

Teenage pregnancy: A big threat to girl child

On increase. According to Uganda Demographic and Health Survey 2016, teenage pregnancy increased from 24 per cent in 2011 to 25 per in 2016.

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Lack of education has been cited as one of the major causes of teenage pregnancy. According to the Health minister, Dr Jane Ruth Aceng, girls who advance in education have higher chances of not conceiving at an early age.

She says though the government is fighting hard to handle problems affecting children, teenage pregnancy is still a threat.

Ms Vivian Kityo, the director of Wakisa Ministries, a home that looks after pregnant girls below 18 years, says Uganda is still faced with a problem of early childhood pregnancies.

According to Ms Kityo, the rate at which young girls are getting pregnant in Uganda is still a big threat.

"Initially, we had a percentage



A teenage mother with her child. FILE PHOTO

of 34 girls getting pregnant before adulthood, however, that has reduced to 24 per cent recently though this is still a small margin as compared to other states in the Sub-Saharan Africa," she says.

Ms Kityo explains that her home currently accommodates 25 pregnant girls, the youngest being 13

years old. For the last 10 years, Wakisa Ministries has catered for more than 1,500 underage pregnant girls. To Mr Kityo, early pregnancies are as a result of the rampant sexual abuse in the country more especially incest and rape.

"Many of the young girls in Uganda are being sexually abused by their long distant relatives who coerce them with simple gifts and the children keep quiet," she explains.

She also observes that, most people are harassed by people who take care of them, especially men who take them to school.

To Justine Nakiwala the communications manager for Plan International, one of the ways to fully eliminate child marriages in Uganda is the enforcement of children rights laws.

"The children rights laws particularly as they are outlined by the African Children's Charter from the national to the local level, will create an enabling environment for addressing the structural causes of child marriage, including promoting of gender equality and challenging gender stereotypes.

Barriers hinder girls' potential

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Girls in developing and underdeveloped countries continue to face barriers that keep them from achieving their full potential.

These include discrimination, harmful cultural practices such as female genital mutilation, child marriage, defilement, teenage pregnancy, school dropout and sexual assault.

As a result many girls become effectively invisible as they are pushed to the margins of society.

According to Ms Justine Nakiwala, the public relations officer of Plan International Uganda, the organisation has programmes tailored to promote the equality of girls and these are focused on health, quality education and inclusive economic empowerment.

"We make sure the girls inequalities are dealt with. The recurrent causes of school dropouts have been majorly marriage, teenage pregnancies, menstrual hygiene, discrimination and cultural hiccups like female genital mutilation but we are doing our very best to tackle all this," she says.

Ms Nakiwala says there is proven evidence that girls when supported, can be a force behind development. Investing in girls' health, safety, education and rights

in times of peace and crisis empowers them to reach their dreams and build better lives for themselves and their communities.

Several initiatives by government such as introduction of Universal Primary Education saw the enrollment rate of girls go up from 3.1 million pupils in 1996 to 8.4 million in 2013. However, the dropout rates, especially among girls is high.

In 2012, the UN Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation estimated that 68 per cent of children who start primary school in Uganda leave before reaching the last grade.

Ms Harriet Kulabako, a woman activist, says Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) is a calamity that still befalls the girl child and together with communities, she is set to keep fighting the phenomenon.

"About 120 to 140 million women have been subjected to FGM and three million girls are at risk each year, according to the World Health Organisation.

In Uganda, the Sebei sub-region in the districts of Kween, Bukwo and Kapchorwa have the highest number of girls who have undergone FGM," Ms Kulabako says.

FGM, which involves the partial or complete removal of the external female genitalia, are often performed on girls between seven and 14 years.