Analysis of data from the District Health Information System shows a 17 percent spike in teenage pregnancies in Uganda between the onset of COVID-19 related lockdown in March 2020 and June 2021.

For 16-year-old Rebecca Aciro, the lockdown meant staying at home, in Mission Village, Padibe sub-county, Lamwo district, with lots of free time on her hands. “I would go to dig in the garden in the morning but after that, I would just be at home doing nothing,” she says.

With the disruption of education and health services due to the pandemic, finding innovative ways of supporting young people to make informed decisions regarding sexual relationships, and protect them from sexual abuse and harmful practices such as child marriage was critical to UNFPA.

“The pandemic challenged us to look at our programming through a different lens, to reflect on how to adjust our approaches and ensure that access to reproductive health services for young people is not entirely cut off,” says Dr. Mary Otieno, UNFPA Uganda Representative.

Taking sexuality education out of the classroom into communities

With support from the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, UNFPA and implementing partner Save the Children International re-purposed an existing curriculum, based on the Presidential Initiative on AIDS Strategy for Communication to Youth (PIASCY) to deliver sexuality education sessions to young people forced out of school due to the pandemic. In eight districts in Northern Uganda and West Nile, 832 teachers from 216 schools were trained to deliver sexuality education using the PIASCY curriculum.

The trained teachers then mobilised young people within their communities to attend the sexuality education sessions held in various community locations.

Ms. Suzan Nambi Nakabinga, a teacher at Padibe Girls Secondary School in Lamwo district, was one of those trained.

“We were trained for five days to prepare us to conduct sessions for the young people. In a week, I would conduct two sessions, one for 10-14 years olds and one for 15-19 year olds.
We divided them into what we called families; each family had about 50 pupils. I was working with three other teachers from my school who were also trained,” she says.

The lessons were delivered using the PIASCY handbook and covered topics including sexual and reproductive health, HIV and AIDS, prevention of gender-based violence, relationship, life skills, and menstrual hygiene.

“The COVID-19 pandemic has put a spotlight on the need to protect young people. It has strengthened the case for more investment to secure young people’s sexual and reproductive health rights,” says Dr. Otieno.

Emerging results
Ms. Nakabinga further observes that one of the biggest changes among the learners was a growth in their confidence to ask questions on various topics as well as the ability to make decisions and stand by them.

“Girls would tell me ‘madam, now we can say no’ to sexual advances. They also reported that they were more careful not to spend so much time at auctions (open markets) where they were exposed to risky situations including consumption of alcohol,” Ms. Nakabinga says.

“I learnt that I can say no to sex, and that if I have a problem, if someone is trying to force me into sex I should report to the senior teacher,” says Rebecca.

Overall 121,839 young people were reached with information during the sessions.

Long way ahead
While the out-of-school sessions have been effective in reaching young people, it is still critical to institutionalise sexuality education, and ensure that young people across Uganda access timely and accurate sexual and reproductive health information and services.

As Ms. Aryemo notes, while the intervention overall was beneficial, not all young people, even within her district were reached.

A number of policies including the National Sexuality Education Framework developed by the Ministry of Education and Sports, the Adolescent Health Policy, and the National School Health Policy are pending approval by the Ugandan Cabinet. Moreover, Uganda is among the countries in the East and Southern African (ESA) region that is yet to endorse the new ESA Commitments on Education, Health, and Wellbeing for Adolescents and Young People (2021 to 2025).

Therefore, the need for the overall policy environment on sexuality education to be made clearer and for policies that are in place to be implemented is more pertinent than ever before, especially now that the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted health and education systems.

“The COVID-19 pandemic has put a spotlight on the need to protect young people. It has strengthened the case for more investment to secure young people’s sexual and reproductive health rights,” says Dr. Otieno.
United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) country representative presents her credentials to minister of foreign affairs

On November 24, 2021, the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Hon. Henry Okello Oryem received credentials for the incoming Country Representative of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) Dr. Mary Otieno.

Dr. Otieno expressed her pleasure at the new post, and appreciated the support of the Government of Uganda. In particular, she singled out the leadership of H.E President Yoweri Kaguta Museveni to deliver on the commitments made at the Nairobi Summit on ICPD25, including reducing unmet need for family planning, eliminating teenage pregnancy and child marriage, as well as all forms of gender-based violence.

UNFPA is supporting the Government of Uganda to deliver on this commitment. Hon. Odongo welcomed Dr. Otieno to Uganda, noting that UNFPA has provided continuous support to the Government of Uganda to implement programmes in the areas of population and development, integrated sexual and reproductive health, and gender equality. This support, he noted, is well aligned to the Government of Uganda’s priorities as enshrined in the National Vision 2040 and articulated in the National Development Plan III (2021-2025).

Dr. Otieno assured the Hon. Minister of UNFPA’s continued commitment to support Uganda to achieve its development aspirations, in particular to harness the demographic dividend by turning its youthful population into productive human and social capital that will contribute to sustainable economic growth. She noted that while the COVID-19 pandemic has set back socio-economic progress, in particular in the area of sexual and reproductive health, UNFPA was committed to doubling its efforts and support to Government and its partners to ensure that these gains are not eroded.

“Dr. Otieno appreciated the support of the Government of Uganda and commitments made at the Nairobi Summit on ICPD25, including reducing unmet need for family planning, eliminating teenage pregnancy and child marriage, as well as all forms of gender-based violence.”

Dr. Otieno, a national of Kenya brings with her more than 20 years of managerial and strategic leadership, advocacy and technical expertise in reproductive health, population and development, gender and human rights within the UN System and with international organisations. She holds a PhD in Epidemiologic Science and a Master’s Degree in Public Health from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor; as well as Master of Arts Degree in Demography and a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology from the University of Nairobi, Kenya. She has previously served as UNFPA Country Representative in Zambia and South Sudan.

Hon. Odongo wished her a pleasant term of duty in Uganda.
Ray of hope as top women leaders champion campaign against teenage pregnancy, child marriage

Every day in Uganda, the stories of hundreds of cases of teenage pregnancies reported across the country have become a ‘new normal’, visibly creating a crisis that may hinder national efforts to achieve development goals. And as the numbers surge by the day, teenage pregnancies are not only depriving adolescent girls of their childhood, education, and mental and physical wellbeing, but also carry huge implications on the social and economic development of the nation.

But there is hope. Three key women at the helm of political leadership: The First Lady and Minister of Education and Sports, H.E. Janet Kataaha Museveni; the Vice President, H.E. Jessica Alupo; and the Prime Minister, Rt. Hon. Robinah Nabbanja have come together to fight this vice. They all agree that harmful practices against women and girls, like teenage pregnancy, are a national issue that requires the collective efforts to address, and have committed to champion this cause. Uganda therefore stands a unique opportunity to create social momentum that could reverse this tide.

On December 3, the Government of Uganda, with support from UNFPA and UNICEF launched ‘Protect the Girl, Save the Nation’, a campaign to mobilize society against the escalating cases of teenage pregnancies.

The aim is to mobilise the entire society to form a movement for the prevention of teenage pregnancies. The pillars of the campaign include: i) The prevention of teenage girls’ pregnancies; (ii) The provision of social protection to teenage mothers; and (iii) The provision of social protection to the babies born to teenage mothers. To support the above three objectives, the campaign will create and manage robust evidence and knowledge around the phenomenon of teenage pregnancy. Credible and reliable evidence will shape and guide interventions and will serve as a benchmark for monitoring progress.

“At a mother, but also a minister responsible for the education of children in this country, I feel that this is alarming, it puts our country at risk and therefore, deserves our attention,” the First Lady said.

At the launch of the Campaign, First Lady Hon. Janet Kataaha Museveni and the Minister for Education and Sports, made a strong commitment to use her position and office to ensure that teenage pregnancies and child marriages are addressed in Uganda.

“As a mother, but also a minister responsible for the education of children in this country, I feel that this is alarming, it puts our country at risk and therefore, deserves our attention,” the First Lady said in a statement read on her behalf by the Minister of Health, Hon. Jane Ruth Aceng.

The First Lady added that Uganda may not be able to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals as well as Vision 2040 if teenage pregnancy and child marriages are not addressed, calling for a concerted effort from all to address the root causes of the crisis. She said with enabling policies like the Uganda 1995 Constitution, The Children’s Act (2016), all stakeholders should hold themselves accountable for any inaction.

“This is the reason why I am committing my office to lead a national campaign whose main aim is to mobilize the country against those vices,” The First Lady said.
The First Lady’s commitment was seconded by a message from the Vice President of the Republic of Uganda, H.E Hon. Jessica Alupo who assured of her personal commitment and commitment of government leaders to ensure that the Campaign to end teenage pregnancy, child marriage, and promote positive parenting succeeds.

She called for support of both the girl child and boy child, ensuring that they enroll and complete school through universal secondary and tertiary education.

"Studies indicate that for a woman to have the education she has received, to have impact in terms of decision-making and reproductive choices, she should be exposed to continuous formal education for at least ten years," said the Vice President, in a message read on her behalf by Hon. Chris Baryomunsi, Minister for ICT and National Guidance.

"We should have the commitment to do whatever we can within our different areas where we work to ensure that we address the challenges of defilement, child marriages, teenage pregnancies and most importantly promote positive parenting," the Vice President said.

The Prime Minister, Rt. Hon. Robinah Nabbanja described the situation as painful - seeing children bearing babies yet they know nothing about, nor prepared to raise them.

She said that while the COVID-19 pandemic forced school closures in order to protect and save lives, it has further shown the critical role of schools in the upbringing of our children.

"The fact that teenage pregnancies and defilement cases have risen in the lockdown has exposed the cracks and weaknesses in parenthood in our homes and families. This must change," said Rt. Hon. Nabbanja.

She added that the many girls who got pregnant in the lockdown will be given the opportunity to return when school opens in January 2022.

"Those girls who got pregnant and have given birth should be given an opportunity to go back to school. They will need help to get their lives back, to learn from their sad experiences and get their hopes restored," Rt. Hon. Nabbanja said.

“We should have the commitment to do whatever we can within our different areas where we work to ensure that we address the challenges of defilement, child marriages, teenage pregnancies and most importantly promote positive parenting,” the Vice President said.
Dr. Steven Samuel Kazimba Mugalu said religious leaders today have a special responsibility to help adolescents today achieve moral, spiritual and sexual health.

“We therefore call for faith communities to move beyond silence about sexuality or a fear or shame-based ethic that is only based on rules and prohibited acts. Young people pay a price too high when those of us in religious communities ignore our responsibilities to help them understand, affirm and embrace their sexuality,” the Archbishop said in a statement read by Rev. Dr. Joseph Sserwadda.

“As religious leaders we pledge to play our role in helping adolescents understand their evolving sexuality and in helping them make responsible sexual choices, now and in their future.”

Regional advocacy dialogues
As part of the campaign, UNFPA is also working with the National Population Council as co-lead in implementation of regional dialogues on addressing teenage pregnancy. During the dialogues, district and regional commitment on addressing the drivers of teenage pregnancy are made including action plan for each district to address teenage pregnancy. The dialogues involve the participation of political, religious, cultural and opinion leaders in the regions. During one of the dialogues in Busoga region, His Lordship Bishop Paul Samson Naimanyhe called for unity as leaders in order to address the issue of teenage pregnancy in the region, calling upon leaders to use their platforms for the cause.

Background
The onset of COVID-19, in a bid to prevent the massive spread of the pandemic in Uganda, a total local down and closure of all education institutions was took effect. As a result, social protection systems for adolescents, and especially girls, was highly affected leading to an increase in cases of defilement, child marriages, teenage pregnancies in the last two years. Since March 2020, studies have shown an increase in cases of domestic violence, defilement, and teenage pregnancy in the country. A UNFPA (2021) study found that a total of 354,736 teenage pregnancies were registered in 2020 and a total of 290,219 registered between January and September 2021, implying an average of over 32,000 teenage pregnancies recorded per month.

Teenage pregnancy, a development issue
Uganda has a large young population with more than half of the population (55%) aged below 18 years (UBOS 2014). This young population presents a great opportunity for development if appropriate investments are made particularly in education, health and protection of young people. Adolescents (10-19 years) and youth (15-24 years) in Uganda already represent a vulnerable and underserved population group who face various Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) challenges. The 2016 Uganda Demographic and Health Survey (UDHS 2016) shows the myriad of poor SRHR indicators for young people: high rates of teenage pregnancy (25%); unsafe abortions and maternal
mortality with 28 percent of maternal deaths occurring among young women (15-24 years), coupled with early sexual debut (16.9 years for female; 18.5 years for male age 25-49); high unmet need for family planning at 30 percent among adolescents; gender-based violence; child marriage (34% by 18 years).

The cost of inaction
Teenage mothers are three times less likely to have professional jobs and twice more likely to be self-employed in agriculture. Eighteen percent of the annual births in Uganda are as a result of teenage pregnancy, 20 percent of Infant mortality and 28 percent of the maternal deaths result from teenage pregnancy. Projections show that families of all teenage mothers in Uganda in 2020 will spend UGX 689.9 billion (194 million USD) on children born in 2020 to complete secondary education by 2038.

Mitigation
According to a World Bank report, ending child marriage and teenage pregnancy could reduce the total fertility rate in the country by 8 percent; population growth in Uganda by a substantial margin. Additionally, the World bank study demonstrates that ending child marriage and teenage pregnancy could reduce under-five mortalities by 6.6 percent. In addition, being born of a mother younger than 18 years increases the risk of under-five mortality by 4.7 percentage points and being born to a young mother has an unusually large impact on under-five stunting at 22 percentage points (World Bank, 2017). Besides these, unprotected sex among adolescents and youth will potentially reignite HIV transmission negating achievements from decades of investment.

354,736

teenage pregnancies were registered in 2020

20%

Infant mortality and 28% of the maternal deaths result from teenage pregnancy
Fourteen-year-old girl rejects her mother’s demands to marry a 35-year-old man

Abim district, North Eastern Uganda – Fourteen-year-old Ruth* said no to child marriage. She rejected her mother’s demands to get married to a man twice her age.

A primary five pupil and a member of Agile Empowerment and Livelihood for Adolescent (ELA) club in Agule village, Morulem parish, Abim district in North Eastern Uganda, Ruth aspires to become a pilot. However, early this year, she found out about her mother’s plan to marry her off.

“I was at home reading my books when a certain man came, and my mother welcomed him. Then she told me that ‘this is your husband’. She wanted two goats and some little money from him. But I refused,” Ruth narrated.

“I told her I am just 14-years-old and so young to get married. I didn’t want to get married nor pregnant and risk suffering complications of teenage pregnancies like fistula. Besides, I needed to continue with my education.”

Ruth narrated that her mother got so furious and could not believe that her daughter would disobey her. She sent her away from home. Ruth found solace at the home of Medesta Adero, a mentor at the Agile ELA club, automatically joining the club. Just like many ELA clubs across Uganda, Agile club empowers adolescent girls by providing life skills, including sexual reproductive health information, with topics such as prevention of teenage pregnancy, child marriage, menstrual hygiene, family planning, and prevention of gender-based violence. The clubs also provide economic livelihood skills with modules including financial literacy and support with business start-ups.

In 2021, a total of 300 clubs were formed, hosting 11,000 vulnerable girls in Karamoja sub-region, with some starting on various livelihood projects such as tailoring, selling household items, selling food, among others.

In December, a total of 1,750 adolescent girls, aged 14-24 graduated from 70 clubs across Uganda, following a 12-months empowerment programme. The clubs are facilitated by BRAC Uganda, with support from UNFPA and funding from the Austrian Development Agency, EU Spotlight Initiative, and Embassy of Sweden under UN Joint Programme on Gender-Based Violence.

According to Pamella Alanyo, the Programme Officer at BRAC Karamoja sub-regional office, the girls are holistically empowered, including equipping them with leadership skills.

“It is from this kind of participation that the girls build self-esteem. They are mentored to become more confident, to stand out strongly to resist, and to speak to fellow peers, parents, and the community on the challenges that girls face when not protected from abuse,” she says.

At Agile club, Ruth works to create awareness among her peers in the community. “We create awareness about the dangers of child marriage, teach other girls on how to make sanitary pads, among other livelihood skills,” she says.

“My dream is to become a pilot. I am going to study hard and become a pilot. I will be a powerful and great woman in future to fight child marriages, defilement, teenage pregnancies and gender-based violence,” Ruth* says, full of hope.

*Names changed to protect her privacy.
Strengthening systems to enable GBV survivors to access justice: European Union, Austria, and Sweden support Government of Uganda’s initiatives

Kampala, UGANDA - Sexual, and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV) are detrimental to the realization of women’s human rights. "When a woman or a girl suffers from SGBV, the consequences last beyond the physical or sexual harm," said Ms. Paska Adong, Senior Community Development Officer in Agago district, Northern Uganda.

Ms. Adong further noted that issues relating to comprehensive documentation of the cases of SGBV impede timely access to justice.

Thus, UNFPA, with funding from the Austrian Development Cooperation, the European Union, and the Embassy of Sweden in Uganda, is committed to enabling access to justice for survivors of SGBV through community mobilization on SGBV prevention and response at both national and sub-national levels.

"With the current pandemic resulting in an increasing number of teenage pregnancies, child marriages, and gender-based violence, it is important, more than ever before, that we all continue and strengthen our collaboration and commitment to address gender-based violence in Uganda," said The Ambassador of Sweden in Uganda, H.E. Maria Håkansson.

To bridge the gap, UNFPA donated an assortment of equipment worth USD297,381 to the Government to facilitate access to justice for SGBV survivors. Some of the equipment included:

a. Servers and tablets for data collection worth USD100,624 for the Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS) with funding from the European Union under the Spotlight Initiative to support harmonization and strengthening of health management systems for effective data collection, reporting, documentation of sexual reproductive health, and rights information;

b. Fistula tables, sexual assault kits, and colposcopies worth USD125,653 for the Ministry of Health to examine and treat survivors of sexual and gender-based violence.

c. Heavy steel cabinets and bio-fridges worth USD37,910 for the Directorate of Forensic Services of the Uganda Police Force to facilitate the collection and storage of quality evidence of SGBV cases.

d. Computers and court audio recorders worth USD33,194 for the Judiciary during mobile court sessions of SGBV cases.

"With the current pandemic resulting in an increasing number of teenage pregnancies, child marriages, and gender-based violence, it is important, more than ever before, that we all continue and strengthen our collaboration and commitment to address gender-based violence in Uganda."

“Allow me to take this auspicious opportunity to acknowledge and applaud you, once again, for the invaluable support we have previously received in managing gender-based violence cases and victim support,” said Hon. Alfonse Chigamoi Owiny-Dollo, the Chief Justice of the Republic of Uganda.

“At the moment Special Court sessions on GBV have commenced including High Court circuits in the districts of Tororo, Iganga, Mbarara, Luwero, Gulu, Moroto, Kasene, Otuke, Adjumani, and Masaka, as well as Chief Magistrates Court Sessions in the districts of Tororo, Busia, Apac and Nakapiripirit," the Chief Justice explained.

Dr. Mary Otieno, the UNFPA Representative in Uganda, reaffirmed the commitment of UNFPA in supporting the efforts of the Government of Uganda in protecting women and girls.

“I am grateful to our development partners, the European Union, the Embassy of Sweden in Uganda, and the Austrian Development Cooperation for the support. In this period when health services are stretched due to the COVID-19 pandemic; it is critical to ensure that sexual reproductive health and rights services, including prevention and response to gender-based violence, are not side-lined,” Dr. Otieno said.

Similarly, H.E. Attilio Pacifici, the EU Ambassador to Uganda, reaffirmed the commitment of UNFPA in supporting the efforts of the Government of Uganda in protecting women and girls.

“I am grateful to our development partners, the European Union, the Embassy of Sweden in Uganda, and the Austrian Development Cooperation for the support. In this period when health services are stretched due to the COVID-19 pandemic; it is critical to ensure that sexual reproductive health and rights services, including prevention and response to gender-based violence, are not side-lined,” Dr. Otieno said.

Similarly, H.E. Attilio Pacifici, the EU Ambassador to Uganda, indicated that this support is crucial as a concerted effort with Ugandan partners to eliminate violence against women and girls.

The support from the Austrian Development Cooperation has enabled survivors of gender-based violence to access justice through initiatives such as the special court sessions,” said Dr. Roswitha Kremser, the Head of the Coordination Office for Development Cooperation at the Austrian Embassy in Kampala.
Ugandan innovator wins UNFPA FGM Incubator, looks to enable survivors access services in real-time

What if girls and women who have faced or are at risk of female genital mutilation could receive the services and support they needed at the time they needed them?

This would help address the challenges of poor access to timely services by survivors of female genital mutilation (FGM), according to social entrepreneur and tech developer Joseph Mulabbi. It was this conviction that led Mulabbi to create Axces mobile, a multilingual mobile tool that connects survivors of FGM to service providers in real time.

Mulabbi and his team of developers recently emerged second runner up at UNFPA’s FGM Innovation HackLab final pitch event.

The overall winner was Nigerian team Family360, whose SmartRR mobile application also helps survivors of female genital mutilation access services.

The FGM Innovation HackLab, a youth-led initiative was launched in September 2021 by UNFPA East and Southern Africa Regional Office, in partnership with the UNFPA-UNICEF Joint Programme on the Elimination of Female Genital Mutilation and the Spotlight Initiative Africa Regional Programme.

More than 100 innovative ideas on how to address FGM were received from young people in 18 countries across Africa and narrowed down to ten through a competitive selection process.

On the pitch day, UNFPA Uganda hosted Mulabbi and fellow Uganda innovator Deborah Nassanga and their teams at a physical event in Kampala from which they connected virtually with the judges and other teams at the pitch event.

Mulabbi explained that Axces Mobile is premised on an internet-free app that enables the user make a toll-free call to a community volunteer (village volunteer agent) and report the occurrence of FGM. The agent then identifies the type of service required, and connects the survivor with a service provider.

Mulabbi’s inspiration for Axces Mobile comes from a deeply personal experience. “While at school, a friend (from the Sabiny tribe in Kapchorwa, Eastern Uganda) lost her sister at the age of 16 after she underwent FGM. With the nearest health centre over 20km away, and with poor road network, the girl bled to death while being rushed to hospital,” Mulabbi says.

While national prevalence of FGM in Uganda stands at only 0.3 percent, in the six districts where it is practiced, including Kapchorwa, prevalence is much higher. In Kapchorwa, 13 percent of girls and women undergo FGM, according to the 2017 Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting survey report by the Uganda Bureau Of Statistics and UNICEF.

“When I read about the FGM Hack Lab, I had a flash back to what I had witnessed years back. I tasked myself to do something to help girls and women access services when they need them. My solution had to be one that is very simple in terms of cost and ease of use, even for those with no access to smartphones or internet.”

“Several interventions to end FGM have been implemented but what we are missing is what we have right now; the creativity and energy of young people.”

Similarly, Nassanga created her app based on personal experience of a family member who underwent FGM. Her innovation, HERStory! enables girls and women report FGM anonymously.

At the pitch event, UNFPA Deputy Representative Daniel Alemu, met with Mulabbi and Nassanga and their teams, applauding them for their commitment to finding solutions to FGM.

“Several interventions to end FGM have been implemented but what we are missing is what we have right now; the creativity and energy of young people. This is not just about winning; it’s about you having the courage to come together to find a solution to this crisis,” he said.

He encouraged them to build sustainable business models for their innovations by expanding their scope beyond development partners to include the private sector.

The two winning teams will each receive seed funding of $50,000 and will be mentored for six months by AfriLABs, an organisation that provides support to entrepreneurs, innovators, developers and youths across Africa through technology hubs.