

Preventing Obstetric Fistula Through Health Systems Strengthening in Uganda

A fistula repair surgery at Mubende Regional Referral Hospital. Photo: Pride Ashaba.

FACT SHEET | AUGUST 2026

Background

Obstetric fistula is a preventable childbirth injury that reflects gaps across the continuum of care. In Uganda, prolonged obstructed labor and birth injuries remain leading causes of fistula, while an increasing proportion of cases occur among adolescent girls (aged 19 and younger).¹ Eliminating obstetric fistula requires more than surgical repair; it demands stronger health systems that delay first pregnancies, expand access to sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services, improve the quality of maternal and emergency obstetric care, and ensure timely referral and treatment. Through the USAID-funded Family Planning Activity (2020-2025) and the FCDO-funded Empowering Women for Better Reproductive Health Outcomes (EMPOWER) programme, Pathfinder International partners with the Government of Uganda to strengthen the health system and prevent obstetric fistula before it occurs. Our integrated, data-driven approach addresses the root cause of birth injuries by combining adolescent SRH, quality maternal and emergency obstetric services, strengthened referral systems, and clinical capacity in treatment and recovery to improve outcomes across the continuum of care. By embedding these interventions within existing government structures, Pathfinder strengthens the capacity to prevent, detect, refer, and manage obstetric complications while building a more sustainable maternal health system.

Strengthening the systems that prevent and treat birth injuries

PREVENT ADOLESCENT PREGNANCY & EXPAND ACCESS TO SRH SERVICES

Pathfinder uses routine data to identify sub-counties with the highest rates of adolescent pregnancy, and partners with local district governments to strengthen coordinated prevention efforts. By supporting **district adolescent health committees** that bring together district leaders, educators, health managers, and community development officers, Pathfinder helps review data, identify local drivers of adolescent pregnancy, and coordinate evidence-based responses. This systems-level approach is complemented by **adolescent-responsive SRH services, peer-led safe spaces, community engagement, and provider mentorship** to reduce bias and improve access to quality care.

ESTABLISH SUSTAINABLE FISTULA PREVENTION & TREATMENT SERVICES

Rather than relying solely on periodic surgical camps, Pathfinder **strengthened regional referral hospitals' capacity to provide routine fistula and birth injury services** by initiating training for multidisciplinary repair teams and strengthening referral pathways.

STRENGTHEN MATERNAL HEALTH QUALITY OF CARE & CLINICAL CAPACITY

Pathfinder strengthens frontline maternity services by working through existing health systems and district-based mentors to embed **clinical mentorship and continuous quality improvement** in public health facilities. This includes improving providers' competencies in **Emergency Obstetric and Newborn Care (EmONC), Essential Training in Operative Obstetrics, and basic obstetric ultrasonography**. Together, these approaches build sustainable clinical capacity and advance the quality and safety of obstetric care.

BUILD COMMUNITY AWARENESS & SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENTS

Pathfinder works alongside government, communities, and local leaders to strengthen the enabling environment for reproductive and maternal health. Through **community engagement, behavior change, and district leadership**, Pathfinder improves awareness, reduces stigma, and strengthens care-seeking for fistula prevention and treatment.

Building capacity across the health system¹

EMPOWERING ADOLESCENTS & COMMUNITIES

- **12 district adolescent health committees** strengthened to coordinate evidence-based responses to adolescent pregnancy
- **4,000+ adolescent girls** reached through Young Mothers Forums with SRH information and services
- **500+ community influencers** engaged to address harmful gender norms that contribute to early pregnancy, school dropout, and gender-based violence
- **30 radio talk shows** on fistula prevention and repair services to increase awareness and reduce stigma

STRENGTHENING FISTULA CARE SERVICES

- **2 multidisciplinary fistula surgical teams** initiated training at regional referral hospitals
- **40+ women** received fistula/birth injury repair services

I am now healed and back to my normal life. I no longer use pads, and I even attended the full Christmas service. I am now focused on growing my business and farm to support my family, and **I encourage pregnant women to deliver in health facilities to prevent complications.**

— Agaba Lodious, 37 years

EXPANDING ACCESS TO REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH SERVICES

- **580+ health workers** mentored to improve adolescent-responsive SRH service delivery
- **51,000+ clients** received postpartum family planning services
- **64,000+ clients** reached annually through integrated maternal and SRH outreach services
- **35,000+ clients** served annually through community-based SRH services delivered through Village Health Teams

IMPROVING QUALITY & SAFETY OF OBSTETRIC CARE

- **600+ health workers** mentored in basic and comprehensive EmONC
- **31 medical officers** trained in Essential Operative Obstetrics
- **41 health workers** trained in basic obstetric ultrasonography
- **150 health facilities** implementing continuous quality improvement for maternal health services

¹ Data is collated from 11 supported districts under the USAID Family Planning Activity and 50 supported districts under the FCDO-funded EMPOWER programme.

Conclusion

Pathfinder's experience in Uganda demonstrates a proven framework for preventing obstetric fistula through integrated, health system-driven solutions. By strengthening local capacity, improving quality of care, and addressing the underlying factors that contribute to birth injuries, Pathfinder is helping transform maternal health outcomes across Uganda. By investing in sexual, reproductive, and maternal health, we can ensure women and girls have access to the care they need to thrive and live with dignity.

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PATHFINDER

For nearly 70 years, Pathfinder International has been a catalyst for systems transformation, inclusive growth, and resilient communities. With a global footprint spanning Africa, South Asia, and the Middle East, we invest in women and girls by expanding access to essential health products and services, unlocking leadership pathways, and strengthening economic participation. By partnering with civil society, governments, and the private sector, we scale women-led innovations that deliver sustainable systems of support, while generating measurable impact with the goal to ensure every woman has the agency to shape her future and lead a healthy, fulfilling life.

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