

Health

Pregnancy

Teenagers

Ministry

By Geoffrey Mutegeki

Plans to offer family planning services to children aged 15 and above have been thwarted by the state minister for primary healthcare, Joyce Moriku, who said the Speaker of Parliament was not consulted.

Yesterday, Moriku refused to launch the fourth edition of the National Guidelines and Service Standards for Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights during the second National Family Planning Conference held at the Kampala Serena Hotel.

It was one of those unexpected moments when the minister, who was invited to close the conference and launch the guidelines, assured everyone that the Government is not party to the guidelines issued by the Ministry of Health.

"As a ministry, we do not own this document; that is why I am not launching it until after we have consulted all the stakeholders," Moriku said, amid silence from the participants.

She acknowledged the World Health Organisation (WHO) recommendation of having family planning for women in the reproductive age between 15 and 49 years, but said there was need for further consultations.

"The Speaker and Prime Minister need to have an input. This document will be taken back for review by the responsible partners and by the responsible body until it is ready, then we shall launch it at an appropriate time," Moriku said.

Despite the guidelines being signed by Prof. Anthony

# Minister rejects launch of contraceptive guidelines



State minister for primary healthcare Joyce Moriku said the health ministry was not fully involved

Mbonye, the acting director general of health services at the Ministry of Health and acknowledged by the assistant commissioner for health services, Dr Bladinah Nakiganda, Moriku said the health ministry was not fully involved.

"We had a meeting at the ministry this morning

(Wednesday) and confirmed that the technical people at health policy advisory committee had not approved this document," she said.

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## THE ISSUE

Mbonye was absent during the botched launch of the guidelines. According to Dr Placid Mihayo, the family planning focal person at the health ministry, the government had chosen the age of 15 as one of the means to reduce early pregnancies among adolescents.

"Teenage pregnancy in Uganda is still high at 25%. We thought we can do something

by putting the age at 15. But the minister has communicated the Government's stand and we are going to go back to the drawing board," Mihayo said.

Dr Richard Mugahi, the Kabarole district health officer, noted that disseminating a public health message needs to be fully filtered and if the minister feels there is something missing, let it be fixed.

"No one wants to endanger children; no one wants to pass a wrong message to the community. The minister could be having a problem with the age, but I believe that can be agreed upon and the guidelines be launched," he said.

Mugahi, however, revealed that family planning has both political and technical dimensions, which need to be harmonised for the implementation to be smooth.

"There seem to be a difference between the political and the technical people. The two need to work together if we are to achieve the objectives of family planning," Mugahi said.

When asked for comment, Dr Olive Sentumbwe, the family health and population advisor at the WHO country office in Uganda, said the organisation

will respect the Government's position.

In the guidelines, it is indicated that this policy review was informed by district consultations in order to take into account experiences of service providers and beneficiaries. Other key stakeholders consulted include the Inter-Religious Council of Uganda, cultural leaders, other faith-based organisations and the legal fraternity.

Uganda's contraceptive prevalence rate among married women (aged between 15 and 49) increased from 30% in 2011 to 34% in 2016 and the national commitment is to increase contraceptive use to 50% by 2020.

"We are much aware of adolescent pregnancy, which is a big problem in the country, the prevalence is rocketing high, we are standing at 25%, but that is illegal marriage. We cannot compromise our standards by promoting illegal marriage," Moriku said.

She called for holistic approach to the problem with emphasising the message of abstinence.

Asked on what they will do about the issue of children who are sexually active between the age of 10 and 14, Mihayo said the health ministry will be offered with age-appropriate sex education.

According to the 2011 Uganda Demographic and Health Survey, more than four in 10 births are unplanned. This is partly attributed to a high unmet need for family planning, in which three in every 10 women who want to prevent pregnancy do not access family planning.