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BY PAUL TAJURA
& DAVID S. MUNDOOZA

KAMPALA. Every 26th day of the month or there about, a menstrual puzzle befalls Lucy Nangiyo, 25. She is a street woman, surviving on the chaotic Kampala streets through begging.

The unforgiving process, however, keeps her awake to harsh reality that she has to cope with month-in-month-out.

"When that time comes, there is a lot of stomach pain (cramps). I can hardly stand," Nangiyo says, tightening the straps holding a slightly one-year-old baby on her back.

Three years ago, she fled 'unbearable hunger' in Moroto District, in the Karamoja sub-region to become a beggar on the streets of Kampala. She carried along a six-year-old child she conceived at 17. She had completed Primary Six about three years earlier.

Several studies have shown that girls in rural Uganda miss up to eight days of study each school term because of the challenges of menstruation. Others have dropped out of school all together.

According to a 2016 Uganda Demographic and Health Survey (UDHS), many school going girls are fast turning into mothers. The government survey indicated that teenage pregnancy now stands at 25 up from 24 per cent in 2011.

"Twenty five per cent of adolescent girls of 15 to 19 years in Uganda have begun child-bearing," the report reads in part. This implies that nearly three in every 10 adolescent girls of 15 to 19 years in the country have begun childbearing. Many rarely return to school.

According to the Uganda Education Management Information System (EMIS) report of 2009, the average primary school completion rate was reported to be 52 per cent, retention rate in primary school being 53 per cent for boys and 42 per cent for girls. However, during the release of the Primary Seven national exams results in February 2013, it was reported that over one million pupils or about 71 per cent who enrolled in Primary one under the Universal Primary Education (UPE) in 2006, were no longer in school. This big figure could be attributed to drop-out, repeating of classes, deaths or existence of 'ghost' pupils in UPE.

The Ugandan story

Uganda, like the rest of the world, joins the world to celebration the International Day of the Girl Child every October 11.

This year's celebrations ran under the theme: Empower Girls: Before, during and after crises.

With emphasis on refugees, a statement on the UN website says, 'let us commit to investing in skills training and education for girls and livelihood activities for young women around the world who are facing crises.'

Far from being passive recipi-

ents of assistance, these girls are leaders who will use the skills that they develop today to rebuild their communities, and create a better future for all of us.'

Nationally, approximately 13 per cent of primary school-aged girls and 30 per cent of secondary school-aged girls are reported to be out of school. Even more concerning are the completion rates: Nationally, only 55.28 per cent of girls enrolled in primary education graduate from Primary Seven, and less than 20 per cent of all girls aged 15-19 have finished primary education.

Girls are least likely to receive an education in West Nile, which has the country's highest gender gap in school enrolment.

According to Mr Richard Lubega, the deputy head teacher of Naalya Secondary School, Bweyogerere, girls face immense challenges that have greatly contributed to the high drop out rate.

Menstruation and poverty are the number one cause of school drop outs.

"It is important to note that most people live in absolute poverty especially in the rural areas.

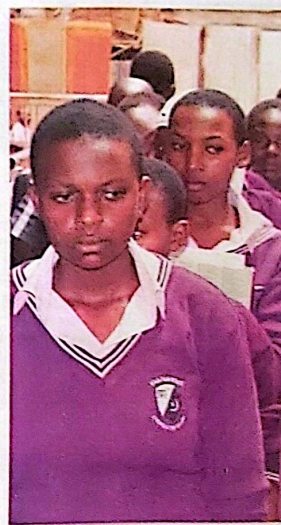
This has led to early marriages where fathers trade their children into marriage for money," Mr Lubega says, adding that some children drop out of school because they have no food. "Above all, students have a hard time retaining information when they are hungry, so in the long run they end up failing."

Long distances coupled with repeated poor performance in class and disability have also been cited as major reasons why girls drop out.

Mr Michael Kagiwami, the resource mobiliser for 'Concern for Girl Child', an NGO that deals with uplifting the girl child, globally, girls more often than boys are responsible for helping their mothers with household chores; which means that they can spend up to six hours per day doing the same. This far too often means that they are forced to drop out of school because they cannot get these chores done and attend classes. In some cases, when they are able to complete their chores and still get to school, they are tired and focusing on school work is an even bigger challenge.

Trinity College Nabbingo students sit O-Level exams last year. Many girls rarely complete their primary, let alone secondary education. PHOTO BY JOSEPH KIGGUNDU

Menstruation, poverty to blame as girls drop out of school



Girls face immense challenges that have greatly contributed to the high drop out rate. PHOTO BY JOSEPH KIGGUNDU

WAY FORWARD

According to a report on National Strategy for Girl's education by Ministry of Education and Sports (2014-2019) the government wants harmonised actions on girls' education.

"This area of focus looks out for harmonising actions of different education stakeholders in girls' education to galvanise successes in girls' education. Harmonisation is essential for maximising financial and human resources," the report reads in part.

Kagiwami says massive sensitisation especially in far off villages is slowly changing the mindsets of parents and the numbers of girls going and remaining in schools is slowly improving.

Giving girls the support they need to fulfil their potential allows them to help their families and contribute to Uganda's development. As one teacher told me, "When you educate a girl, you educate the nation."

There is also need for school environments to be improved in order to keep the girls in school.