

DOREEN NAWA
Lusaka

Adolescents scarred by fistula

While condition is treatable, significant barriers exist

CAN childbirth be harmful? For Charity Bwembya* 16, of Kwabulongo village in

Nakonde, the answer to this question is an outright yes!

This is because of what she has gone through after getting married to a man who is 16 years older than her.

Charity got pregnant at the age of 14 and her neighbour was responsible.

She says one morning in 2019, she was left home alone when a man entered the house and had sex with her.

It was during the August school holiday.

The man ordered her not to disclose anything about the sexual ordeal to anyone.

A month later, it was discovered that she was pregnant. The family sat and a decision was made.

Charity was told to get married to the man who had raped her despite her young age.

"My aunty and other women in the village told me I would marry Cephas and I had no objection. I had to stop going to school. I was in Grade Six then. We started living together as husband and wife," Charity shares.

And after nine months, it was time for Charity to give birth.

She was taken to Isoka General Hospital.

And immediately after delivering, she was taken to the recovery bed.

There, she noticed something strange was happening to her — her lower garments were getting wet.

"I told my mother (aunt) who was by my bedside about what I was experiencing and when the doctor came, he referred us to Mbala General Hospital," Charity says.

She then went back to Mbala General Hospital, where she was referred to Chilonga Mission Hospital.

At Chilonga Mission Hospital, she was diagnosed with obstetric fistula.

According to medical experts, obstetric fistula is a hole between the private part and rectum or bladder that is caused by prolonged obstructed labour, leaving a woman incontinent (lack of voluntary control of urination or defecation or both).

It is said that young women and adolescent girls are at high risk of suffering fistula because their bodies are not sufficiently mature for carrying a pregnancy and giving birth.

At Chilonga Mission



ROSINA, 19, a mother of two has gone back to school after a successful operation.



CHARITY being led to the theatre in readiness for the surgery.

Hospital, Charity was told that fistula comes with a myriad of infections and chronic pain and can even cause nerve damage to the legs.

While fistulas in Zambia are said to be completely preventable and treatable, there are significant barriers to treatment for mothers and Charity's case is no exception.

She has no money to pay for the reconstructive surgery that will help her to pass urine without wetting herself.

In the meantime, she is also in dire need of some cash to buy catheters which she needs to drain urine without getting wet.

Charity's first surgery at Chilonga Mission Hospital was unsuccessful.

After the operation, she stayed in Chilonga Mission Hospital for five days before she was discharged and headed back to her village.

After that, her stitches and catheter were removed at a rural health centre, and she returned home with joy that she would no longer be disgraced by the problem of dripping urine.

But one unusual morning,

she woke up only to find the urine dripping again.

Every place where she sat that day became wet with urine.

"As months went by, that [dripping] became a daily thing," she says.

Charity thinks her condition

stigmatised in the community.

"Now the problem is that people in my village are inciting my husband to divorce me, saying I cannot give my husband anymore children, so I am useless," she says.

Charity is not the only young

village in Isoka developed obstetric fistula after a difficult labour with her first child.

It was in 2016 when she fell pregnant at the age of 14. Nine months later, she went into labour and walked for over 10 kilometres to a rural health centre.

She was in labour for a day-and-half without giving birth.

An ambulance was called in to take her to Isoka General Hospital.

At the hospital, the doctor examined her and recommended a Caesarean Section, unfortunately her baby was still-born.

Throughout the surgery, Rosina was unconscious and only woke up the following day.

"I didn't know what was happening because I was very sick. It is all because of the pregnancy," she says.

Rosina stayed in the hospital for a week before she was discharged and headed back to her village.

Like Charity, Rosina, too, started getting wet just a few days after being discharged from hospital.

When it was confirmed that she had fistula, arrangements

were made to send her to Mbala General Hospital for surgery.

"It was a relief seeing an ambulance come to pick me up at no cost. If I had to, I could not afford paying for it.

"At the hospital, too, it was the same, surgery was done free of charge. I didn't pay anything. I was told an organisation had paid for me," Rosina recalls.

The operation was successful. After a few days, she returned to her village and she was not getting wet anymore.

"I don't want to see anyone go through what I went through. It is unbearable. Sadly here in Isoka and Nakonde, there are a lot of such cases because we usually have children early in life," Rosina says.

And a health promotions officer at the Ministry of Health in Nakonde, Gertrude Chipampe, says obstetric fistula is a childbirth injury that destroys a woman's life.

Ms Chipampe says this condition makes one lose voluntary control over urination or defecation, and as result a subject of mockery in the community.

She says surgery is the only

cure.

"We have booked everyone that has fistula and we are waiting for support to take them to Mbala for surgery. Here in Nakonde, fistula cases are on the increase because of teenage pregnancies and child marriages," she says.

And an obstetrician and gynaecologist, Swabby Macha, says an estimated 2,000 fistula patients await surgery each year countrywide.

Dr Macha says unwanted pregnancies among adolescents aged between 15 and 19 accounts for 30 percent of all maternal deaths, with abortion being among the major causes of complications like fistula.

"Repairs, important as they are, will not eradicate fistula. Programmes are needed that reach communities to dissuade them from marrying their daughters as children," Dr Macha says.

Pregnancy and childbirth should be among the happiest moments in a woman's life.

Sadly, this was not the case for Charity and Rosina, including many other fistula victims in Zambia.

*Not real name.

"I don't want to see anyone go through what I went through. It is unbearable."

started when she fell pregnant.

"I think it all started because of the pregnancy because I was not like this before. I regret falling pregnant," she said in an interview.

The worst part about her condition is that she is being

woman suffering from fistula.

She is among women that are due to undergo surgery with the help of Fistula Foundation Zambia once resources are available.

Rosina Mwila, 19, another adolescent from Matumbo

RTSA takes on cloned vehicle-aided theft

NANCY SIAME
Lusaka

WITH the rise in numbers of criminals using cloned vehicles to stage robberies and implicate innocent people, it has become imperative for law enforcers to act swiftly and nip the new crime in the bud.

Current happenings have left the authorities with no choice but to fall back on technology to fast-track the identification of motor vehicles right on the spot.

No need to go to the Road Transport and Safety Agency (RTSA) offices and start scanning through computers.

Here is the reason why.

Recently, a Lusaka pharmacist was shot at in Kamwala South area after his vehicle was ambushed by police officers who suspected him to be a criminal.

This was shortly after a crime was conducted using a vehicle with the same registration number as that of the pharmacist.

The criminals who conducted the robbery within Kamwala South went away with about K1 million, which they snatched from a marketing manager of Crown Milling.

One of the onlookers captured the registration number of the motor vehicle in question as BAT 9578, same as that of the druggist, who was with his wife somewhere else at the time of the crime.

This is just but one of the many incidences where criminals have cloned other people's motor vehicles while the victims go about their business oblivious of the imminent danger.

Apart from duplicating the registration number plates of the target vehicles, the criminals go to an extent of using automobiles similar to the

vehicle registration number they have cloned.

To curtail this, RTSA has developed a smart mobile application which will be able to establish a vehicle's actual details and that of its owner, including the picture whenever required.

Through the integrated Smart Enforcement Application, data related to all Zambian registered vehicles will be drawn from existing RTSA databases and availed to law enforcement officers in an instant.

The officers will use the application to scan any motor vehicle using mobile phones.

Drivers who disregard traffic regulations will also be tracked using the same digital application.

The information and communication technology (ICT) application was launched on Saturday November 27, 2021 by Minister of Transport and Logistics Frank Tayali in Chongwe during RTSA Open Day.

Explaining how the application works, RTSA head of ICT Brian Sikute said the process to determine the owner of a vehicle will now be instant, unlike in the past when officers had to search through the system.

"The application has a provision to query particulars of a certain motor vehicle, its driver and suspend [a driver's license] or generate a traffic charge instantly.

"For cloned motor vehicles, it will be very easy [to detect], they [criminals] will try to make a vehicle as similar as possible to the original one, it will be almost the same as the original, but the chassis number is different.

"With this mobile app we will be able to tell that this is a cloned motor vehicle," Mr Sikute said.

The application can be used on a mobile phone of an officer as long as they have internet connectivity to pick the global positioning system of any particular location.

However, the user needs to have an authorised user name and password to use the application.

Mr Sikute said the launch of the smart application is the beginning to the use of technology to automate the entire RTSA system.

"Imagine a situation where there is an accident, when the law enforcement officers get to the scene, they want to identify people on the vehicle, the status of the vehicle and the driver involved.

"Currently, the process is a lot manual because a police officer on the scene has to wait for RTSA to get to the scene and communicate with other officers to get particulars of the vehicles and the drivers," he said.

Trials have been done and the application is said to work perfectly.

Mr Sikute further explained that the smart application will make it possible to print traffic offence charge sheets right at the scene.

RTSA is also working with police and National Road Fund Agency to capture vehicles at toll gates whose owners have previously committed traffic offences but have been elusive.

For Government, the application will reduce the need to deploy officers on the ground since it [application] will be able to alert officers whenever a vehicle is in violation.

"The new dawn Government aspires to reposition the country to become the centre of digital transformation and use technology to drive productivity and strengthen operations in all sectors of the economy.

"This transformation will



ROAD Transport Safety Agency traffic inspector Sophia Mukupa (right) explaining how a laser jet is used to capture speeding motorists to Minister of Transport and Logistics Frank Tayali, during the agency's open day in Chongwe.

PICTURE: ANGELA NTENTABUNGA

extend to the road transport sub-sector through the provision of quality road transport services and road safety management," Mr Tayali said during the launch of the programme.

The minister, who also launched the Zambia Road Safe Corridor Initiative, said the two programmes will make roads safe for all users.

The initiative outlines a pragmatic and collective effort to work towards a road safety management regime that saves more lives, enables inclusive socio-economic progress and

enhances regional transport safety and connectivity.

The initiative is a long-term effort aimed at convening various road sector stakeholders to enable collective action for improved road safety management.

Mr Tayali said Government's goal is to build an enforcement approach where road users are engaged at all times without the physical presence of enforcement officers.

He emphasised that Government places high value in facilitating the safe and

timely movement of people and products by ensuring that roads are well managed, with adequate measures to mitigate the risk of road accidents.

The minister assured that Government's agenda is to ensure that the transport policy on road transport is operationalised through efficient and equitable licensing and registration procedures.

RTSA chief executive officer Gladwell Banda expressed the agency's desire to transform into a world-class and equitable regime of transport

management system by leveraging on ICTs.

The road agency is leveraging on various ICT-based solutions to innovate technology-driven enforcement mechanism to create a favourable environment for transport and logistics as well as improving the road safety profile of the country.

The other major challenge the smart enforcement application will address is delays caused due to random stoppages for physical checking of vehicles and verification of documents.