Painful reality of Uganda's teenage pregnancy crisis

Poverty, stigma and weak law enforcement are driving Uganda's teenage pregnancy crisis, forcing vulnerable girls out of classrooms and into motherhood too soon.

BY SYLIVIA KATUSHABE

Teenage pregnancy continues to disrupt the lives and education of thousands of girls and Buikwe District in eastern Uganda is among the most-prone districts.

The vice, which is quite prevalent in rural areas, has been egged on by cultural and patriarchal prejudices, which objectify teenage girls.

"Our mother had a lot of children and our father had abandoned us. We used to go to school barefoot, and people would laugh at us. We could lack what to eat, and our young siblings could not understand the situation at home, so we, the older ones, had to find what the younger ones could eat," revealed a young teenage mother in Buikwe District, whose identity was concealed.

Most communities in Buikwe live in abject poverty. Children do chores, including tilling land, and those who are not in school work for a pittance across its lush-green sugarcane plantations.

According to the 2022 Uganda Demographic and Health Survey, one out of five women in Uganda engages in sexual activity before age 15 years. A further 64 percent have sex before age 18 years, while 34 percent of women aged 25-49 years are married before the age of 18 years, and 7.3 percent before the age of 15 years.

Teenage pregnancy is one of the major factors that inhibit continued education for girls in Uganda. For instance, it is estimated that 28 percent of school-aged girls are engaged in sexual activity, resulting in 80.1 percent of them becoming pregnant, and 97 percent of those are discontinued from their studies. The perils of teenage pregnancy is visible in this community.

At her humble hamlet of Nkokonjeru, Buikwe District, a young girl, is six months pregnant.

"I got pregnant when I was still in school, I did not intend to get pregnant but I was defiled by a boy, I had fear so I did not tell my Dad, they realised I was pregnant after seeing my bump. My father went to the boy's father and he promised to to offer me treatment and after giving birth I would go back to school."

She was previously studying at this Islamic Primary School, which is adjacent to her home in Buikwe. In this classroom crammed with teenage girls, a teacher conducts classes. It is a privilege to be in school, and it keeps these girls occupied with their studies, away from the prying eyes.

The Education ministry has rolled out revised guidelines of 2022 to assist adolescent mothers and pregnant girls in completing their school cycles, as well as to provide schools with guidance on the prevention and management of teenage pregnancy in school settings.

"We have disseminated the policy, and we have engaged the schools, especially the head-teachers and the school management committees, to handle cases at the school level. We have also engaged the community, through the local leaders to ensure that they disseminate this information to the schools and even to the parents in the community," says Julius Kizito, the District Education Officer, Buikwe district.



Young mothers carry their babies in Teobia B Village in Kole District in 2020. Early pregnancy rates remain high, especially in sub-Saharan Africa. PHOTO/FILE

> **Ray of hope.** "A small fraction of them [teenage mothers], about seven percent, are seen returning to school, whether formal schooling or joining a vocational institution. That should worry all of us. We should look at teenage pregnancy as a development issue. Once children and adolescents are out of school, we lose manpower," Ms Labila Sumayah Musoke, who is a human rights activist and Lawyer at ISER

> **Policy guide.** "We have disseminated the policy [for adolescent mothers], and we have engaged the schools, especially the head-teachers and the school management committees, to handle cases at the school level. We have also engaged the community, through the local leaders to ensure that they disseminate this information to the parents," Mr Julius Kizito, the District Education Officer for Buikwe

"We have even provided booklets at the school level where they record these cases and also counsel the parent, and even counsel the learner. And as a result, we have seen some positives coming up."

However, the policy has drawn ambivalence from head-teachers and is reluctantly implemented at some Islamic and Catholic leaning schools.

"So if we could accept them to be at school, we would maybe get useful mothers in the future. But in most cases, people say it will be a bad example to other girls at school to be pregnant. That's the reason why some schools do not accept. So we can forego the law and say, no, let's be humanitarian and the child be kept," says Hassan Odong, the head-teacher of Lweru UMEA Primary School.

The guidelines place limitations and conditions on teenage mothers to return to school. They provide for a mandatory leave of one year from the time a female learner is three months pregnant to allow her to look after the baby for a period of about six months.

In case it is a male learner responsible for the pregnancy, he will also be subjected to the same period of leave. However, the rules provide for exceptional circumstances. if a girl is just a month or fortnight away from sitting her promotional exams, permission should be granted to sit for the exams before taking the mandatory leave.

A 2024 study conducted by the Initiative for Social and Economic Rights (ISER) warns that this policy position is counterproductive in facilitating the return of such learners, and the majority end up dropping out of school.

Ms Labila Sumayah Musoke, who is a human rights activist and Lawyer at ISER, opines that, "the way they are handling these girls is also abusive through a human rights lens, where they are treating the girls and pushing them out of the system with a moral argument of protecting the non-pregnant learners."

64% GIRLS HAVING SEX BEFORE AGE 18

SCHOOL DROP OUT RATE

Each year, millions of Ugandan children start Primary One, yet over 60 percent leave before completing primary school. By the end of secondary education, a further 25 percent have dropped out, with girls disproportionately affected.

These are not just statistics; they represent lost potential, reduced life chances, and diminished national productivity. Teenage pregnancy is a major driver of this crisis. Uganda has one of the highest adolescent birth rates in Africa.

Ms Musoke further argues: "We see school nurses and administrators expelling these girls, but no one pauses to ask her, what happened to you? Why did you get pregnant? Who is responsible for this pregnancy? And these are the critical questions which anyone, let it be a faith leader, a school founding leader, must pause and question."

Teen pregnancy carries a sting of stigma, and often the victims are blamed and framed as indisciplined. But human rights advocates postulate that framing teenage pregnancy from the lens of morality is flawed.

"There are some communities where the girl has clocked like maybe about 14 years, or 15 years, they see physical changes, they feel the girl is ready for marriage," says Fr. Ronald Reagan Okello of the Uganda Episcopal Catholic Education Commission.

For instance, some of the victims of teenage pregnancy carry the stigma of being defiled by their own relatives.

At this school, based in Bukunju, Buikwe district, we interact with another young girl who gave birth during the Covid-19 pandemic. She reveals that she will continue to pursue her education.

Her identity was concealed during the interview. "I got pregnant during the Covid-19 pandemic. I later gave birth. I started looking after him, but after giving birth, I had the dream of going back to school. I have just sat for the Primary Leaving exams. I got many good things from school because you cannot be well in life if you have not gone to school."

Annet Nassuna, the head-teacher of Nsanganzira UMEA Primary School, revealed that, "The girl got pregnant during the Covid-19 pandemic, because she was not at school. She told us that one day, when she was at home, someone defiled her, and after the defilement, she conceived, and after giving birth, we advised her to return to school."

Agnes Basakana, Youth Advisor, Centre for Reproductive Rights says the fight against the scourge of teenage pregnancy should be community-centred. "Out of every four of these adolescents, you'll find one is pregnant or is a mother. So that speaks to a lot of maternal issues surrounding this young girl."

Despite the Penal Code Act provisions that call for life imprisonment for those who have been convicted for offenses such as rape and defilement, which have aggravating circumstances, the vice is amplified by the complicity of law enforcement officers and parents.

This girl shares a harrowing ordeal. She became pregnant through a person who was meant to be in a place of responsibility.

"I want to go back to school and become a well-behaved woman once I grow up, and then after getting money to look after my parents, I want to be a Doctor," said the victim who spoke anonymously. Bakasana proffers that there is a need to have a holistic approach in resolving this crisis.

"In the span of our work, we use strategic litigation. We call for legal reform and research and movement building in a bid to ensure that we are able to protect, to enhance the protection of reproductive rights."

Teenage pregnancy is worsened by by income inequalities and the collapse of law enforcement, resulting in a systemic exclusion that favours those in the upper rungs of society.

"A small fraction of them, about seven percent, are seen returning to school, whether formal schooling or joining a vocational institution. That should worry all of us. We should look at teenage pregnancy as a development issue. Once children and adolescents are out of school, we lose manpower," says Ms Musoke.

The fight against teenage pregnancy remains weak and fragmented, resulting in disjointed interventions that fail to address the multifaceted nature of teenage pregnancy. As a result, adolescent girls are left vulnerable to systemic neglect in environments that should be enabling and protective.

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