



Amid COVID-19, girls are mobilised to join Empowerment and Livelihood for Adolescents (ELA) clubs where sexual reproductive health and rights are discussed. Photo courtesy of BRAC Uganda.

Addressing teenage pregnancy during the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic 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 girls!

When the country went into lock down in 2020, fifteen-year-old Sara* from Lacekor village, Adilang sub-county, Agago district, Northern Uganda, stopped going to school as schools across the country shut down. By the time the year ended, Sara had moved in with a young man called Lokech, who used to accost her on her way to school. “He used to disturb me,” she says referring to the fact that he would make advances towards her. Sara is currently seven months pregnant.

UNFPA takes action to protect girls’ rights during the pandemic

Sara has been receiving antenatal care at Adilang health Centre. When the time comes, she will deliver at this facility, thanks to a UNFPA project that ensures that pregnant girls are mapped, given a voucher and referred to a health facility for maternity care. In addition, midwives at the health facilities have received refresher training to enable them provide emergency obstetric care to girls and women as well as information and services to prevent repeat pregnancies. Supported by the Embassy of the Netherlands, the project is implemented in 14 districts in West Nile and Northern Uganda.

“A Village Health Team member came home. She wrote my name down and told me to go to the health centre. The midwives have been caring for me and I feel happy to have someone to provide me with information and help me with my pregnancy,” Sara says.

With support from the Danish Embassy, UNFPA has trained health workers to provide sexual and reproductive health information and services to adolescents in the West Nile and Northern regions.

Meanwhile through the Joint Programme on child marriage, adolescent girls at risk of child marriage and teenage pregnancy are mobilised through Empowerment and Livelihood for Adolescents (ELA) clubs to receive information on sexual and reproductive health.

“We cannot do business as usual, the 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,” says Dr. Edson Muhwezi, Assistant Representative, UNFPA Uganda.

“The high rates of teenage pregnancy can be attributed to disruption to programmes that support access to sexual reproductive health information and services to schoolgirls. Additionally, poverty has led to some parents to marry off their daughters in order to make money to survive,” Dr. Muhwezi adds.

Analysis of data on first Antenatal Care visits from District Health Information System (DHIS-2) shows that there was a 17 percent spike in teenage pregnancies between March 2020 and June 2021. A total of 354,736 teenage pregnancies were registered in 2020, and 196,499 in the first six months of 2021.

According to UNICEF estimates, Ugandan school children have gone more than 300 days out of school since March 2020. As a result, adolescent girls have been deprived of the social protection that school offers and have been exposed to risks of sexual violence, exploitation and abuse, child marriages, and teenage pregnancies.

“We have had to adapt, innovate and collaborate even more, delivering an integrated package of sexual reproductive health and rights,” says Dr. Muhwezi.

To help ensure that adolescents still have access to accurate information on sexual and reproductive health, UNFPA working with the Ministry of Education and partners, trained teachers to deliver sexuality education sessions to young people while out of school. The initiative is implemented in West Nile, Acholi, Karamoja regions and in South Western Uganda, supported by the Netherlands Embassy and the EU spotlight Initiative.

In the first six months of 2021, UNFPA and partners have reached 35,337 adolescents with family planning, maternal health and HIV prevention services. In addition, 10,150 adolescent girls and young women aged 10-24 years accessed sexual and reproductive health and gender-based violence prevention services through the ELA clubs.

Long road ahead

But a lot more still needs to be done. At the ICPD25 summit in Nairobi in 2019 Uganda made a commitment to eliminate obstacles that stand in the way of girls’ empowerment including teenage pregnancy. UNFPA is supporting the Government of Uganda to deliver on this commitment.

“We are mobilising stakeholders including the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Gender Labour and Social Development and Ministry of Education and Sports, to re-launch a multi-stakeholder campaign to end teenage pregnancy,” said Ms. Suzanne Mandong, the acting Representative, UNFPA Uganda.

In addition, UNFPA is working with the Ministry of Education to develop policy guidance (Revised guidelines for prevention and management of teenage pregnancy in school settings in Uganda (2020) to provide a framework to support safe re-entry of girls into school after pregnancy.

With COVID-19 having eroded many of the gains made in ensuring sexual and reproductive health and rights, now more than ever it is essential to prioritise the reproductive health and rights of young people, and pay special attention to adolescent girls like Sara.

***Name changed for privacy and protection**

Message from Ms. Suzanne Mandong, Acting Representative, UNFPA Uganda



Welcome to UNFPA Uganda’s rebranded newsletter. In this first issue, we bring you stories of women and girls whose lives have been changed by our interventions.

The COVID-19 crisis has taken a staggering toll on people, communities and economies everywhere. But not everyone is affected equally. The pandemic is hitting marginalized communities harder, particularly women and girls, deepening inequalities and threatening efforts to leave no one behind.

As health systems struggle to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, we had to rethink our interventions to respond to the new reality, ensuring that sexual and reproductive health services are not sidelined.

Moreover, with schools on lockdown, gender-based violence has become a pandemic within the COVID-19 pandemic, making girls even more vulnerable to child marriage and teenage pregnancy.

We had to rethink ways of reaching girls and boys out of school, to ensure that their dignity is maintained.

We had to reach out to policy makers, including orientation of the newly elected eleventh Parliament, to influence policy formulation to match the current needs of women and girls amid COVID-19 pandemic.

The stories herein show that it is worth stepping up and fighting every single day for the women and girls who are counting on us. Enjoy the read.



File Photo: Some of the Parliamentarians during the annual conference for the Northern Eastern Africa Parliamentary Committee on Health (NEAPACOH) a platform to follow up on commitments to improve the health status of women including follow up on the Family Planning 2020 commitments

Working with Parliamentarians to achieve ICPD agenda, SDG goals

KAMPALA: “Let us all be champions for maternal, newborn and child health issues,” said Hon. Muwuma Milton Kalulu, a Member of Parliament and Population champion, in his concluding remarks after making a presentation sharing his experiences, best practices and lessons learned in advancing sexual and reproductive health and prevention of gender based violence.

The Parliamentarian made the statement during an orientation of members of the 11th Parliament on Uganda’s population dynamics and harnessing the demographic dividend in Uganda. The exercise was organized by the National Population Council with support from UNFPA through funding from the Embassy of the Kingdom of Netherlands in Uganda.

Over the years, through the Uganda Parliamentary Forum on Food Security Population and Development (UPFFSPD) and the Directorate for Research, UNFPA has built strong partnership with the Parliament of Uganda as a way of advancing the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) Programme of Action and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) agenda.

In the 8th, 9th and 10th Parliament, UNFPA built capacity of a team of Parliamentary champions who have today become strong advocates on population and development issues, with 216 and 235 members subscribing to the forum in the 9th and 10th Parliament respectively.

Among them is population Champion Hon. Milton Muwuma who says UNFPA Uganda’s support and engagements has enabled Parliamentarians execute their legislative, oversight, representation and budget appropriation roles confidently.

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“Participating in the Forums is very important. It provides you with resourceful data when presenting on the floor of parliament, gives you a basis to move a motion/Bill on population issues, and narrows the gap between MP and electorate as issues affecting them are being raised in the House,” he said.

Budgetary appropriations

Hon. Muwuma says UPFFSPD champions have been instrumental in tracking of the reproductive health budget and ensuring evidence based advocacy for increased budgetary allocation for reproductive health.

Policy and Legislative responsibilities

The forum has also been instrumental in strengthening laws and policies on sexual and reproductive health.

“Some of the legislations passed in the 8th and 9th Parliament were as a result of the support from the forum,” Hon. Muwuma says.

Among them are the National Population Council Act 2014 which led to the establishment of the National Population Council, the Female Genital Mutilation Act (2010) and The HIV and AIDS Prevention and Control Bill 2010 (passed in 2014).

In 2021, Hon. Jovah Kamateka, Woman Representative Mitooma district moved a motion for a resolution urging government to develop and enforce policies and strategies to protect girls from the escalating cases of teenage pregnancy and child marriage during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Oversight, Monitoring and Accountability

Hon. Anthony Akol, Acting Chairperson of the Forum says Parliamentary outreaches have been conducted on teenage pregnancy, FGM, promoting safe motherhood, family planning and gender-based violence covering over 18 districts.

Representation

The Parliamentarians have also represented Uganda in various forums and south to south initiatives to position Family planning agenda including the Inter-Parliamentary Conference on ICPD beyond 2014. Working with partners in Population and Development – Africa Regional Office, UPFFSPD and UNFPA, the forum organizes annual conferences for the Network of African Parliamentary Committees of Health (NEAPACOH) a platform to follow up on commitments by parliamentarians to improve the health status of women including follow up on the Family Planning 2020 commitments.

Under the south-to-south cooperation, the UPFFSPD hosted the Parliamentary team from Ethiopia and the Asian Parliamentary Forum on Population and Development in August 2021 to share experiences, lessons and best practices in advancing the ICPD agenda.

Following the Parliamentarians’ conference in August 2021, a declaration was made to advocate for increased budgets to meet the ICPD25 commitments, including sexual and reproductive health services for all, specifically contributing to the three zeros – zero maternal deaths, zero unmet need for family planning, and zero tolerance to gender-based violence and other harmful practices.



L-R: Karamoja Affairs Ministers, Hon. Agnes Nandutu, and Hon. Mary Goretti Kitutu, First Lady Janet Museveni, Head of EU delegation in Uganda Ambassador H.E. Attilio Pacifici and Irish Deputy Head of Mission in Uganda, Ms. Nichole McHugh and members of staff of St. Daniel Comboni Technical Institute, Moroto. UNFPA Uganda joined the discussion between First Lady, Mrs. Janet Kataaha Museveni and European Union (EU) Ambassadors on ‘Support to skilling Uganda Programme in Karamoja’ to improve youths livelihoods, social protection and addressing unemployment.



Members of the Kitgum District Crude Liquor Ordinance Task Force at a review meeting supported by UNFPA.

Photo credit: Sarah Labol/Kitgum.

Ordinances facilitate grassroots action to counter gender-based violence

It has been the talk of policy makers, programmers and development partners for a while, at meetings, workshops and dialogues, “that Uganda makes good policies and laws but the problem is implementation.”

Against this background local leaders in several districts have taken steps to address this challenge by developing district bye-laws and ordinances (regulation made by the local authority and applies only in their area) in order to change the narrative. Kitgum district in Northern Uganda is one of them.

Emerging from unspeakable legacies of armed conflict by the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA), residents of Kitgum district grappled with high incidences of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). In addition to other community-based interventions to address the challenge, they advocated for the intervention by the local leadership.

Thus, the Kitgum District Local Action Plan to address gender inequality and violence was developed. The Plan recommends the development of ordinances and bye-laws as one of the interventions to strengthen the legal responses to increasing incidences of GBV.

“The sheer magnitude of GBV and its effects on women and girls inspired our aspiration to come up with the bills which we are translating into ordinances to curb the vice further,”

says Mr. James Okidi, the District Community Development Officer (DCDO).

Mr. Okidi further explains that violence is deeply rooted in excessive alcohol consumption, and opportunities lie in local legislation to address pertinent issues at the heart of public interest.

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Similarly, Ms. Sarah Labol, the District Gender Focal Point notes, “there has been a growing concern among stakeholders and communities of Kitgum over the increasing cases of GBV fuelled by the heavy consumption of crude alcohol and drug abuse. Therefore, the leaders unanimously saw the need to develop local legislation to regulate the production, sale, and consumption of crude alcohol.”

Thus, the District Community-Based Services Department worked closely with the District Council and other sub-national partners to use locally generated data to draft and pass legislation on alcohol and substance abuse to address violence against women and girls, including sexual violence, physical violence, economic violence, psychological violence, as well as harmful practices such as child marriage. The District Council approved the tabling and debate of a Bill on the Crude Alcohol Ordinance in March 2021.

Support from UNFPA and Partners

UNFPA supported the District Crude Liquor Ordinance Taskforce to review, scrutinize, and align the proposed Crude Liquor Ordinance with the Constitution of the Republic of Uganda and other relevant laws of the land to customize the information contained therein to the Local Government settings and structures.

At national level, UNFPA has been at the epicentre of advocacy for progressive gender policies and laws, including the support to the Ministry of Gender Labour and Social Development in the advancement of the National Policy on Elimination of Gender-Based Violence in Uganda, advocacy on and support to the development of the National Guidelines for the Provision of Psychosocial Support for Gender-Based Violence Victims/Survivors.

With funding from European Union (EU) through the Spotlight Initiative, UNFPA has so far supported six District Local Governments to finalize, table and debate Bills on Ordinances in regard to alcohol abuse, GBV prevention, and promotion of sexual and reproductive health and rights. In progress so far are:

- i. The Alcohol Consumption Ordinance has been developed in Arua district;
- ii. The Child Protection Ordinance in Tororo district is under review to include elimination of GBV and child marriage;
- iii. The issue paper on Alcohol Consumption, the GBV Ordinance developed by Amudat district is awaiting final tabling by the District Local Council, then it will be sent to the Attorney Generals' office for approval;
- iv. Kyegegwa and Kasese districts have developed issue papers for GBV Ordinances that have been approved by the planning and the technical teams at district level.

To support the legal framework at community level UNFPA works with partners like CARE, with funding from the Royal Danish Embassy under the Women, Adolescents, Youth Rights, and Empowerment (WAY) Programme, to sensitize communities against the dangers of alcohol use.

For Kitgum, "It is envisaged that if the Bill is passed into Law/Ordinance, it will regulate the sale and consumption of alcohol in the district, hence the ripple effect of reduced violence against women and girls," says Hon. Emmanuel Lapyem, Local Council Five (LCV) Councillor, Layamo sub-county.

Highlighting a few milestones



Towards zero unmet need for family planning

- 35,337 adolescents were reached with family planning, maternal health and HIV prevention services in the first half of the year.
- 103,260,000 Male condoms and 133,050 female condoms were distributed from national warehouses.
- 240 health workers in UNFPA supported districts were trained on Comprehensive Family planning including Long-Acting Reversible Contraception (LARCs) and new Technologies like Contraceptive Implant (Implanon NXT).



Towards zero maternal deaths

- 250,303 mothers in UNFPA supported districts gave birth with support of a skilled birth attendant.
- 90 midwives/ preceptors were trained using the Structured Collaborative Clinical Training Programme (SCCTP) module.



Ensuring zero tolerance to gender-based violence and harmful practices

- 10,150 adolescents aged 10-24 years accessed sexual and reproductive health and gender based violence prevention services through the Empowerment and Livelihood for Adolescents (ELA) clubs.
- 105 health workers were trained in provision of Clinical Management of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV).



Building Resilience in humanitarian setting

- 45 midwives were deployed with support of UNFPA in facilities across refugee hosting districts to provide integrated sexual and reproductive health services.
- 15,472 pregnant women in the humanitarian setting were mapped by UNFPA supported Village Health Teams (VHTs) and linked to health centers.
- 1,051 pregnant women referred for Emergency Obstetric and Newborn Care (EmONC) through the strengthened ambulance system.



‘We narrowly survived undergoing FGM’: Minister, MPs call for tougher actions against perpetrators

Karamoja & Sebei Regions, Uganda – A 14-year-old Judith* and five other Ugandan Pokot girls survived to undergo forced Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and child marriage after being tricked to travel to neighboring Kenya during COVID-19 pandemic. The six girls from Namosing village in Loro sub-county, Amudat district, North-Eastern Uganda trekked barefoot for about 15 kilometres to Alale, Western Kenyan Pokot district to allegedly visit a friend’s grandmother in June 2020.

“One of our friends hatched a plan. She lied and tricked us. She told us we were going to visit her grandmother across the border in Kenya,” said Judith currently at Kalas Girls Primary school in Amudat, a safe haven centre for rescued girls fleeing FGM or escaping child marriage.

“We stayed there for over a week. One day we were taken to the gold mining site to work in order to get the money to pay the old woman (surgeon). Luckily, someone tipped and leaked information to us that we had been brought to undergo FGM,” she said.

“Three of us escaped and went to the area local chief who rescued and took us to the Assistant County Commissioner. They rescued the other three girls. We were connected to the police in Amudat. We narrowly survived to undergo FGM and child marriage.” According to ethnic Pokot tribe, once girls have been mutilated, they are deemed ready for marriage and taken out of school; a practice UNFPA and UNICEF are combating through the Joint Programme to End FGM and the Global Programme to End Child Marriage.

Since January 2021, six cases of FGM have been registered in Amudat, compared to 13 in 2020, according to a brief presented by Chief Administrative Officer Masokoyi Wassa during a high level visit led by the State Minister for Gender and Cultural Affairs, Hon. Peace Mutuuzo, on 14 September 2021. The delegation included 25 members of the Parliamentary Committee on Gender, Labour and Social Development.

In the neighboring Kapchorwa district, Eastern Uganda, a total of 17 girls were rescued from FGM in 2020, according to District Community Development Office statistics. With support from the Swedish International Development Agency, the EU Spotlight Initiative and the Global Programme to End FGM, Hon. Mutuuzo led a five-day field monitoring mission to FGM practicing districts in Karamoja and Sebei regions in North-Eastern and Eastern Uganda respectively, to generate new evidence on the harmful practices in the context of COVID-19. The evidence generated during the visits will be presented on the floor of Parliament to advocate for more Government budgetary allocation to interventions to end FGM and child marriage.

“A number of policy documents and legal frameworks (GBV, FGM, and Child Acts) will be reviewed to address existing gaps so that we can come up with a complete plan and programmes to tackle GBV cases,” said Hon. Kabahenda.

The findings will also inform a high level policy dialogue to be convened in the capital, Kampala and Uganda’s country progress report on FGM elimination at the Regional FGM Inter-Ministerial meeting in October 2021.

“When we outlawed FGM, the practice didn’t stop. It went underground,” said Hon. Mutuuzo, whose delegation also visited existing GBV shelters in Moroto, North-Eastern Uganda; and Kween and Tororo districts in Eastern Uganda to gain comprehensive knowledge of the service package provided to survivors.

Hon. Flavia Kabahenda Rwabuhoro, chairperson of the Parliamentary Committee on Gender, Labour and Social Development recommended a review of all existing policies and legal frameworks to decisively tackle GBV and harmful practices.

“A number of policy documents and legal frameworks (GBV, FGM, and Child Acts) will be reviewed to address existing gaps so that we can come up with a complete plan and programmes to tackle GBV cases,” said Hon. Kabahenda.

“We need to do a lot of sensitization on mindset change and we are starting it now. We are going to advocate for school establishment and vocational studies in those areas where FGM is still being practiced. We are going to factor in GBV/FGM into our budgets, institutions operations and structures,” Hon. Mutuuzo said

Welcoming Ms. Suzanne Mandong, UNFPA Acting Representative to Uganda

Since her arrival in Uganda on August 28, 2021 Ms. Suzanne Mandong has had bilateral meetings with several partners to discuss issues of mutual interest in advancing sexual reproductive health and rights in Uganda. Here are some of the partners she met.



- 1 Ms. Mandong (5th L-R) with the Ministry of Health Team, led by the Permanent Secretary, Dr. Diana Atwine (4th L-R)
- 2 Ms. Mandong with Dr. Jotham Musinguzi, Director General, National Population Council (NPC)
- 3 Ms. Mandong with H.E. Fukuzawa Hidemoto, the Ambassador of Japan to Uganda
- 4 Ms. Mandong with H.E. Karin Boven, the Ambassador of the Netherlands in Uganda
- 5 Ms. Mandong with Mr. Joel Boutroue, Representative, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)
- 6 Ms. Mandong with Hon. Chris Baryomunsi, Minister of Information, Communications Technology and National Guidance
- 7 Ms. Mandong with Mr. Robert Kochthani, Representative, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)
- 8 Ms. Mandong with Dr. Mohamed El Munir A. Safeldin, Representative, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
- 9 Ms. Mandong with Mrs. Rosettie K. Byengoma, the Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Defence and Veteran Affairs (MODVA)
- 10 Ms. Mandong with H.E. Susan Ngongi Namondo, UN Resident Coordinator
- 11 Ms. Mandong with Mr. Vincent Bagiire, Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Foreign Affairs