

Uganda must invest in sexual and reproductive health, rights

In refugee settlements and fishing communities on the shores of Lake Victoria, such as Mayuge and Namayingo districts, several girls still leave school due to early pregnancy or early marriage. When this happens, the cost is not only personal and to the family, but also to Uganda's development. Reduced education levels lower essential skills, limit women's economic participation, contribute to faster population growth, and lead to higher dependency.

This International Women's Day 2026, under the theme "Give to Gain," Uganda has an opportunity to turn commitments into action by investing in women's advancement and protecting these young girls who will become tomorrow's female leaders.

As a gender and protection professional, I find the realities on the ground heartbreaking and preventable. I see young girls forced into adult responsibilities when they become pregnant, instead of

The consequences of this are visible across communities, especially in refugee settings and fishing communities. Child marriage remains widespread. The Uganda Demographic and Health Survey (UDHS 2022) reports that nearly one in four girls aged 15–19 has begun childbearing, with rural girls affected more than urban peers. Modern contraceptive use is improving, with about 38 percent among currently married women and 43 percent among sexually active unmarried women, but unmet needs remain high for adolescents and other marginalised groups.

The result of this is unintended pregnancy, higher health risks, and fewer chances to complete education or secure decent work. This is why investment must be sustained and designed around the realities of these young people.

With partners Centre for Health and Human Rights in Development (CEHURD) and Reproductive Health Uganda (RHU), with the Government of Canada funding, Oxfam is supporting a "Stand Up" initiative in West Nile among refugees and host communities and in Mayuge and Namayingo to improve SRHR information and services for adolescent girls and young women (AGYW). In our 2023 baseline, 39 percent of AGYW reported being married before 18 and 47 percent reported a pregnancy before the age of 20. Only 28 percent could identify at least two SRH service points in their community, highlighting a significant service gap.

Our November 2025 mid-line survey indicates that early marriage and pregnancy still occur among 15–19-year-olds. The reported early pregnancy rate is 27.1 percent among AGYW aged 15–19 compared to 72.9 percent among those aged 20–29. The lesson is that prevention must begin earlier, before risks build up.

If "Give to Gain" is to be more than a slogan, it must translate into combined efforts and action from all stakeholders. When we GIVE women and girls the information, services, and protection they deserve, Uganda GAINS a healthier, more productive, and more equal future.

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Health and rights

being in school. Even when health facilities are available, many girls do not access SRHR services.

Uganda has made progress on gender equality through expanded access to education, women's economic programmes, and investments in health. Yet stigma, harmful norms, and unequal power relations still determine whether women and girls can seek information and care without fear. Economic hardship further reduces families' ability to reach facilities, especially where facilities are far

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The Editor welcomes 450-word comments on topical issues. F