

COVID-19 Pandemic: Bottleneck to the Education of Teenage Girls in Uganda



**An assessment of the impact of COVID-19 on the education of
teenage girls in Uganda in twelve Primary Schools**

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Table of Contents

Chapter One	4
Introduction and Background	4
Introduction	4
Background of the study	5
Problem Statement.....	6
Study Objectives	7
Study Methodology.....	8
Chapter Two.....	9
The Findings of the Study	9
Pregnancy and Early Marriages	9
Enrolment status of Girls in Primary	10
Return to School by the Affected Girls	11
Perpetrators' Penalties	13
The Plight of the Affected teenage girls	15
Government Policy Response	16
Respondents' Suggestions	18
Chapter Three	21
Conclusion and Recommendations	21
Recommendations	22
Delivery of education materials	24
References	26

List of Abbreviations

AFJN:	Africa Faith Justice Network
ARU:	Association of Religions of Uganda
COVID-19:	Corona Virus Disease- 2019
DHIS:	District Health Information System
FGDs:	Focus Group Discussions
FGM/C:	Female Genital Mutilations/ Cutting
ICPD:	International Conference on Population and Development
JPIIJC	John Paul II Justice and Peace Centre
MJNLC:	Mwalimu Julius Nyerere Leadership Centre
MoES:	Ministry of Education and Sports
NDP:	National Development Plan
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SGBV:	Sexual and Gender Based Violence
GOU:	Government of Uganda
UNESCO:	United Nations Education Scientific and Cultural Organization

Chapter One

Introduction and Background

Introduction

In December 2019, a novel strain of corona virus, Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Corona Virus 2 (SARS-CoV2 or COVID-19) was identified in Wuhan, China, and continued to spread globally.¹ Within a very short period, this virus had spread to many parts of the world. In a period of less than four months in March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared this outbreak to be a global pandemic². Countries far off in Africa too became affected by the spread of the virus. Uganda confirmed its first case of COVID-19 and started implementing a response to limit or reduce its spread in March 2020. By July, 2020, Uganda had registered over 1,100 COVID-19 cases and 2 deaths, out of 260,000 persons who had been tested³. The government had to devise measures to deal with this pandemic. The initial measures implemented from end of March until early June 2020 included regular hand-washing, social distancing, school, religious institutions, office and shop closure (only essential services continued), a ban on all private and public transport, and night curfew. It is the school closure that has had an adverse effect on the school going children especially the adolescents in the upper primary. It is important for both parents and the authorities to consider innovative ways of ensuring education continues for the affected girl. School closures caused by COVID-19 pandemic triggered significant challenges for education systems to respond to the needs of different school going groups whose learning and well-being have been heavily impacted. After the re-opening of the schools, policy initiatives need to be taken to support the educational, social and emotional needs of these students and their families who are adversely affected by the pandemic.

John Paul II Justice and Peace Centre (JPIIJC), Association of Religious in Uganda (ARU) Department of Justice and Peace, and Catholic Secretariat Department Lay Apostolate in partnership with Makerere University Julius Nyerere Institute (MJNLC) supported by Africa Faith Justice Network (AFJN) conducted a study in March to ascertain the challenges posed by COVID-19 on the Education of the teenage girls in Uganda. The study focused on understanding the impact of COVID-19 restrictions on the education of the teenage school girls. The findings of the study provide key areas for advocacy by the partners and other stakeholders in promoting the education of teenage girls which has been hampered by the measures adopted by government to curb down the spread of COVID-19 in Uganda.

¹ Shereen et al., Emergence of a Novel Coronavirus, Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2: Biology and Therapeutic Options, Journal of Clinical Microbiology ASM Journals, Vol. 58, No. 5., <https://journals.asm.org/doi/10.1128/JCM.00187-20>

² WHO Director-General's opening remarks at the media briefing on COVID-19 - 11 March 2020, <https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-COVID-19---11-march-2020>

³ <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/uganda/>

Background of the study

Adolescents make up a quarter of the population in Uganda, yet life is harsh for many. Poverty, HIV and AIDS, early marriage, teenage pregnancy, gender-based violence and low participation in secondary education make it difficult for them to fulfil their potential. They face multiple vulnerabilities. Many of them drop out of school as a result of unwanted teenage pregnancy and early marriage. According to Uganda Bureau of Statistics UBOS (2018), almost a quarter (one in four or 25%) of Ugandan women has given birth by the age of 18⁴. Close to half are married before their 18th birthday and continue having babies into their mid-40s⁵. Uganda has one of the world's highest maternal mortality rates, with 18 mothers dying every day in pregnancy or during and after childbirth⁶. The traditional practice of child marriage and female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) also persists in many communities. In 2013, Uganda ranked 16th out of 25 countries with the highest rate of child marriages⁷. In the Pokot community in Amudat district (Karamoja), almost all girls (95%) have been cut to make them more 'marriageable'. Both practices are devastating for girls' physical and mental health⁸.

COVID-19 pandemic has created a crisis within a crisis for adolescent girls, the country has recorded an increase in the number of girls who have become pregnant during COVID-19 lockdowns. The COVID-19 pandemic, as in the rest of the world, has impacted all aspects of life in Uganda, resulting in school closures, loss of jobs, and disruptions in access to health and social services. But no group has felt the effects of the pandemic more than adolescent girls⁹. Ugandan school children stayed out of school for more than 400 days from March 2020 to 10th Jan 2022 when schools were officially opened. As a result, adolescent girls were deprived of the social protection that school offers and were exposed to risks of sexual violence, exploitation and abuse, child marriages, and teenage pregnancies. A total of 354,736 teenage pregnancies were registered in 2020, and 196,499 in the first six months of 2021¹⁰. Analysis of data on first Antenatal Care visits from District Health Information System (DHIS-2) showed that there was a 17% spike in teenage pregnancies between March 2020 and June 2021. Additionally, poverty led to some parents to marry off their daughters in order to make money to survive.

One of the best ways to reduce vulnerability, poverty and exclusion among girls is education, but access to secondary education and completion of primary education among them is low in

⁴ Fact Sheet on Teenage Pregnancy, 2021, https://uganda.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/teenpregnancy_factsheet_3.pdf

⁵ <https://www.unicef.org/uganda/what-we-do/adolescent-development>; UNICEF, Ending Child Marriage and Teenage Pregnancy in Uganda, A Formative Research to Guide the Implementation of the National Strategy on Ending Child Marriage and Teenage Pregnancy in Uganda, Final Report – December 2015, pages VIII, 18. (<https://www.unicef.org/uganda/media/3901/file>).

⁶ Fact Sheet on Teenage Pregnancy, 2021, https://uganda.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/teenpregnancy_factsheet_3.pdf

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ <https://uganda.unfpa.org/en/news/addressing-teenage-pregnancy-during-COVID-19-pandemic> 15 October 2021

¹⁰ Ibid.

Uganda. Only a fifth of adolescents of the right age are enrolled in secondary schools¹¹. In addition to teenage pregnancy and child marriage, school fees and other related costs are key factors that keep adolescent girls out of school. Violence is another barrier to the girls' education. Instead of having protective and safe learning spaces, many girls face sexual harassment and rape in schools. A study on gender-based violence against children in Acholi and Karamoja in 2013 found that the majority of primary and secondary school children had experienced sexual abuse. The emergence of COVID-19 has compounded this plight. The COVID-19 pandemic created a crisis within a crisis for adolescent girls and a lot more needs to be done. At the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD+25) summit in Nairobi in November 2019 Uganda made a commitment to eliminate obstacles that stand in the way of girls' empowerment including teenage pregnancy. This study established the exacerbated impact of COVID-19 on the education of teenage girls in Uganda, the effectiveness of measures by the government to address the negative impact, and provide policy options in addressing the aggravated impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the education of the teenage girls.

Problem Statement

To alleviate the effects of COVID-19, the government developed some common practices to foster equity and inclusion by the distribution of food and educational materials. Though the lockdown has eased and the schools are open, some pupils are unable to access educational facilities. They were either married off during the lockdown or got pregnant or lack school fees and scholastic material or other complication that cannot allow them to continue with their education. Though the real number of such girls is not known, there are known examples in Uganda and elsewhere. Unfortunately, this category of learners has not been recognised as vulnerable and therefore need special attention. The Ministry of Education & Sports (MoES) developed an Education Sector COVID-19 response plan for continuity of learning to support learning during the lockdown period. The support provided learning materials to over 2,900,000 children and through radio lessons and digital learning more children were supported as well to learn. However, even then the girl child was disadvantaged as the COVID-19 imposed more household chores on them. As the government opened school in January, as one of the measures to ensure inclusive education, it allowed all learners to return to school including those pregnant and those who have delivered. It is not clear if the government was prepared for the total well-being of all the learners by this policy. Many countries, in opening school after lockdown, planned to provide counselling for pupils, special support measures for learners from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, special support measures for learners who may have been victims of violence at home and special support measures for students in psychological distress.

As school opened on the 10th January 2022 this year, it is becoming apparent that most of the girls that got pregnant and married out will miss to further their education as well as those who

¹¹ <https://www.unicef.org/uganda/what-we-do/adolescent-development>; UNICEF, Ending Child Marriage and Teenage Pregnancy in Uganda, A Formative Research to Guide the Implementation of the National Strategy on Ending Child Marriage and Teenage Pregnancy in Uganda, Final Report – December 2015, pages VIII, 18. (<https://www.unicef.org/uganda/media/3901/file>).

have challenges with school fees. This phenomenon has direct effect on the realization of the global Sustainable Development Goals 4, 5 and 8; namely, quality education, gender equality, and decent work and economic growth respectively as the teenage girls are left out in the education which is paramount in reduction of vulnerability. The teenage girls out of school have also got negative impact on the realization of the National Development Plan, Uganda Vision 40, Affirmative Action, among other development policies in the country. Realizing Uganda's Vision 2040 requires among other things, investing in children's future through sustainable education. This cannot be achieved if so many girls affected by COVID-19 have their hope for education shut and will become peasant farmers. Therefore, this study is premised to provide policy options in empowering the girl child for national economic growth as well as realizing the global development agenda on women emancipation.

Study Objectives

The main objective of the study is to establish the exacerbated challenge posed on the education of the teenage girls due to the long closure of school as a means to curtail the spread of COVID-19 in Uganda. Specifically, the study focused on establishing the:

- Challenges posed by COVID-19 on the education of the teenage girls,
- Practical measures by government to address the challenges, and
- Generation of policy options.

The finding of the study is meant to be used by the partners to advocate for the education of the teenage girls whose education has been curtailed by the consequences of the measures of government to curb the spread of COVID-19 in Uganda.

Justification of the Study

The girl child is the most vulnerable and her education has been specifically challenged by the measures put in place by the government to curb the spread of the pandemic. It has been hardest for girls from low-income households and those in rural areas. Girls have faced threats including increases in child marriage, teenage or early pregnancy, and gender-based violence. Many girls were married off in exchange for money as a result of the economic effects of the pandemic on families. The increase in child marriage resulted in an increase in teenage or early pregnancy. There was also an increase in rape cases, which led to unwanted pregnancies, and survivors are more likely to drop out of school. This impact has been realised in many communities. Already UNESCO (2020) has reported that teenage pregnancy across sub-Saharan Africa increased by as much as 65% as a result of school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic¹².

The burden of household responsibilities grew heavier and their freedoms curtailed in line with gendered expectations about female behaviour and girls' vulnerability to sexual violence. Access

¹² UNESCO, Adolescent pregnancy threatens to block a million girls across sub-Saharan Africa from returning to school, <https://en.unesco.org/news/adolescent-pregnancy-threatens-block-million-girls-across-sub-saharan-africa-returning-school>

to Sexual and reproductive services were highly compromised. As the teenage girls were confined at home in the lockdown, they were unable to leave home to seek safety from their abusers. In many communities, girls who have children as teenagers are seen and have to give up their education in order to take care of their children, while some are forcefully sent out of school.

Thus, the education emergency caused by the COVID pandemic could also roll back the progress that had been made to achieve gender equality in education. If not addressed, there will be a sharp increase in the number of girls who would not be able to have an education after the pandemic. As a country, Uganda must invest in the education and security of these teenage girls as resources for the future of this country and the world at large. This is what drives the future that is needed for the girls.

Study Methodology

The study utilized purposive sampling technique to select the schools and participants for the study. The survey employed both qualitative and quantitative approach to ensure comprehensive understanding of the issue. The two approaches, enabled the research team explore in-depth the challenges posed by COVID-19 on the education of teenage girls in Uganda and determine the effectiveness of practical measures by the government to address the challenges. A total of 200 participants across the four ecclesiastical regions in Uganda were interviewed. These included: administrators of the primary schools, the teenage girls who did not return to school, district education officials, teachers from the targeted schools, Senior woman teachers, community leaders and parents or guardians of the affected children. The study tools will include: Interview Guide (ID) and Focus Group Discussion Guide (FGD). A total of 12 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with community leaders were conducted, 12 interviews with head teachers, 12 interviews with senior woman teachers, 12 interviews with parents of affected children and 12 interviews with District education officials. Ethical protocols were upheld; moreover, to protect respondents' privacy and information obtained were anonymized. A total of 12 schools were visited in all the four regions of Uganda.

Chapter Two

The Findings of the Study

This chapter presents the findings and analysis of the study. Through 2020 and 2021, the COVID-19 pandemic led to prolonged school closures in Uganda. These closures exacerbated sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) against girls. Lockdowns isolated some girls in close proximity to perpetrators within homes and neighbourhoods, and left them unable to access help. Moreover, financial burdens increased the pressure on girls to work in locations where the risk of SGBV is high. Cultural and social norms played their part, including through child marriage. Victim blaming and stigmatization were ubiquitous, and perpetrators rarely faced justice. *“Parents were not used to staying home with the children for such a long time and it was a challenge. They struggled to provide the essentials for the children since most were not working. There was lack of government social work support to engage these children with sensitization on social safeguards to support the parental roles”*, FGD Katera village Sheema district.

Pregnancy and Early Marriages

Uganda’s main strategy for harnessing the Demographic Dividend (DD) is built around ensuring that the adolescents are healthy, properly educated and appropriately skilled to take up jobs that will be created in the economy as per the third National Development Plan (NDP III) programme lay out. The corner stone of this strategy is rapid fertility decline, arising mainly from young people delaying marriage and childbirth as they complete their education and build careers, which will trigger the age structure transformation and in turn effect harnessing of the Demographic Dividend. The surge in teenage pregnancy and early marriages brought about by the measures used to curb the spread of COVID-19 is a setback this strategy. The statistics from the 12 schools revealed that about 159 were either pregnant or married, out of which 107 account for pregnancy and 52 for marriage. On average 13 girls were affected by either marriage or got pregnancy from the 12-schools visited during the period. There were no official statistics from the schools visited on the number of girls that got pregnant or married out, except for Oryang Primary School – Nebbi District. The respondents based their statistics on their contact with either the affected girls or parents. This requires a more comprehensive data to be collected otherwise the number is far higher.

Table 1: Pregnancy and Early Marriage Status

No	Primary Schools	Pregnancy	Marriage	Total
1	Oryang Primary School – Nebbi District	69	8	77
2	Amen Primary school - Soroti District	5	7	12

3	Muyebe Primary School - Kabale District	4	12	16
4	Kasimeri Primary School – Moroto District	2	2	4
5	Kawaaga Primary school- Kamuli – District	6	3	9
6	Ober Primary School – Lira District	5	8	13
7	TICAF primary school – Tororo District	1		1
8	Agururu Primary School – Tororo District	1		1
9	Kiso Katera Primary School – Sheema District			
10	Bucuro Primary School – Gulu District	4		4
11	Rushooka Central Primary School – Ntugamu District	9	12	21
12	St. Theresa Bunamwaya – Wakiso District	1		1
Total		107	52	159

Enrolment status of Girls in Primary

The statistics from the school Administration, Oryang Primary School – Nebbi District, indicate total enrolment of girls from P.3 – P.6 was 157 in 2020 out of which only 52 have returned in 2022 when government opened schools. It has got the highest number of pregnancies between March 2020 and January 2022. Out of the 69 pupils that got pregnant 54 delivered, while 15 were still carrying their pregnancy. The 54 who delivered are not willing to come back to school. They claimed that their parents were not supporting them and some had to struggle for themselves during the lockdown, while the parents claim that the children no longer listen to them. From the 157 girls in March 2020, the school management does not know the whereabouts of 28 of the girls. They might have either changed schools, got married or stayed home for various reason. Generally, the situation in Nebbi district is alarming. However, this does not mean that the number of the girls are lower when the school opened in 2022. On the contrary there is fair enrolment in all the schools visited.

Table 2: Girls Enrolment 2020, 2022

No	School	Year	Year
		2020	2022
1	Oryang Primary School – Nebbi District	157 (P3-P7)	138 (P3-P7)
2	Amen Primary school - Soroti District	563	600
3	Muyebe Primary School - Kabale District	138	134
4	Kasimeri Primary School – Moroto District	882	864
5	Kawaaga Primary school- Kamuli – District	220	230
6	Ober Primary School – Lira District	198	196
7	TICAF primary school – Tororo District	150(P.5-P.7)	130(P.5-P.7)

8	Agururu Primary School – Tororo District		
9	Kiso Katera Primary School – Sheema District	207	229
10	Bucuro Primary School – Gulu District	202	204
11	Rushooka Central Primary School – Ntugamu District	187	150
12	St. Theresa Bunamwaya – Wakiso District	107(P.5-P.7)	112(P.5-P.7)

However, the enrolment is higher in the lower classes than the higher classes considering the statistic from Oryang Primary School: Primary one 120, Primary two 63, Primary three 32, Primary four 56, Primary five 33, Primary six 8, and Primary seven 9 totalling to 320 pupils. Therefore, total enrolment for 2022 in completion classes P6 and P7 is **2.5%** and **2.8%** respectively. This shows that the completion rate of the teenage girls is very low, an indication of a significant challenge in the retention of the girl child at higher primary level.

Return to School by the Affected Girls

Although the government permitted the girls who got pregnant during the lockdown to return to school, some did not return due to various reasons. The major reason for the affected girls not returning to school was pregnancy as expressed by 32% of the respondents. The pregnancy was disturbing for some of them. The Pregnancy age was so disturbing that, Senior Woman Teacher, Apio Jenifer in Ober Primary School could not avoid lamenting that, *“Even a P.2 pupil got pregnant in our school here”*. On the other hand, those who had already given birth were also overwhelmed with the family responsibilities, while those still carrying pregnancy were shy to sit with their fellow pupils. Furthermore, some parents stopped supporting the girls upon getting pregnant. *“For some, when they became pregnant, their parents abandoned supporting them in school; others feel shy to face their fellow pupils and those who have given birth have the responsibility of looking after their babies”*, Balekere Robert – Headteacher Kawaaga Primary School – Kamuli District explained.

Early marriage counted for the second reason for the failure of the girl returning to school in January. It was noted by 25% of the respondents that lockdown compounded the economic hardships in most families. Therefore, early marriage became a source of income to some parents. *“Poverty made some parents to marry off their daughter to get resources”*, Mr. Omara Djegeti Orech, Senior Education Officer – Lira District confirmed. On the other hand, some of them got tired of staying with their parents and ended up getting married¹³. The participants from FGD Lulikoyo village – Tororo had this to say, *“Some girls have decided to get married instead of going back to school, others have got something to do where they are able to earn daily. Others were taken up by village activities”*.

¹³ In this study, the responds refer to marriage as a man and woman living as husband and wife.

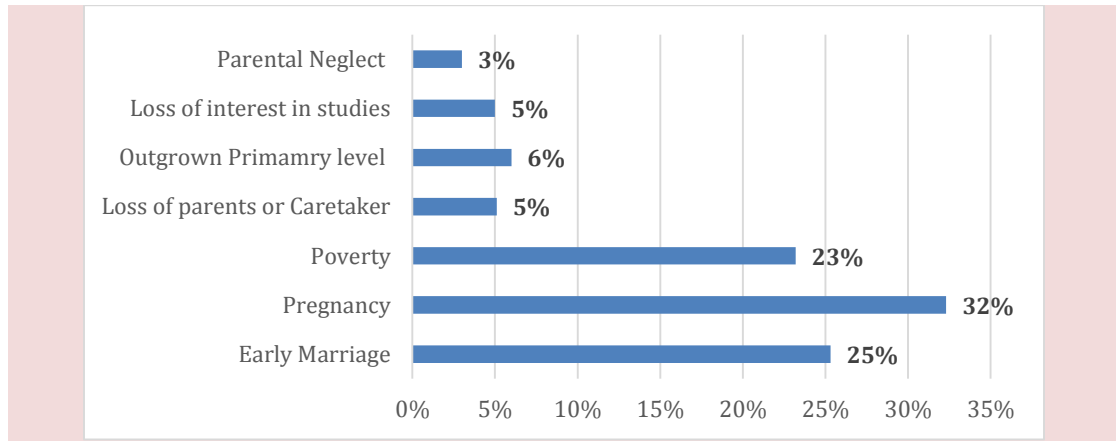
The respondents alluded to Poverty as the third reason for the affected girls' failure to return to school. COVID-19 increased the already bad situation in the families. *"Some parents failed to take their children back to school due to poverty created by COVID-19 lock down"* Mr. Omara Djegeti Orech, Senior Education Officer – Lira District. *"Many parents are too poor to afford scholastic materials"* FGD Butalega 1 village – Kamuli. However, it was also noted that, some parents used the lockdown as an opportunity for them not to pay school fees for their children, especially the girl child. Even before the outbreak of COVID-19 some of the teenage girls' pupils were already having the challenge with scholastics and hygienic materials.

Another setback to the return of the girls to school was loss of parents or Caretaker. Some girls became orphans during lockdown leaving them with no one to pay their fees. Some of the parents died due to COVID-19 leaving pupils with no one to pay the school fees. Age also was highlighted as one of the setbacks. Some parents felt their girls had out grown primary level. *"Some parents stopped their girls from returning to school claiming they were too old to be in primary level"*, Nyafwono Joyce Senior woman teacher – TICAF primary school – Tororo. Similarly, some of the girls themselves felt out of age for primary education. *"Some girls found themselves grownup for primary education and could not return back to school"*, Headteacher- Amen Primary School-Soroti. *"When school opened in January 2022, not all the girls went back to school. Because some of them felt that they have over grown the classes they were in before the closure of the schools in 2020. Others just lost moral."* FGD Lulikoyo village – Tororo

Loss of interest in studies was also hindrance to their return to school. Some of the girls totally lost interest in studies as they stayed at home for long. *"Other girls lost interest in studies as some claim that they can no longer grasp anything and forgot what they had learnt due to the long period without studying"*, Balekere Robert – Headteacher Kawaaga Primary School, Kamuli District. *'When school was opened in January, I had already delivered and felt that, it was no longer necessary to go back to school'* Kacwiny Parwoth Charity an 18 years P6 of Oryang Primary School.

The respondent also noted parental neglect as contributing factors for the failure. Some parents were negligent to take their girls back to school. *"It is negligence by their parents to support their education by not paying for their school fees and scholastic materials. Many parents of this community still don't consider girl child education as a serious matter and now given the poor financial state aggravated by COVID-19, many have neglected bringing back their girl children to school"*, Balekere Robert - Headteacher Kawaaga Primary School- Kamuli District. *"There are also those parents who have neglected bringing them back to school. They are neither pregnant nor married, but they are at home digging or selling items like tomatoes and sweet bananas in the trading centres. When I meet them, they tell me their fathers have refused to buy them books and uniforms"*, Senior woman teacher Kawaaga Primary School – Kamuli

Graph 1: Reasons for not Returning to School



Perpetrators' Penalties

The study revealed in some cases the perpetrators of early marriages and teenage pregnancy were held accountable, but to a large extent they were not penalized. According to the community leaders, Tororo district, only 20% of the perpetrators were held accountable. The penalties given to them included but not limited to: tasking them to take charge of the pregnancy and the baby, imprisonment for some time, forcing them to marry the teenage girls, and making them to commit to pay school fees for the teenager after giving birth. *“Some of the perpetrators were held accountable. They were forced to provide for the girls that got pregnant. Others were arrested and still in jail”*, Nyafwono Joyce Senior woman teacher of TICAF primary school. Mulondo Simon Andrew, Education Officer Kamuli District added, *“Some of the perpetrators were reported to police and arrested. For example, in the Estate, the man who impregnated the 14-year-old girl was reported to police and arrested by the police in Kamuli and later taken to Kirinya”*. However, penalties like forcing the perpetrators to marry the teenage girls were counterproductive because they might not have been ready for marriage as well as putting an end to the teenage girls’ education. *“Some of the perpetrators were forced to marry the girls. This again brings another challenge as they were not prepared for marriage. So, the marriages are marred with: domestic violence, poverty, stress, etc”*, Balekere Robert – Headteacher Kawaaga Primary School, Kamuli District lamented.

To a large extent most of the perpetrators were not held accountable. The study revealed that up to 80% of the perpetrators were not held accountable because of the following reasons: Both the girls and boy were regarded as children, COVID-19 restriction of movement, the boy and girl are of the same community and relationship and unity is paramount, consent of parent especially due to poverty, perpetrators connivance with the parents of the affected girls making it difficult

for the case to come to public domain, perpetrators being casual workers from other districts, parents not reporting the cases, and perpetrators running away after realizing the crime he has committed. Poverty considerably, contributed to the negotiation between the perpetrators and the family of the girl. *“There was high level of poverty among most families during the lockdown. The parents decide to negotiate with the perpetrators to save themselves the trouble of treating and taking care of the pregnant girl and their children after giving birth”* – a teacher in Kawaaga primary school – Kamuli District explained. Similarly, in some cases, when the parents are interested in some income, they connive with the perpetrators who buy them off. In such instances it becomes difficult for the cases to come to public domain and for the authorities to hold the perpetrators accountable. According to Senior Education Officer – Tororo district, *“The perpetrators were not held accountable because parents negotiate for payment and perpetrators are set free. Other parents consider the relationship among community members so they let it go”*. Most perpetrators meet with the parents of the girls, negotiate the bride price and the girls are married off or agree to take care of the pregnancy. *“One parent tried to sue the man who impregnated his daughter, took the case to police but later the accused paid 700 ug shillings and the parent agreed to give in the daughter for marriage”*, senior women teacher Kawaaga Primary school – Kamuli.

In Kamuli most of the girls got pregnant with sugarcane cutters casual workers. *“Most of the boys who impregnated our girls were strangers who had come to work in sugarcane plantations to cut sugarcane and when the work was done, they left and no one could trace where they live or came from. To make matter worse, the girls don’t even know their real names, they used nick names like Rasta or one of their names. Therefore, it is difficult to find them and hold them accountable for the crimes they committed.* FGD Butalega 1 village – Kamuli. Some of the perpetrators were also members of the community, too young and friends to the affected girl’s family. *“We didn’t contact any authority because the boy is still young and also a son to our neighbour who is also our friend”*, Athino Brende affected parent Amagoro village – Tororo District.

The Plight of the Affected teenage girls

The study revealed that the girls who got pregnant and those married out face domestic violence, poverty, rejection and stress. Most of the girls are staying with their parents and have become single mothers because the boys who made them pregnant have ran away. Some girls now have babies who don't have fathers to look after them, in other words, they are single teenage mothers. Majority of the girls lack basic needs as they are left on their own. *"As single teenage mother, I lack money to take care of my child and myself, especially when she is sick. We also lack money to take care of our basic needs. The father of the child does not help me"* Kacwinyparwoth 18 years – Nebbi district. Others could not deliver normally due to immature age for delivery. *"Some of the girls who got pregnant were operated and are more are likely to go through similar process in the future during child birth due to their age that is still so tender to give birth. For some girls, their babies died shortly after giving birth due to lack of enough care; some girls who gave birth did not even have breast milk to feed their babies because they are still too young by around 14 years. Some of the girls who had gotten married were later mistreated and they returned home where they are also neglected by their parents who are still angry with them"* FGD Butalega 1 village – Kamuli. As they are out of school, they experience psychological torture, self-regret, family neglect, and social isolation.

In case the affected girls fail to return to school completely, they are likely to live a life of very low standard without enough income to meet basic requirements. *"Many of those girls who got married, their marriage is likely to break up because they went in for something they were not ready for and lack knowledge to run it"* – Mulondo Simon Andrew, Education Officer Kamuli District. If they don't return to school completely, their journey of education ends and the prospects for better future is shattered. The only job opportunity in their docket will be casual labour. They will become child mothers and vulnerable definitely to contracting diseases like HIV Aids; poor future mothers who cannot support their children and may end up abandoning their children. *"There future will be bad because they are all dependents on parents. Even most of them got complications during delivery and some have turned to things like prostitution"*, Mr. Omara Djegeti Orech, Senior Education Officer – Lira District.

"Those who went for early marriages will experience domestic violence because they joined something they are not yet mature and prepared for, they don't know how to go about the marital challenges that may come their way. Both the girls and their husbands will become tired of each other. Conflicts will emerge, hence resulting into domestic violence", a teacher in Kawaaga primary school – Kamuli District explained. It will be hard for them to compete with their colleagues who remained at school and completed, because there are certain qualifications required for almost every well-paid job. *"Just of recent we received people who came to construct a pit latrine at the school and demanded that the one to cook for them must be able to speak English because they didn't know Lusoga and English was the only language and means of*

communication. Many people who had wished to take on the opportunity missed out because they could not speak English”, FGD Kamuli. Their future is likely to be filled with regret for not continuing with studies. They will miss several opportunities due to lack of qualifications.

Some of the parents and the girls still think of future education. *“The future for Winnie is still promising as she still insists on going back to school after giving birth, and me, as her parent I am still willing to support her back to school any time she decides to. Her dream is to become a nurse and still have hope that she will cling on to it after giving birth”, Babiwemba Sylvia – Peasant Farmer Kamuli District. She dreams of going back to school and becoming a nurse. “In future, I want to be a nurse. After giving birth, I will go back to school, sit for PLE, join secondary school, finish senior four and join nursing institute in Kamuli Town where I will become a nurse”. She is cognizant that if she does not go back to school she will suffer as her life will be miserable. “I will suffer in future if I don’t return to school. My dream of becoming a nurse will die and I will be a woman of no class and my husband will beat me”, Namukose Winnie Kawaaga Primary School Kamuli District.*

On the other a hand some of the affected girls are no longer interested in formal education. “Talk to teenage girls who are now pregnant or gave birth, some of which are my daughters and they say they want to find other things to do like tailoring, hair plating, etc. In other words, they prefer vocational courses to regular studies, therefore, their dreams are in line with vocational studies” – FGD – Soroti. “My dream is that, government should bring for us programs that will enable us earn some money. I won’t have a good future if I don’t go back to school. But I don’t see myself getting back to formal education. I need life skills to enable me earn my living”, Kwiwocwiny Parwoth 18 years – Nebbi district.

“There are also other children who still dream of becoming professionals like teachers, doctors etc. This is especially with children whose parents have failed to pay their school fees and buy scholastic materials due to financial constraints. They still hope to return to school and accomplish their studies once the financial situation becomes better” FGD Butalega 1 village – Kamuli

Government Policy Response

As a policy, the government has allowed all children back to school, including teenage girls who are pregnant or gave birth. This has given chance to many teenage girls who would have dropped out of school at such lower levels to continue with studies. In the study districts, sensitization has been over radio and in public functions. *“As the office of the district education Officer, we have often carried out sensitization on media through radio talk shows and public functions*

encouraging children and parents to take their children to school despite what they might have gone through the lockdown”, District Inspector of Schools Sheema. In other districts senior woman teachers were empowered to handle the teenagers who have stayed long out of school. “Our department (DEO) have organized workshops, trained and empowered senior women teachers to be able to offer psycho-support to the teenagers who have returned to school after experiencing challenges of pregnancies, early marriage and other problems” – Mulondo Simon Andrew, Education Officer Kamuli District explained. The respondents feel that, the policy is good as it aimed at making all the affected girls continue with their normal education. “For the parents and girls who are embracing this policy, the affected teenage girls will complete their education and achieve their goals”, Senior Education Officer – Tororo. “There is need to reach out to all the affected girls to make sure they all go back to school and complete their studies and where force is needed it can be applied”, he added.

Much as the respondents, appreciated the positive policy by the government, they noted the policy faces a number challenges as some of the girls who got pregnant were abandoned by their parents who stopped supporting them; others feel shy to face their fellow pupils in school and those who have given birth have the responsibility of taking care of their babies. *“I feel ashamed to go back to school and sit in the same class with those who are not pregnant, I fear that my fellow pupils at school will laugh at me because now the pregnancy can be seen in the uniform as its now 5 months. I want to go back to school after I give birth but now in my situation, I don’t want to go back” – Namukose Winnie, Kamuli District. “To a large extent the measure is not helping because these girls need extra support from the school and the government of which very little assistance is given”, a teacher in Ober Primary school, Lira District, explained.*

Another challenge to the government is the lack of preparedness of the schools to handle such cases. The Study revealed that some of the schools are not prepared in handling the cases of breastfeeding mothers and as well as expectant mothers. *“The measure by the government might not be effective since most of our schools are not yet ready to handle such cases” Eddie Assimwe Head Teacher Kiso Katera Primary School – Sheema District. No wonder that the affected kids are isolated or called names by fellow pupils. Most disturbing is that some of the respondents felt that allowing pregnant girls to study together with the rest will make the pupils think that getting pregnant during primary school education is normal.*

Furthermore, the measures put in place lack clarity or strategy. Much as the girls were permitted to go back to school despite their conditions, the implementation of this was not clear. There are no guidelines on how these girls will be handled and what it entails for the school. This is the first time the schools are having pregnant mothers and breastfeeding mother studying together with other pupils. *“The measures put by government may not work effectively because they are not clear”, Teachers at Kiso-Katera Primary School – Sheema District decried.*

Again, although the government has encouraged the parents to take their children back to school, some are very reluctant when it comes to providing scholastic materials and paying the small sum of school fees that they are asked to pay. *“Some parents up to now have refused to return their children, especially teenage girls back to school even when they are able to support them in school”*, the teacher at Kisoro Primary School added. Some parents in the community have refused to bring back their children to school by giving excuses that their children are now very dull to grasp anything in class after staying for so long without studying. *“The long period of the lockdown and their experiences of the pregnancies, child birth, marriage, etc. made them lose touch with studies”* FGD Butalega 1 village – Kamuli.

The respondents asserted that the positive government policy is also affected by health complications that emanate from pregnancy. *“...these girls have effects of pregnancy like vomiting which affects their concentration at school and remaining in the school environment”*, Among Phoebe warned. Babiwemba Sylvia – Peasant Farmer Kamuli District explained this dilemma: *“My daughter frequently falls sick because of the pregnancy at her age of only 16 years. She normally suffers from malaria and vomiting. There are times when she craves for things like fish, chicken and I don’t have money to buy them”*.

There are also teenage girls who express loss of interest in studying specially those who gave birth. They are more interested in caring for their babies than returning to school. Therefore, despite the government initiative to allow them back to school and the willingness of their parents to pay school fees and provide scholastic material they are still not willing to return to school.

Respondents’ Suggestions

A question was posed to the respondents, to seek their views on how the teenage girl’s education plight could be addressed since they lived with them and understand the issues. They alluded to many action-points that can be undertaken by the government to enable the affected girls redeem their future which was affected by the closure of schools in the bid to curtail the spread of COVID-19 in the country. Below are their suggestions:

Establishment of vocational schools for those who can no longer continue with formal education. *“The government should extend vocational services/training to our community to enable teenagers who feel they can no longer continue with regular schooling to learn some vocational skills like tailoring, hair plaiting, carpentry, construction, etc. Such skills will enable those teenagers to be in position to earn some income and survive in the competitive world”*, Headteacher Kawaaga Primary School – Kamuli District Appealed. *“Many of our daughters don’t want to go back to school, they prefer doing other things like hair dressing, catering, tailoring, etc. Government*

should therefore set up vocational institute that can offer vocational courses near or within our community”, community leaders FGD Butalega 1 village – Kamuli emphasized.

Sensitisation at all levels. They regarded community sensitisation critical at this stage and should be accompanied with home visitations and follow up. Parents should be sensitized on how to stay with and ensure these affected pupil’s study and on the value of education. The parents and the teenage girls should be sensitized on the effect of early marriage and teenage pregnancy. Teachers should sensitize the pupils to avoid intimidating this kind of learners.

Enforcement of the policy by the government: *“The government should tighten the law against parents who have deliberately neglected their children’s education. Those who don’t send their children to school and provide scholastic materials to be arrested and charged accordingly”,* Mulondo Simon Andrew, Education Officer Kamuli District. More strict laws should be set to punish the perpetrators. In addition, *“the govt should introduce a policy whereby the local leaders can move home to home to force parents who have haven’t taken back their children to schools to do so and support them where necessary”* Nyafwono Joyce Senior woman teacher of TICAF primary school.

Perpetrators should be held accountable: The government must act more than talking by ensuring tight enforcement of the law against the perpetrators and the parents who have reluctantly refused to take their children back to school. The Police and Gombolola Chiefs should move through sub counties and villages arresting parents with no proper reason for not sending their children of school going age to school.

Poverty Reduction: Some of the teenage girls were not able to go back to school due to poverty in their families. *“Poverty has made many parents shy away from their responsibilities to cater for their children’s education needs”,* a teacher in Kawaaga primary school – Kamuli. Government should in the short term provide incentives for the affected girls and in the long run improve on the household income through family friendly programs like the Parish model.

Counselling and guidance. There is need for continuous counselling and guidance for the affected. The domestic violence, rejection, isolation, delivery, etc at early age has far reaching negative impact on the girl child.

Enrolment of Women teachers: The government should enrol more female teachers to be allocated in village schools or hard to reach areas to help in addressing the issue of teenage girls in schools. It was noted that, some of the schools were not prepared for handling teenage mothers and expectant mothers.

Education support to the vulnerable affected girls: The government needs to assist with school fees and other school requirements to girls who had gotten married or pregnant still willing to go back to school yet their parents have given up on them or passed on.

Collection of data on the affected girls: There is need for comprehensive data on the number and status of the affected girls in the country. Government should come up with programs of intervening in the lives of such children after data collection. The government needs to get information from all the girls who were affected so that it helps them to get empowered through different programs like micro finance credit, payment of school fees and helping them to bring up their children so that when they return to school, they are not stressed about their children.

Chapter Three

Conclusion and Recommendations

Behind every school is a safe child, a learning child. When schools close, children are at risk with the marginalized ones paying a heavier price. Evidence shows that the children's numeracy and literacy levels fall with many facing the risk of never attending school again. There are other risks such as child labour, negative mental health, and sexual exploitation with many teenage girls becoming pregnant and victims of early marriages. The impact of the closure of schools on the teenage girls as a measure to prevent the spread of COVID-19 clearly confirmed the importance of school in the safety of the children as child abuse increased during the period at a record level.

The increase in teenage pregnancies and early marriages during the lockdown exposes the weaknesses of protective laws and institutions in Uganda. Apart from the suffering and the health risks, both mental and physical, teenage pregnancies and early marriages have long-term negative consequences for the victims and is socially detrimental. Teenage pregnancies and early marriages undermine the ability of the affected girls to return to school and complete their education. Lack of education reduces the capacity of women to earn a living, to act as community leaders, or to participate in political life, all of which have a negative impact on society and the economy. This is clear in the findings of the study as the majority of the affected girls in the targeted primary schools were not able to return to school. Moreover, some of those who returned had also challenges to remain in school. The pandemic exacerbated and made it ever more challenging to meet the significant and existing needs of teenage girls in the targeted schools. Government and stakeholders, must address the extreme additional impacts that the COVID-19 outbreak is having on these young girls, as well as continuing to address pre-existing challenges to ensure the needs and rights of these girls are met. Initial and remedial solutions may have their own hiccups and false starts but are urgently needed. The magnitude is so much that the government cannot afford the luxury of delay in this case.

Re-opening schools, while ensuring that no student is left behind requires strong partnerships between relevant ministries and state agencies responsible for equity and inclusion matters. Specialised agencies working on multiple areas are crucial actors in the design and implementation of school re-opening strategies. Such actors are important to strengthen co-ordination between different stakeholders while having a direct insight into teenage mothers' situation and needs in Uganda.

All learners "lost time" during the lockdowns and these learning losses might be severe. Whereas there were vulnerable groups before, lockdown itself created another group, the teenage mothers. However, educational gaps between vulnerable groups and others are likely to be exacerbated, generating higher dropouts, failures, absenteeism, etc. Furthermore, the long-term

social and emotional impacts on such learners may be the most lasting legacy of the COVID-19 crisis. As such, these groups need serious support and the support has to be clarified and strengthened as schools open in order to avoid lasting negative effects likely to generate both social exclusion and economic loss.

A holistic approach to inclusive education based on strong co-operation between different stakeholders that address learners' education as well as their needs and well-being is crucial. Considerable joint efforts by school leaders, teachers, parents, learners, educationalists, local government leaders, health care professionals, and communities are needed to (re-)create schools as safe, supportive and inclusive places for all learners.

A mix of mainstream policies to support all learners and targeted initiatives to respond to the special needs of vulnerable groups, including the teenage mothers, is needed in order to ensure that all learners have the same access to quality learning opportunities and feel that they belong to the school. Improving the access and the quality of remote learning as well as prioritizing the disadvantaged groups are a very important component.

Recommendations

The recommendations points out key action points that can be undertaken by various stakeholders in addressing the plight of the affected teenage girls.

Comprehensive data of the Affected Girls

There is no comprehensive statistics on the number and situation of the affected teenage pregnant girls. Government should establish a comprehensive database on the affected girls which will require a targeted and disaggregated approach in responding to their present needs. This will enable the government to clarify and strengthen the support these affected girls needs in order to avoid lasting negative effects likely to generate both social exclusion and economic loss.

Enforcement of the policy on education

It is important that the government take stringent measures against parents who deliberately neglect their children's education. Parents should be strongly urged to send their children to school and also provide scholastic materials as required. The government should act more than talking by ensuring tight enforcement of the law against the perpetrators and the parents who have reluctantly refused to take their children back to school. Punitive measure should only be taken against such parents if peaceful overtures have been ignored.

Promote anti-discrimination

At the school levels, management should ensure compliance with anti-discrimination and even human rights policies and laws. They should encourage anti-bullying campaigns and addressing issues related to the stigmatisation of the affected teenage girls in their schools.

Partnership among stakeholders

Government should facilitate partnerships between different stakeholders to respond to the affected teenage girls' needs generally. This requires serious co-operation between political authorities and civil society generally. It should be recognised that grass-root associations are essential partners in reaching the vulnerable groups including the affected teenage girls in supporting them both financially and materially. This whole-school and whole-community approach facilitates communication and strong partnerships between schools on the one hand and the communities on the other. The policies to help the affected teenage girls need to be streamlined, in this case, they need to involve their families and communities in the design and implementation. This is to ensure the affected girls get the necessary education assistance to enable them return and remain in school.

Encouraging return to school

The affected teenage girls need to be encouraged to go back to school. In this regard, religious and cultural leaders also play critical role in shaping the narrative necessary to influence the return of the affected teenagers to school. They should use their influence to ensure that parents play their role of supporting their children. They should use their platforms to appeal to parents and guardians to do whatever it takes to ensure that those teenage girls that got pregnant return to and remain in school.

Government needs to sensitise the community on the importance of education and encouraging the parents to take back their affected girls to school. This can be done through radio programs, community dialogues, and radio and television adverts.

Encouraging remaining in school

For those who have returned to school, their absenteeism should be limited by introducing a system of incentives to promote attendance. This can be through subsidies (meals, transport, child help, etc.) to the affected girls. For those who have stayed at home for a long time, it is important to address the learning gaps where schools could be urged to help the affected teenage girls to catch up on missed learning. The catch-up accelerated programmes and other

practices might include among others after-school tutoring and peer-to-peer coaching initiatives as well as special after-school study classes.

Special attention should be paid to socio-economic and psychological well-being of the affected teenage girls. The teachers should be provided with guidelines and resources to support teenage girls' well-being. In this respect, the schools and authorities should provide equitable and inclusive access to extra services, free school meals and hygiene kits, extra grants and financial support, tuition waivers and cash transfer programmes. Policy makers should ensure that the affected girls get the necessary education assistance to enable them return and remain at school.

Empowering schools to support the affected girls

The affected teenage girls need special attention. It is therefore important to facilitate ongoing communication with teachers and school leaders to better identify the affected teenage girls' challenges and needs. The teachers may need refresher courses on how to deal with this new phenomenon. It is therefore necessary to organise frequent seminars and workshops on 'socio-emotional learning in times after the pandemic'.

Address cultural challenges

There are deeper structural cultural challenges that the country needs to deal with, such as child marriage, defilement, FGM, and gender issues. This is where the role of the religious and cultural leaders becomes very necessary. Teenage pregnancy and child marriages increased during the lockdown due to the economic hardships and the sudden paradigm shift of working conditions. Thus, the future of these girls and the whole society is uncertain. It's imperative to act, to take steps towards the imagined future. It is a generational call to ensure that a legacy, of creating a society that values all people regardless of gender, is set.

Delivery of education materials

For those who cannot physically attend classes for one reason or another and yet interested in studying, government can partner with government to provide educational resources – laptops and internet access. Some sort of a scouts group mechanism, that allows delivery, can be implemented to allow them access the internet and/or hard copy lessons and tasks from schools. The deliveries of homework/assignments on paper to these pupils and the subsequent collection and return to the teachers should be organised. The pedagogical materials can be printed and distributed to them. teenage mothers in rural and disadvantaged areas and locations with a poor internet connection. This can be effected by the Ministry of education partnering with

private organisations, civil society organisations and transport companies to distribute the materials needed by the affected teenage.

Enrolment of Women teachers

The government should enrol more female teachers to be allocated in village schools or hard to reach primary schools to help in addressing the issue of teenage girls in schools. It was noted that, some of the schools were not prepared for handling teenage mothers and expectant teenagers. Moreover, some of the schools completely lack the senior woman teacher.

Establishment of vocational schools

Some of the affected teenage girls may never go back to school and yet are interested in life-skill training to enable them become self-reliant in managing their families. The Government should establish vocational schools and skill-acquisition centre. Already the parish development model is suitable for this initiative.

Encouraging monitoring and evaluation

Monitoring and evaluation initiatives need to be conducted at different levels and will be key to support the affected girls in returning to and remaining in school. At the school level, it will be important for the educational staff to identify the affected girls and understand the challenges they face. This implies training, mainly for teachers, on how to monitor the pupils most in need, implement more individualised approach to help them catchup based on their individual situation.

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