

CHILD MARRIAGE AND TEENAGE PREGNANCY IN UGANDA

43%

of Ugandan girls are married before 18 years



One in four (25%) girls in Uganda aged 15-19 years have had a child or are pregnant



Girls aged **15-19** years are twice more likely to die during pregnancy and childbirth than women in their 20s



RAISING THE ALARM ON CHILD MARRIAGE AND TEENAGE PREGNANCY

Globally, child marriage undermines 33,000 lives every day.¹ UNFPA's State of the World Population Report 2020 shows that an estimated 650 million girls and women alive today were married as children, and by 2030, another 150 million girls under the age of 18 will be married if no intervention is done.

In Uganda, 43% of women age 25-49 were married before the age of 18, according to the Uganda Demographic and Health Survey (UDHS) 2016. Child marriage is not only a human rights violation, it also increases the risk of teenage pregnancy, which can have a profound effect on the health and lives of young women and can contribute to high fertility rates.



The magnitude of child marriage and teenage pregnancy in Uganda

Although the legal age of consent to marriage in Uganda is set at 18, getting married formally or informally before this age is a common practice in the country. Both boys and girls are married off as children, but girls are disproportionately affected by this harmful practice. In most cases, young girls are married to considerably older men. Progress has been made to end child marriage, but the practice still affects nearly half of all girl-children in Uganda, with 43% of women 25-49 years report having married by 18 years.² On a global scale, Uganda is ranked 16th among 25 countries with the highest rates of child marriage.³

When young girls are married off at an early age, this contributes significantly to teenage pregnancy. The proportion of teenagers who have begun childbearing is high, though it has progressively declined over time from 43% in 1995 to 31% 2001, to 25% in 2006 and to 24% in 2011.⁴ The most recent data from the UDHS 2016 indicates a slight increase with an estimated teenage pregnancy rate at 25%. This rate is considered one of the highest in Sub-Saharan Africa.⁵ In rural areas of Uganda, the teenage pregnancy rate is even higher with 27% of girls, age 15-19 years having begun childbearing.

A complex issue with deep roots

In Uganda, a complex and interrelated set of drivers exposes girls to child marriage and teenage pregnancy. These drivers are crosscutting and deeply rooted in traditions, culture and poverty. Child marriage and teenage pregnancy are closely linked, and while child marriage is often a precursor of early childbearing, pre-marital pregnancy may also put girls at risk of being married off.⁶ Young girls may be forced to marry the father of their baby – even a rapist – to spare their families the stigma associated with an unmarried pregnancy.

The key drivers of child marriage and teenage pregnancy include:

Poverty and bride wealth: Poverty is known to be a major driver of child marriage and exposure to risky sexual behavior. Children from poor households are more at risk of getting pregnant and married off compared to those in relatively better households. Lack of basic needs has desperately led girls to exchange sex for gifts or money, exposing them to unprotected sex. Bride wealth payments also expose girls to child marriage, as poor parents are impatient to acquire the much needed income through marrying off their daughters. Selling girls at designated markets in exchange for livestock have also proven a common community practice in some districts, such as the Moo Cwari market, Lira district.⁷

Cultural norms and perceptions: The continuity of practices of child marriage and teenage pregnancy are largely due to the cultural perception that the transition from childhood to adulthood is defined and constructed around marriage and reproduction. Marriage and motherhood are core expectations and perceived as key markers of womanhood; consequently, marriage and pregnancy are not only desired and expected, it is also culturally accepted and enforced. In some cultures, getting married and bearing children are valued as the only means for young girls to secure identity and status in families and as adults in society.⁸

Limited access to Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) information and services: Limited access to SRHR information and services by sexually active adolescent girls is a major factor contributing to unwanted teenage pregnancy. As a result, adolescent girls and boys lack knowledge on the linkage between sexual activity and pregnancy; sexual consent; girls' menstrual cycle; and associated risks of pregnancy; contraceptive methods and healthy sexual behavior; and consequences of unprotected sex.

Limited enrolment and retention of girls in school: Many poor families cannot afford to keep their girls in schools or do not perceive the value of education for girls. If a girl is not in school or drops out of school, she becomes vulnerable. Consequently, less-educated girls are more at risk of early marriage and teenage pregnancy, for example 35% of girls aged 15-19 years with no education have already had a baby, compared to 11% of girls who have more than secondary education, the UDHS, 2016 shows.

Early (forced) sexual activity: Early and unsafe sexual activity is linked to both child marriage and teenage pregnancy. In Uganda, 18% girls experience their first sexual intercourse before the age of 15 years; this proportion being higher in rural areas.⁹

A significant number of these girls are being pressured or forced to having early sex. As such, defilement is among the top 10 leading crimes reported to the police in Uganda.¹⁰

Family and household situation: The significance of the family and household situation is linked to teenage pregnancy and sustainment of child marriage practices. Girls with parents with low levels of education, living with single parents, in polygamous families and having alcoholic and/or abusive parents are more at risk of marrying early and getting pregnant.¹¹ Being an orphan and living in a child headed household also make girls more prone to child marriage and teenage pregnancy. If a girl experiences difficult living conditions and unsafe home environments, she is more likely to run away for marriage. Some girls see marriage as their last option for escaping abusive and violent situations at home.

Institutional drivers: Inadequate implementation of policies and laws protecting children and challenges with girls accessing and completing a quality education remain significant issues in Uganda. Even though access to education has expanded, there are still many obstacles due to long distances, non-existent or poor school facilities, lack of dedicated teachers and lack of sanitary facilities. These issues put girls at particular risk of child marriage and teenage pregnancy.



SELLING OF GIRLS AT THE MOO CWARI MARKET, LIRA DISTRICT

The Moo Cwari (“to look for your husband”) market is a market in Aromo sub-county in Lira district that is designated to the selling of girls in exchange for livestock. The market day occurs every Tuesday and attracts people from as far as South Sudan, Acholi sub-region and Lango region. The buyers of girls are typically the parents of a young teenage boy, although it can also be a man in his late 40’s looking for a second wife. Negotiations usually take place prior to the exchange, and the market is mainly used as camouflage to authorities. At the market, the husband (or parents if it involves a young boy) will bring cows or other livestock as if selling them to the girl’s parents. The transaction is usually an exchange of two to four cows for one girl. The girl, who has not consented, is then forced to follow the new husband and become a wife.

Source: UNFPA, (2019). Ethnographic study on child marriage and teenage pregnancy.

The detrimental effects of child marriage and teenage pregnancy

Girls who marry young are further more prone to gender-based violence (GBV) and domestic abuse due to limited autonomy and significant power differentials. Both child marriages and teenage pregnancies are associated with shame, stigma and mental health issues that sometimes can lead to suicidal tendencies.¹²

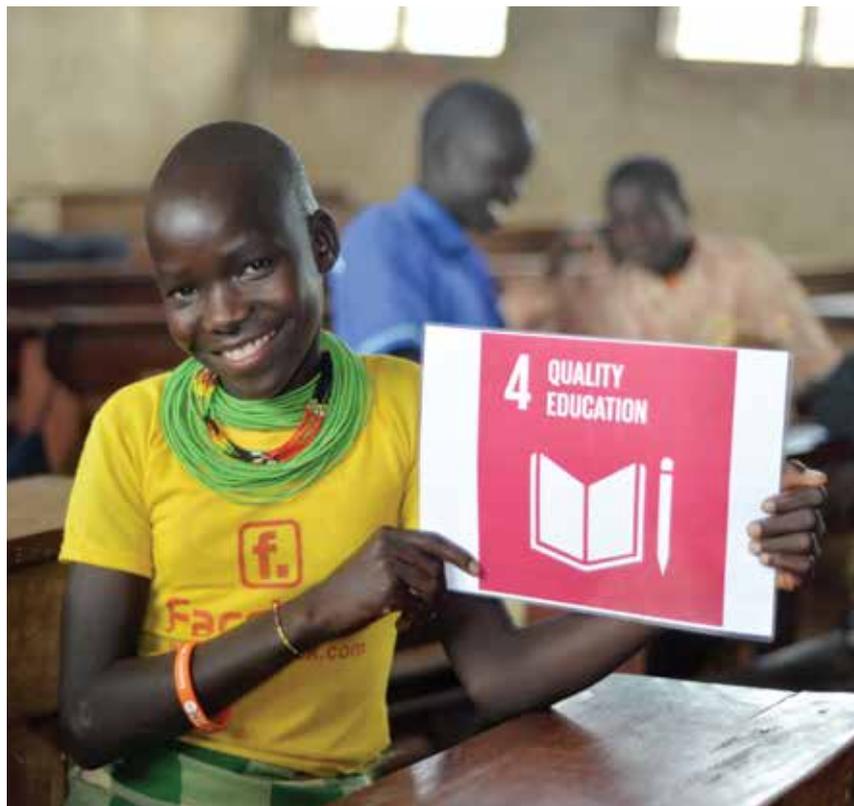
Besides, child brides are also at significant risk of contracting sexually transmitted infections (STIs) including HIV, as they are often unable to effectively negotiate safer sex and under pressure to demonstrate their fertility.

Ugandan girls who experience child marriage and teenage pregnancy are exposed to multiple vulnerabilities, affecting both their health and wellbeing. Health wise, pregnant teenagers are more likely to experience serious complications while giving birth, often because their bodies are still physiologically immature to handle childbirth. Obstetric fistula is one of the most severe and devastating complications of teenage pregnancies.¹³

The risk of maternal death are about 28% higher for mothers aged 15 to 19 than that of mothers aged 20 to 24.¹⁴ To put it simply, a girl between the age of 15 and 19 years is twice as likely to die during pregnancy or birth as a woman in her 20s. If she is under 15 years, the risk is five times higher.¹⁵ The UDHS (2016) shows that teenage births are associated with higher levels of child morbidity and mortality, for example, the neonatal mortality rate of adolescent born babies is at 34/1000 live births compared to 25/1000 live births among women in their 20’s.

In terms of wellbeing, teenage pregnancy significantly contributes to physiological stress from the pregnancy itself and fear of reactions and abandonment from the partner, parents, peers, school, health workers and the community. Besides, many young girls are so desperate to end the pregnancy that they resort to dangerous and unsafe methods of abortion.

On a socio-economic level, child marriage and teenage pregnancy often lead to school dropouts and poor or delayed educational achievements. Approximately 15-20% of dropouts for girls in secondary school are triggered by child marriage and teenage pregnancy.¹⁶ Many young girls are therefore trapped in a cycle of poverty because of limited opportunities for employment and income. Child marriage and teenage pregnancy also predicts more children over a woman’s lifetime, affecting the entire population growth of the country.¹⁷



4 things you need to know about child marriage in Uganda

- 1 Child marriage is common with 292,129 girls aged 12-17 years having ever married (calculation is based on the National Population and Housing Census, 2014)
- 2 Both boys and girls are married off – but girls are significantly more vulnerable to the practice
- 3 Progress is being made, but not enough
- 4 Child marriage and teenage pregnancy are closely linked

What needs to be done to address the burden of child marriage and teenage pregnancy in Uganda?

Uganda still stands a chance to successfully reduce the stagnated high rates of child marriage and teenage pregnancy. The country should endorse the following actions:

Increasing access to SRHR services including family planning and GBV through scale-up of youth-responsive services and investment in youth-led innovative solutions.

Targeting vulnerable populations including refugees, people with disabilities, key populations and poor communities in hard-to-reach areas to ensure access to adequate SRHR information and services.

Promoting behavior change communication and sensitization programmes targeting communities, families and schools to increase community and parental responsibilities and communication skills, especially on sexuality matters and matters of consent.

Building support and commitments from community leaders and key influencers, especially cultural and religious leaders, to legislate and intervene on issues of child marriage and teenage pregnancy.

Using multiple communication channels such as mass media, radio, community gatherings with standardized messages tailored to specific target audiences, including adolescents and significant adults in the communities.

Identifying champions and role models as change agents to sensitize communities and young people on the value of female education and to represent an alternative to traditional social norms and practices.

Strengthening legal and policy framework by promoting policy coherence; effective enforcement of existing laws prohibiting child marriage; inter-sectoral collaboration; and adequate financing and overall capacity for service delivery to fight against sex exploitation and child marriage.

Expediting finalization and implementation of key policies, including the National Strategy to End Child Marriage and Teenage Pregnancy, the National Sexuality Education Framework 2018, the National Policy for SRHR, the National Adolescent Health Policy, the National School Health Policy, the Multi-sectoral Adolescent Girl Framework, the National Engagement Strategy for Adolescents and Youth SRHR, the Defilement Law, and the Prevention of Trafficking in Persons Act 2009.

Providing girls who are already married or mothers with options for schooling, employment and livelihood skills, SRHR information; and implementing a policy to allow girls to return to school after delivery to continue their education.

Conducting research and documenting promising practices on teenage pregnancy and child marriage that can be replicated.

Investing in economic empowerment and social protection initiatives that protect and support girls to know and claim their rights and acquire relevant skills to make independent and smart life choices.

Conclusion

Despite national policies, legislation and programmes for improved wellbeing and rights of girls, Uganda still experiences persistent discrimination of girls and high rates of child marriage and teenage pregnancy. Progress has been made, but unless efforts are accelerated, reductions in numbers of girls being married off and getting pregnant will not keep pace with the current population growth. To end these harmful practices, urgent and deliberate efforts at all levels of society are required. There is a need to continue galvanizing the highest political will and engagement of religious, cultural and community leaders to end all practices of child marriage and teenage pregnancy.

REFERENCE

¹UNFPA (2020). State of the World Population 2020. United Nations Population Fund, 605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158.

²Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS). Uganda Demographic and Health Survey, 2016. Kampala, Uganda and Valverton, Maryland, USA.

³United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). The State of the World's Children 2017. New York, USA; 2017.

⁴Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS). Uganda Demographic and Health Survey 2016. Kampala, Uganda and Valverton, Maryland, USA; 2018

⁵National Population Council. The State of Uganda Population Report 2019. Kampala, Uganda; 2019.

⁶World Bank. Accelerating Uganda's Development: Ending Child Marriage, Educating Girls. Kampala, Uganda; 2017.

⁷United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). Ethnographic Study on Teenage Pregnancy and Early Marriages in Uganda. Kampala, Uganda; 2019.

⁸United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). Ending Child Marriage and Teenage Pregnancy in Uganda. Kampala, Uganda; 2015.

⁹Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS). Uganda Demographic and Health Survey, 2016. Kampala, Uganda and Valverton, Maryland, USA.

¹⁰United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). Ending Child Marriage and Teenage Pregnancy in Uganda. Kampala, Uganda; 2015.

¹¹United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). Ending Child Marriage and Teenage Pregnancy in Uganda. Kampala, Uganda; 2015.

¹²United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). Ending Child Marriage and Teenage Pregnancy in Uganda. Kampala, Uganda; 2015.

¹³United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). Ending Child Marriage and Teenage Pregnancy in Uganda. Kampala, Uganda; 2015.

¹⁴UNFPA, 2020. State of the World Population Report (SWOP).

¹⁵National Population Council. The State of Uganda Population Report 2019. Kampala, Uganda; 2019.

¹⁶United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). Ending Child Marriage and Teenage Pregnancy in Uganda. Kampala, Uganda; 2015.

¹⁷World Bank. Accelerating Uganda's Development: Ending Child Marriage, Educating Girls. Kampala, Uganda; 2017.

Delivering a world where every pregnancy is wanted, every child birth is safe and every young person's potential is fulfilled.



United Nations Population Fund
Plot 12A Baskerville Avenue, Kololo
P.O BOX 7184
Kampala, Uganda
O: +256-4177-44500
F: +256-414-236445
<http://uganda.unfpa.org/>



Look at all pictures of UNFPA Uganda on Flickr:
<http://www.flickr.com/photos/unfpauganda/>



Become fan of "UNFPA Uganda" on Facebook:
<http://www.facebook.com/unfpaug>



Look at our youtube-channel for UNFPA-videos:
<http://www.youtube.com/user/unfpauganda>



Follow our tweets: <http://twitter.com/UNFPA Uganda>

Population Matters is a series of analytical policy briefs on Uganda's emerging social development issues.