

EMPOWER GIRLS, SAYS FIRST LADY

BY VISION REPORTER

The First Lady and Minister of Education and Sports, Mrs. Janet Museveni, has said she is committed to championing the cause of the adolescent girl in Uganda because of their significant potential.

"I am persuaded that if, together, we can empower the girl-child, Uganda will be a better country," Mrs. Museveni, who is the National Champion for the adolescent girl, told a stakeholders consultative meeting for central and east central region on issues around the adolescent girl.

The meeting organised by the Organisation of African First Ladies Against HIV/AIDS (OAFLA) - Uganda and funded by UNICEF was held at Bishop Willis Teachers Training College in Iganga district on Tuesday. It was one of the activities to celebrate the Day of the African Child.

Mrs. Museveni said despite the dire circumstances that girls go through, investments in them is the best thing to do. She cited the labour force participation, fertility choices, and health, where girls can play a pivotal role in breaking the intergenerational transmission of poverty and shaping the country's development.

She noted that adolescent girls, unlike their male peers, are more likely to bear the brunt of poor sexual and reproductive health outcomes, drop out of school and marry at an early age. However, investment in education, health and employment opportunities for girls lead to greater economic contributions.

THE STATISTICS

Statistics show that girls, who form 51% of the adolescent population in Uganda, are vulnerable to sexual and gender-based violence with 15% of



Mrs. Museveni with students at Bishop Willis Teachers Training College in Iganga district. She advised the girls to be assertive

girls being married at the age of 15 and 49% by age 18, while 58% of young women have had sex before the age of 18, increasing the risk of girls contracting HIV and other health-related consequences. In relation to their education, she said whereas the gender gap in primary schools closes with an almost equal number of girls and boys enrolling for primary education, the transition retention rate from P5 to P7 is 32%, resulting in only 67% girls joining senior secondary school.

"We need to preserve and at the appropriate time, harness the productive potential of the African woman. Let us promote the wellbeing of the adolescent girl; like any child needs a mother to tender them to

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grow to their full maturity, the nation needs mothers to tender her resources for sustainable economic development. These here are the future mothers of this nation," she

advised. She counselled the young girls to stop feeling insignificant and instead know that they all matter. "You matter to your community, to this beautiful country, and most importantly, to God. You are not just a statistic; you have got so much potential to become everything that you dream to become. As of Uganda, we are committed to doing our civic duty and everything possible within our means to see to it that you achieve your wildest dreams."

Mrs. Museveni thanked the UN family, civil society organisations, parents, teachers, religious and district leaders for partnering to propel the adolescent girl agenda.

The executive director of OAFLA Uganda, Beatilda Bisangwa,

reported that dialogues were held with different groups including the district, religious and cultural leaders, parents, teachers and community leaders, who all committed to protect and promote the wellbeing of the adolescent girl.

GIRLS PLEDGE

On their part, the adolescent girls represented by Mariam Namukose from Bukoyo Secondary School, committed to keep in school and complete their education, strengthen peer to peer influence, develop meaningful relations with their parents and promote good behavior among others.

According to UNICEF, approximately 35% of girls drop out of school because of early marriage and 23% because of early pregnancy (UNICEF, 2015).

This increases to 34% in the poorest households. In rural areas, 24% of girls experience early pregnancy compared with 16% of wealthier households and 21% of urban girls (UNICEF, 2015).

The UN resident co-ordinator/ UNDP resident representative in Uganda, Rosa Malango, reported that she has met some of these girls when she travels through the country and they have all asked her for help to go back to school, a safe place for their children and the chance to raise their families out of poverty in safety through skills and kits for new business.

Malango said the UN in Uganda — UNFPA, UNICEF, UNAIDS, UNDP and UN Women — had developed an Adolescents and Youth Strategy (2017-2020), to help guide their support for adolescents and youth. This strategy recognises the role of adolescents and youth to drive sustainable development and seeks to link Uganda's experience to global frameworks to identify a wider group of partners.