

Will adolescent sex education reduce teenage pregnancies?

Mixed reactions. A section of the population believes that children as young as 10 years old should access family planning services but others oppose it.

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As Uganda joins the rest of the world to mark World Youth Day today, latest statistics on the rate of teenage pregnancies have baffled parents, educationists and other stakeholders.

The Uganda Health Demographic and Health Survey 2016 indicated a rise in teenage pregnancies from 24 per cent in 2011 to 25 per cent in 2016.

The study attributed the rise to low education attainment among girls aged 15 to 19, with 34 per cent of them having no education and only 28 per cent with primary education.

"Children born to very young mothers are at increased risk of sickness and death," the report states.

It also indicates that teenage mothers are more likely to experience adverse pregnancy outcomes and are more constrained in their ability to pursue educational opportunities than young women who delay childbearing.

Dr Blandinah Nakiganda, the assistant commissioner for health services in the Health ministry, also observes that boys and girls who drop out of school are left idle, only to have children.

"We have a problem of child marriage and high dropout rates get boys and girls idle and they start giving birth every year," says Dr Nakiganda.

She adds that family planning is a preventive method for controlling maternal mortality and teenage pregnancies.

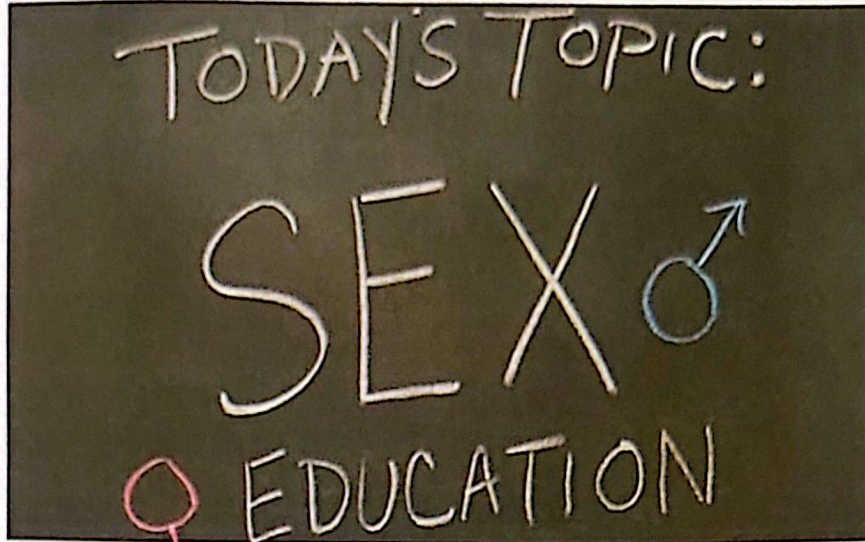
However, a draft policy document she signed early this year caused public rage after it emerged that the Ministry of Health was suggesting contraceptives for adolescents and children aged 10 to 19 years.

Although the ministry has since denied the policy statement, it indicated that children as young as 10 years old should access family planning services as one of the means to reduce early pregnancies among adolescents.

Commonly known birth control methods include condoms, diaphragm, contraceptive pills, implants, IUDs (intrauterine devices), sterilisation and the morning after pill.

However, the government proposal has since received with mixed relations, with a section of the population supporting and some others opposing it.

At a dialogue organised by



There have been calls to make children as young as 10 years old access family planning services as a means of reducing early pregnancies among adolescents. COURTESY PHOTO

Kampala recently, Mr Mondo Kyateeka, the assistant commissioner in charge of youth affairs at the ministry of Gender, indicated he was handling a complaint of a child as young as 10 years who had conceived.

Mr Kyateeka said the family planning interventions should also prioritise men as one of the measures to control teenage pregnancies.

Due to poverty in some communities, some adolescent girls are forced into marriage by their fathers as a way of accumulated wealth through bride price.

Despite Uganda registering a slight decline in its maternal mortality rate from 438 per 100,000 live births to 336 per 100,000 live births, some academics such as Prof Grace Bantebya Kyomuhendo, the head of the Department of Women and Gender Studies at Makerere University, have decried the high numbers of teenage pregnancies.

Justification

Prof Kyomuhendo says teenagers aged 15 and 19 years are another group of the young people who are contributing to maternal deaths and need to be targeted with contraception.

But activists such as Fr Jonathan Opio of Human Life International and Mr Steven Langa of Family Life Network, have called upon parents to resist such family planning attempts, claiming they are being advocated by donors.

"It is clear that unscrupulous people with support from powerful multi-lateral organisations have mooted an agenda of introducing and promoting comprehensive sex education in schools and institutions of learning. We reject and sternly oppose this ill intentioned

early this year.

Ms Jennie Barugh, the head of

the Department for International Development (DFID) in Uganda,

argues that government to ensure that girls remain in school as a means of controlling teenage pregnancies.

She also indicates that about two million women don't want to get pregnant but are not able to get contraceptives. Uganda's unmet need for family planning stands at about 28 per cent.

"Young people are finding barriers so we need to empower them to break these barriers," Ms Barugh says.

The United Nations Population Fund country representative, Mr Alain Sibenaler, says there is still low awareness on reproductive health.

"Family Planning is meant for the demographic dividend and we must invest in the young population who will look after the elderly," Mr Sibenaler says.

To avert the high rates of teenage pregnancies and new HIV infections among adolescent girls, he says UNFPA will work with government to re-launch the "Let Girls Be Girls Campaign."

Demographic dividend is defined as the accelerated economic growth that may result from a decline in a country's birth and death rates and the subsequent change in the age structure of the population.

With fewer births each year, a country's young dependent population declines in relation to the working-age population.

ADVICE

Dr Jotham Musinguzi, who heads the National Population Council, wants the population to embrace family planning as means of lowering the high fertility rates if the country wants to harness the demographic dividend.

The UBOS data indicates that fertility in Uganda has been declining since the 1980s. The Total Fertility Rate declined from 7.4 children per woman in 1988-89 to 5.4 children per woman in 2016.