year has been very challenging for deaf children since schools are closed.

One of the challenges that our deaf children face, is that sometimes they are abandoned by their parents because they are viewed as useless. This makes their lives quite challenging. At the deaf school, we try as much as we can to love these children especially girls, and build their confidence, constantly speak to them about Sexuality Education and inform them about ways that they can use to avoid being involved in risky behavior.

The closure of schools has left these children, especially the girls, very vulnerable. We have seen many of them being deceived by men and since most of them do not work for themselves, they easily fall into these men's traps.

One of the girls I used to teach joined the school to do her senior 4 and completed it successfully. After the end of the term, we dropped her off at her parents, when the next term resumed we expected to see her **joining** senior 5. She didn't report.

She had been sent away by her parents because she was pregnant. She became pregnant during the holidays, her parents asked her to help them with various house chores and one afternoon, she was raped by a man who followed her to the garden. All this was shared by her parents. We looked for her all over the village until we located her. She had just carried out the unsafe abortion and was in a horrible state as she had lost a lot of blood.

She informed us that she was raped and later got pregnant, we were devastated because as a school, we had a lot of hope in her. We took her to the health center but it was difficult because none of the health workers could communicate with the girl.

As a third party, I interpreted for the health worker who attended to her. One urgent thing the government needs to do is put in place interpreters, in schools, Police stations, courts, and hospitals. This will ensure that people in the deaf community get equal justice as others have.



Story 15. Nassenya Miriam

Teacher, Butaleja district

I am a teacher in one of the schools in Butaleja and I share age-appropriate sex education information with the pupils. The reason I do this is to ensure that the pupils have the correct information and make well-informed choices.

As a teacher in the community, I have seen many pupils get pregnant, especially during holiday times. From the interactions I have had with some of the pupils, I found out that some of the reasons why girls end up getting pregnant is that they lack scholastic materials so they find ways of getting these materials. One of the ways is getting money or materials from an older person who in return, asks for sex.

At the school where I am currently employed, we had a case of a girl who got pregnant, when the school management found out they called her parents. During the meeting, the school management informed the parents that their child was pregnant but she can continue coming to school.

When the girl went home, her parents informed her that she had to get rid of that pregnancy so that she can continue with her education. The girl used local herbs to remove the fetus and she bled a lot for a week and had to take three weeks from school.

When it came to three weeks, we decided to visit the girl's home and inquire why she wasn't coming to school anymore. That was when she informed us that her parents had taken her for an abortion. We spoke to the parent and asked her that the girl resumes school since she had already missed out a lot **as** she was now feeling better.

The parents agreed and the following week the girl reported back to school, at the school campus, the girl faced a lot of bullying and stigma from fellow pupils.

They called her a murderer, prostitute and constantly abused her for having allowed them to go ahead with the abortion. The constant hurtful words drained her emotionally as she kept crying most of the time, the senior woman teacher counselled her and also informed the pupils to stop with the name-calling.

I want to call upon the government to help us. I want them to help us with menstrual pads because some girls can't afford them. This makes them drop out of school and makes them vulnerable to exploitation by men; which can lead to unplanned pregnancies and then unsafe abortions. We also want the government to help us and set up sports centers so that the pupils can build their careers and keep busy.



Story 16. Gorge Peter

Resident state attorney –Tororo

Holding perpetrators accountable

My team and I handle police cases of criminal nature and sometimes these cases involve sexual or gender-based violence.

The police usually carry out their investigations and once they hand over the files to us, we investigate these files. Once the files have sufficient evidence, then these cases go to the prosecutor and when there is insufficient evidence then we close the cases.

The rate of sexual and gender-based violence cases fluctuates. I think the cases are higher when the children are on holiday than during school terms. The schools provide some sort of protection; the children are overseen by teachers and they are occupied.

In Tororo, we ensure that these perpetrators are held accountable. I work together with the police to get evidence, sanction the charges and ensure these cases go to court. Once these cases are in court, I continuously follow up to make sure they are prosecuted and punished, to send a signal to anyone who may have an idea of violating children's rights.

In September, we handled sexual violence case sessions before the Chief Magistrate. We had 52 cases, 28 cases were defilement, and we secured convictions of 39 cases. 5 of the 52 cases had reconciled on different grounds, for example for one, the perpetrator and victim were both minors (teenagers of 17 years). Giving them custodial sentences wouldn't help, so we gave them council instead. In such cases, we try as much as we can to involve parents because some of these parents don't even care what happens to their children or where they go at night. We offer counselling services to such people.

There is a case of a clan grandfather that defiled a girl and left the village. The girl's family reported to the police and a file was opened. The girl's family then decided that she keeps the pregnancy. The grandfather returned to the village after the girl had already given birth.

He was brought for questioning and he denied ever raping this girl. DNA tests were conducted and the test came out positive. With this evidence, the grandfather was sentenced to 15 years, and am certain such acts send out strong messages/warnings to the would-be offenders.

The biggest challenge that I face when it comes to SGBV cases is that the families of the victims and people in the community push the victim into accepting money instead of the justice that they deserve. When these cases are presented in court the victims stop coming for hearings and if they do, they deny everything. This becomes very difficult to carry on with these cases, it's everyone's responsibility to see to it that victims get the justice they deserve.

A lot of awareness needs to be done around SGBV reporting.



Story 17.

Mercy Namono (Not real names)

Age 18, Mbale district

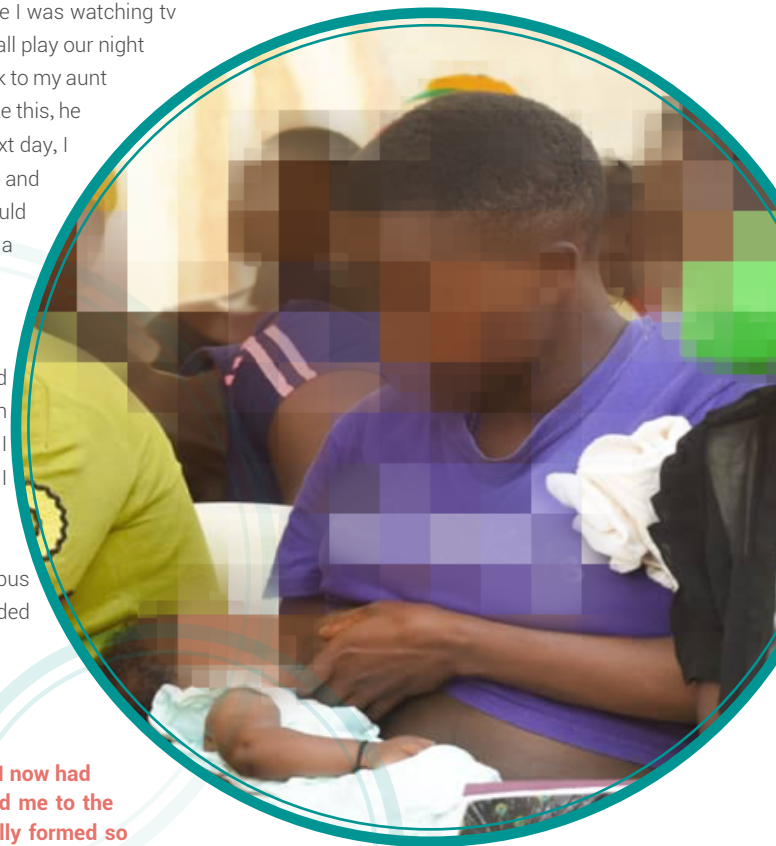
I was living in Kenya but after the death of my parents, I came to Uganda and stayed with my aunt in Mbale. My aunt wasn't doing well financially and I could see that she struggled to look after me and herself. I started hawking tomatoes and onions but the money I was getting wasn't enough. I asked my aunt to help me look around for a job for myself. My aunt identified a place that required a housemaid and because of how we were struggling financially, I was certain this job would be our breakthrough. The family I was working for used to give me a lot of chores and if anything went wrong, I was blamed. The emotional abuse from all the family members was unbearable but I stayed because I needed the income. One day, a phone went missing from the house and the wife of my boss struggled and severely beat me, I screamed for help but no one rescued me, said 'Mercy Sefuroza'

After a month of working for this family, my boss Tata Alpha asked his wife to go to the village in Busoga to bury one of his uncles that had passed away. Tata Alpha escorted her to the bus park and he proceeded to work as usual. He returned home earlier that day and asked his children to help me out with some chores so that they can go and spend the night at Haji's who was one of our neighbours. I found this rather strange and inquired from him why his children have to sleep over at haji' yet they have a home to which he didn't respond to. When his sons were done with the chores, they went over to haji's place to spend the night since he wasn't home that night. At around 7 pm, he asked me to go to the nearby shop and buy for him coffee spirit waragi. He drunk the alcohol from his bed. In the house, it was just Tata Alpha and me. He went over and closed the doors with a padlock and walked over to where I was watching Tv from.

Tata Alpha informed me that if I didn't give him what he wanted, he would stab me with the knife. I was terrified and I let him have his way with me. The reason why I didn't scream was that he covered my mouth tightly. I knew no one would believe me and the house had a ceiling so I was certain the noise wouldn't be heard by the people outside. After raping me he went over to his bed to sleep and left me there lying on the tiles where I was watching tv from. The next morning, Tata Alpha informed me that when he returns we shall play our night game. I went on my knees and pleaded with him to forgive me or take me back to my aunt without my salary. 'I will beat you to death if you continue to disrespect me like this, he said. When he returned that evening, he raped me again. When he left the next day, I went over to the neighbors and informed them that Tata Alpha was raping me and asked them to help me with transport money or look for another place that would employ me. One of the ladies took me to a home in Kawuuku that needed a housemaid. I only worked for them for a day and Tata Alpha came and picked me up, and I resumed work at my former home.

On returning home, I informed Tata Alpha that I was pregnant and asked him what I should do about the pregnancy. On hearing this, he put me in his car and drove me up to the Mbale bus park. When he dropped me off, I asked him to help me with some money since for all the 4 months that I had worked for him I had never been paid. He just drove off. The bus arrived in Mbale at 9.00 pm but he hadn't given me money to cater for transportation from the bus park to my aunt's home. I walked from the bus park where it dropped me up to the nearest Boda Boda stage where I pleaded with them to take me to my aunt's place to which one of them did. I later called Mama Alpha and informed her that her husband had gotten me pregnant but all I got from her were accusations and insults.

I continued with my hawking tomatoes and onions to earn a living since I now had a baby to look after. When the time for delivery arrived, my aunt rushed me to the hospital, on reaching, the doctors informed us that my bones hadn't fully formed so I will not be in a position to push the baby. I was successfully operated and my baby came out fine, well-wishers brought me clothes and money once I delivered. I informed Tata Alpha that I had delivered but he has never offered any support towards me or the baby.



Story 18.

Mataaka Agnes (Not real names)

15 years, Mbale district

There was a boy called Ojje who always prophesied his love for me. I didn't love him but I was okay with having him as a friend. One day, he invited me to go and visit him at home. When I reached his home, I found him preparing food, once it was ready he gave me some to eat. I wasn't hungry but I ended up eating the food anyway, once we were done with food, he raped me. After raping me, I informed him that I was going to report him to my mother but he threatened to kill me. I didn't give in to the threats, I gathered strength and ran outside. When I went outside, I called my mother.

My mother informed other community members about my incident. They hunted for him and once he was found they beat him up. After the beating, my mother asked him if he will look after me and while she was still waiting for his response he ran away. We have never seen him or heard from him since then.

After that incident, I was taken to the village after some time I realized that I was lazy, lost my appetite and all I wanted to do was sleep. That is when I realized that I was pregnant. I went through my pregnancy well and started experiencing challenges after delivery. There is no one that I can leave my son with, I have to put him on my back for me to have anything done. I believe if I had SRH information, I would have been in a position to prevent myself from getting pregnant by taking the emergency contraceptive pill.

"For me I have on two occasions had an abortion from Ssenga (meaning a traditional birth attendant). At both occasions, I developed serious complications including severe bleeding and sepsis but was lucky enough to receive treatment at our health centre IV. I had no option but to abort because then at first, the father of my child was our teacher who did not want the child and was offering me no support. He told me to go and abort but never gave me any money."



This was narrated by one of the girls, 17 years of age from Butaleja district during the Young Mother's Forum.

At a capacity building training for health care providers on standards for quality health care services for adolescents in Mbale organized by UYAHF, health workers noted that they are hesitant to carry out abortions due to lack of a clear understanding on the laws. Furthermore, they consider sharing information on safe abortion as a taboo and are unwilling to offer guidance and counselling to any woman who might have questions on practicing an abortion. This justifies the dire need for the risk and harm reduction model to prevent unsafe abortions.

What Uganda Youth and Adolescents Health Forum is doing.

This gap in knowledge and practice has probed **UYAHF** to go a step further to mobilise and build agency of young people to advocate for decriminalization of abortion and advocate for the rights of women and girls to exercise their rights to bodily autonomy and reproductive health choices. We are doing this through the Civil Society Coalition to Stop Maternal Mortality Due to Unsafe Abortion (**CSCMMUA**) where **UYAHF** is an active member. We have been closely working with and supporting Ministry of Health to re-instate Ministry of Health's Standards and Guidelines to Reduce Maternal Mortality Due to Unsafe Abortions 2015, which permitted abortion in cases of foetal anomaly, rape and incest. Although this policy had previously been passed by the government, it was shortly recalled on the basis that abortion is 'illegal' in Uganda and that religious and cultural leaders were not in support of it under any circumstances.

As a result, Uganda Youth and Adolescents Health Forum with support from Safe Abortion Action Fund and, through the **SHEDECIDES** Uganda local movement, has loosely established a network of youth led organizations and youth champions working towards advocating for decriminalization of abortion, promotion of access to safe abortion and contraception to end teenage pregnancies and reduce unsafe abortion among adolescent girls and young women. The network coordinated by **UYAHF**, has been working to give vulnerable and poor adolescent girls and young women autonomy over their bodies and the choice to exercise their reproductive health and rights. This network is made up of youth led and youth serving organizations within Kampala, Mbale, Butaleja, Tororo, and Busia as well as a few empowered health workers working in public hospitals in Kampala, Mbale, and Butaleja districts. Although facing a lot of challenges, the number of youth organizations and youth initiatives working towards advocating for safe abortion and post abortion care is slowly growing in number and momentum but requires capacity support in smart and evidence-based advocacy and lobbying, human rights-based approach, and training in innovative models like the harm reduction model among others.

UYAHF is proud to have supported documentation of stories of girls and families that have lived the reality of unsafe abortion and its complications. For some of the girls, unsafe abortion has caused life long and permanent damages likes removal of the uterus, for others, they have suffered shame and stigma from their communities and school, while other families like Miss. Hasfa Sulemu's family, they lost their daughter to unsafe abortion complication which is a very hurting and sorrowful experience.

Key recommendations

1. Unsafe abortions can be prevented by ensuring free or affordable public sector family planning services reach adolescents girls and women especially those that are in rural and hard to reach areas. This will greatly reduce the unmet need of contraception and lower the rates of unintended pregnancies.
2. Build capacities of health workers around the global standards for quality health care services for adolescents, this will guide them as they interact with adolescents that come to their health facilities. This will greatly improve on the quality of health care services that are offered to adolescents.
3. Provision of comprehensive sexuality education to adolescents so that they have knowledge about their bodies, how one becomes pregnant among others. The increased autonomy for women and girls to make their own decisions about their reproduction prevents them from making poor choices and reduces their vulnerability.
4. Document the impacts of the restrictive abortion laws and policies on maternal mortality and morbidity. The abortion laws do not reflect the reasons most women and girls terminate their pregnancies.
5. Create sexuality education campaigns that educate adolescents about the dangers of unsafe sex, unsafe abortions and how to prevent unwanted pregnancies and how to negotiate for sex

As has been indicated in the stories shared, speaking with girls in Butaleja and Mbale through **UYAHF**'s Young Mother's Forum's on Safe Mother hood, it was clear that any form of abortion in their community is not acceptable due to stigma, restrictive social - cultural norms, conservative cultural and religious beliefs, negative and poor attitudes from health care providers who are judgmental and discriminative to young people.



Uganda Youth and Adolescents
Health Forum



get in touch

Plot 1238, Bukoto 1-UCB Zone,
P.O Box 25914-Kampala, Uganda
Tel: +256 776 385819 /+256 200 902407

Email: info@uyahf.com

Website: www.uyahf.com

Face book: Uganda Youths and
Adolescents Health Forum

Suubi Helpline: 0759479995