

Fistula is hell on earth – victim

KAMPALA

By Hope Mafaranga

Fistula continues to affect Ugandan women so much so that many have endured permanent damage.

Kevin Nalubwama, 27, a resident of Rubaga in Kampala, is one of the over two million women in Uganda living with fistula.

A former journalist, Nalubwama has undergone numerous obstetric fistula corrective surgeries, but with no hope of overcoming and healing the trauma.

Narrating her story during the 2018 annual scientific conference reunion dinner at Sheraton Kampala Hotel on Friday, Nalubwama sent the participants into tears when she said the vesicovaginal fistula (VVF) that she is suffering from was the result of delays at Mulago Hospital in Kampala.

The conference dinner was organised by Save the Mothers, an international charitable organisation that equips African leaders to save the lives of women and babies through a Masters Public Health Leadership. It is based at Uganda Christian University, Mukono.

"When I reported to the hospital to have my second child, the medical personal realised I could not have a normal delivery and put me on the list of people to be operated on. However, I waited for two days, without being taken to the theatre. In the end, I had a normal delivery, but got VVF," she said.

After delivery, Nalubwama was later helped by a nurse and discharged.

"After seven days, I started leaking urine. I had no idea what had



Orombi (in purple), Save the Mothers founders Dr Florence Mirembe and Jean Chamberlain (in front of Orombi) and other alumni during the Save the Mothers dinner at Sheraton Hotel Kampala on Saturday. Photo by Lawrence Mulondo.

happened," she said.

When she went back to the hospital, she was told that she was suffering from a condition called VVF.

VVF is an abnormal fistulous tract extending between the bladder and the vagina, which allows the continuous involuntary discharge of urine into the vaginal vault.

Nalubwama said VVF is a terrible disease and expensive to manage as the victims need a lot of money to buy diapers.

"You have to keep changing the

diapers to avoid infections and the odour. Living with fistula is hell on earth both socially and financially. Imagine I lost my marriage because my husband could no longer put up with a leaking woman," Nalubwama, who had her first child at 15 and her second child at the age of 17, said. She has been living with the condition for 10 years.

Dr Jotham Musinguzi, the director of the Population Council, said there are many teenage mothers, who have suffered the same fate as Nalubwama.

Musinguzi advocated the use of contraceptives to control childbirth and reduce teenage pregnancies.

"If we reduce fertility, we have fewer children and the fewer children we have, the lesser the number of women who will die while giving birth and children dying afterbirth," he said.

He called on politicians to support medical workers and increase financing to eliminate maternal mortality.

The former Archbishop of the Church of Uganda, Henry Luke Orombi, urged men to always take care of their wives

and support them during pregnancy and childbirth.

"They go through a lot during childbirth; the tears, pain and the blood. It is not a journey of Hallelujah to be a mother. Cuddle them so that they can forget the pain they experience during childbirth," he said.

Orombi also reminded people that women are gifts who need to be treasured and urged men to love them unconditionally and honour them.

"God himself came through women when he gave his only beloved son Jesus Christ to us through a woman. He could have come through any other thing, but he chose a woman. By that time God chose the woman, it means she is a precious gift that must be unconditionally supported financially, physically, emotionally and protected from cultural negativities," he said.

Dr Miriam Mutabazi, the East African director of Save the Mothers, said a mother dies every 90 seconds due to pregnancy and childbirth-related causes.

"These are preventable deaths," she said.

Mutabazi said developed countries have the skills, personnel and resources to manage complications during pregnancy, but in developing countries, women and babies simply die.

"When you save a mother's life, you save the best person to raise her children, feed, clothe and educate them. She also contributes to her community, economy and environment. Save the mothers and you can save the world," she said.