VISTA
FOUNDATION UGANDA
VOICES INSPIRING STRENGTH, TRANSFORMATION AND ADVOCACY

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REPORTS OF BEYOND THE CURE: WHY SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS ARE THE "EVERYDAY ESSENTIALS" FOR GIRLS AFFECTED BY LEPROSY

Leprosy is curable, yet its social consequences continue to shape the lives of those affected, especially young women and girls. On this World Leprosy Day 2026, we must confront a harsh reality: while the medical treatment for leprosy is effective, the stigma remains a paralyzing barrier to the "Everyday Essentials" of life—dignity, safety, and bodily autonomy.

In Uganda, recent trends show that leprosy cases have seen a worrying rise, peaking at over 500 cases annually in recent years, with a significant 55% of those cases involving females. For adolescent girls and young women (AGYW), a leprosy diagnosis often triggers a cycle of exclusion and silence. Stigma limits their access to education and healthcare, leaving their Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) dangerously invisible in leprosy responses.

The Invisible Burden on AGYW

For a young woman in Uganda, leprosy is rarely "just" a skin condition. It is an intersectional crisis:

* Barriers to Menstrual and Maternal Health: Stigma often prevents girls from seeking menstrual health needs or safe pregnancy care due to fear of discrimination by health providers.
* Increased Vulnerability to Violence: Women affected by leprosy face a higher risk of gender-based violence (GBV) and coercive reproductive decisions. In some communities, a diagnosis can lead to abandonment or forced marriage.
* The Participation Gap: Physical impairments, combined with the shame of social isolation, further undermine a girl's confidence to make informed choices about her own body.

At VISTA Foundation Uganda, our core value is Equity. We believe that health is not complete without sexual and reproductive justice. We cannot treat the physical symptoms of leprosy while ignoring the rights of the person living with it.

A Clarion Call for Integration

We call on the Ugandan government, health providers, and civil society to stop treating SRHR and leprosy as separate silos. To truly foster a disability-inclusive society, we must:

* Integrate stigma-free SRHR services into existing leprosy programs.
* Provide Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) that is accessible to girls with disabilities.
* Ensure meaningful inclusion of women affected by leprosy in leadership and decision-making roles within their communities.

Ending leprosy must mean more than just zero transmission; it must mean protecting the dignity and rights of every girl. Because when we empower an adolescent girl to reclaim her voice and her body, we transform an entire community.

Join the movement for Equity. Let 2026 be the year we move from medical cure to social transformation.

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