

Sunday feature

STATUS
REPORT

40%

Underage girls married. According to the 2015 Unicef report, 40 per cent of girls aged between 20 and 24 years were married before the age of 18.

Uganda struggling to end child marriages

Long struggle. The government of Uganda took up the African Union campaign in 2015 to end child marriage. Despite the efforts, the challenge of underage girls getting married is still persistent.

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When her parents passed on in 2006, 16-year-old Adia Nanteza, a resident of Triangle Zone in Mulago Parish in Kawempe Division was in Primary Five at Immaculate Heart Primary School in Luweero District.

Her paternal grandmother took on the responsibility and care of her school dues. But along the way, things did not turn out as the grandmother had expected. She only managed to see Nanteza through school for only one year.

"The situation at home was not good. My grandmother couldn't afford to take me through school anymore. She asked me to get married and reached the extent of chasing me away from home to look for a man," she recalls.

Confused, Nanteza was not sure of her next step. She went into a relationship with a man who not only lived in poor conditions but was also already married and had children with his first wife.

Because he was not giving care, coupled with mistreatment from his

other wife, Nanteza saw no hope in her relationship. She stayed at her husband's place for only two months. Nanteza's marriage contradicts Uganda's Constitution.

Ms Hope Nankunda Mwijuka, the executive director at Health Promotion and Rights Watch Uganda, a partner organisation with Joy for Children, says according to the 2015 UNICEF report, 40 per cent of girls aged between 20 and 24 years were married before the age of 18 years.

Furthermore, according to the UNFPA 2012 fact sheet, Uganda is among the leading countries with high rates of teenage pregnancies in the Sub-Saharan Africa.

On June 16, 2015, the government of Uganda took up the African Union campaign to end child marriage. It was also its first ever national strategy on ending child marriage and teenage pregnancy, running from 2014/2015 to 2019/2020.

This was developed together with civil society organisations, including Girls Not Brides members in Uganda and United Nations agencies.

Uganda's Constitution sets the age of marriage at 18 years and above, unlike the Customary Marriage Act which allows girls aged 16 and above to get married but with the consent of their parents or guardians, as elaborated by Stuart Oramire, a lawyer and child rights advocate working with Centre for Children's Rights.

"Not only does child marriage contravene the provision of the 1995 Constitution, it also violates the laws

WHAT THE LAW SAYS. Uganda's Constitution and Customary Marriage Act which allows girls aged 16 and above to get married with the consent of their parents or guardians, as elaborated by Stuart Oramire, a lawyer and child rights advocate working with Centre for Children's Rights. "Not only does child marriage contravene the provision of the 1995 Constitution, it also violates the laws of marriage in Uganda. However, there are obsolete laws that support child marriage in Uganda like the Customary Marriage Act," Mr Oramire explains.



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Ms Sharon Nabasumba is the Child advocacy officer at Joy for Children, an organisation that was established to respond to the plight of vulnerable children in Uganda.

She explains that much as the organisation offers sponsorships such as providing scholastic materials to victims of child marriage like Nanteza, she says teachers and the local community leaders equally have a role to play to curb child marriages especially in rural areas.

"We work in more than 60 schools

Ready. Legally mature couples match to church during a mass wedding at Miracles Centre Cathedral in Rubaga recently. FILE PHOTO

in Fort Portal. We carry a message to rural and urban schools about keeping the girl child in school. We hope to carry on with this work in other parts of the country because it is a countrywide challenge of girls dropping out of school to get married," Nabasumba explains.

She adds: "We do empower girls that have dropped out of school to re-enroll and go back to school. Our emphasis currently is at finishing primary school. We do direct sponsorship for these girls to go back to school. We keep monitoring them closely. The success we have registered is that the rate of school drop-outs in the areas where we are working has significantly reduced."

OBSERVERS TAKE...

Ms Hope Nankunda Mwijuka, the executive director at Health Promotion says: If you are to assess why teenage pregnancy and child marriages are high, it is due to lack of knowledge on sexual reproductive health, limited access to family planning methods, extreme poverty and lack of basic needs which leads girls into accepting offers from men in exchange for sex. There are also poor parenting styles and the fact that these girls are not empowered to say no to sex.



Accept and move on. "Accepting the mistake and moving on with your education is the most important action that you have to take," HOPE NANKUNDA MWIJUKA, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR AT HEALTH PROMOTION AND RIGHTS WATCH UGANDA



Those who leave the marriage

One day, Nanteza made up her mind and hit the road to Kampala to stay with her elder sister, Ms Scovia Namuleme.

"I climbed onto the back of a lorry that was loaded with bananas and beans in the night without the driver's consent and found my way to Kampala. It was very cold and

uncomfortable but I had no choice," Nanteza recalls.

She says when the lorry finally parked at Kalerwe, a Kampala suburb, she hurriedly disembarked so as not to be seen by the driver. All this time, she did not know she was expecting until her sister noticed when she arrived in Mulago.

"She was always vomiting yet she was not sick," the sister recalls.

Recollecting. One of the victims of child marriage narrates her ordeal during the launch of the End Child Marriage campaign in Hoima Town recently. FILE PHOTO

"When my sister told me that I was pregnant, I called my husband but he denied the pregnancy. I started to make a living by hawking boiled maize but my business never lasted. Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA) officials carried it away," Ms Nanteza recalls.

She adds: "I later bought a back pack where I put sweets and chewing gum to vend but never brought in much money," she recollects.

As the pregnancy advanced, Nanteza had to attend antenatal care visits at the neighbouring Mulago hospital.

"Whenever I went there, doctors insulted and criticised me. They always asked why I slept with men at a young age. I felt hurt but I had to bear with the condition until I gave birth," Nanteza says.

The same doctors who reportedly criticised her for getting pregnant early were the same people who ensured she delivers successfully.

With the baby now about two years old, Nanteza and her elder sister run a stall where they sell tomatoes and banana leaves by the roadside at Triangle Zone in Mulago to make some money to look after the baby. Though there were no resources to see her through school, Nanteza, with a tint of sadness on her face says being pushed into marriage was the worst thing her grandmother would have done.

At 16 years, Nanteza's hopes of continuing with school hang in balance until, as she says, one day a miracle happens and she gets a sponsor.

"I urge fellow girls to take school seriously and avoid getting close to men. From the kind of suffering I went through, I have learnt a lot. I am missing school and how my future will be is now in God's hands," Nanteza notes.

Ms Namuleme, just like Nanteza is responsible for taking care of her ten month old baby, is as well responsible for taking care of Nanteza and her child simultaneously.

Unlike Ms Nanteza, Ms Jackline Natumanya was 16 years when she got pregnant in 2013. At that time,

she was in senior two at one of the top schools in Kampala.

"It was unintended because I and my boyfriend never planned it. When I found out that I was pregnant, I was scared because I didn't like it. I still wanted to go to school," Natumanya recalls.

From a family that was headed by a single mother who operated a small shop from where Ms Natumanya's school fees came from, she didn't know what awaited her.

"When my mother got to know that I was pregnant, she advised me to stop schooling. She started mistreating me. I couldn't go to my boyfriend's place because he had gone on a run. His known phone number was also off," she says.

Annoyed and disappointed in her daughter, Natumanya's mum chased her away from home. Although she also struggled to live, she finally gave birth successfully to her now two-year-old baby. Ms Nanteza and Ms Natumanya's stories are just a few of many girls who go through similar situations across the country.

Nationally, Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBS) 2011 report puts the East and Central regions at 30.6 per cent. The Eastern region is at 30.3 per cent, North Eastern (Karamoja) at 29.7 per cent, West Nile region at 26.4 per cent and the Northern region at 25.6 per cent. According to UBS, the percentages are higher among the uneducated girls at 45 per cent compared to 16 per cent among the educated girls.

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NATIONAL REPORT

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