

What have parents in Uganda done or not done to protect teenagers from Pregnancy and Early Marriages? *An ethnographic study*

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Background.

Globally, teenage pregnancy is a serious development concern. Uganda's adolescent fertility rate is among the highest in the Eastern Africa region. Ugandan adolescent girls start their sexual activities and also get into marriage earlier and teenage pregnancy has been consistently high for some time. Girls start giving birth early – 25% of girls age 15-19 have either given birth or are pregnant with their first child (UDHS 2016). The main objective of the research was to study patterns, context and underlying factors of family and social settings/relationships that drive teenage pregnancy and early marriage.

Methods

The study was conducted for 2018 in six districts of Kabarole, Kalangala, Kaabong, Rukungiri, Lira and Amuria, in Uganda. Qualitative data was collected from in-depth interviews (30), focus group discussions (20), key informant interviews (18), documents review, and observation. Qualitative thematic content analysis was used for evaluating the data. The findings inform policy advocacy and engagement and make recommendations that address sexual reproductive health knowledge and service gaps in Uganda.

Results

The findings are presented under five thematic areas: Poor or lack of communication between parents and teenagers; lack of parental guidance; Poverty, parental pressure/violence; girls as source of wealth

Poor or lack of communication between parents and their teenage girls

Equally, in all the study districts the failure of girls to refuse sexual advances was attributed to poor parental guidance to adolescent girls on how to manage their body changes and ensuing urges. However, it was argued that some parents are also not aware of what messages to pass on to their children at this stage of life. Some parents fear that when they talk to their children about sexuality they will be encouraging them to start sexual relations. This perception is embedded in the socio-cultural perceptions surrounding sexuality as a taboo subject in most Ugandan communities. The likelihood of early sexual relations and pregnancy is high for children staying with grandmothers as most are old and frail and lack the energy and motivation (due to cultural taboos attached to sexuality), to give girls relevant information on adolescent sexuality.

Poverty

The need for money to get a better standard of living was cited in the study as a major driver of teenage pregnancies. Girls in the study districts were easily lured by men into sexual relations for money; however, when the girls give in to their sexual demands, the men lose interest in them including those who may have conceived. Some girls who have sexual relations with men do so because of lack of adequate provisioning at home for basic necessities like food, clothing, soap and perfumes. Hence adolescent girls are lured into sexual relations by basic needs like food, which, if their parents were able to provide, would keep them away from early sexual relationships. Children living in poverty stricken families especially girls are discouraged from pursuing their education further. Such children are told that if the parents are constrained to raise the fees for primary or secondary they will not be able to raise larger sums of money for tertiary education.

Lack of parental guidance /Child rearing roles

Other teenagers start sexual relations at an early age because of lack of parental guidance. When guardians fail to give children proper guidance and counselling on sexuality matters, the children make misinformed decisions regarding sexual relations and consider early marriage as the best option for them. Teenage pregnancies and early marriages in the study districts were also attributed to the evolving child rearing roles of parents with both parents now working longer hours away from home whereas traditionally, the women were at home mostly. The long absence of parents from home implies that they are not able to closely watch the behaviour of children. With this unrestrained freedom children go to places of entertainment like discos and bars where they start sexual relations unaware of the repercussions of their behaviour. Another underlying driver of teenage pregnancies that was reported in all the districts was leaving children unattended at home without an adult to advise them on how to behave. This practice is common in Kalangala at the landing sites, Lira, Amuria and Kabarole. In Kalangala when the men go for fishing at night, their wives also move out of the homes and go to bars to drink while others go to work selling cooked food, and as bar attendants, leaving the children on their own at home. In such circumstances, some children also leave home and get involved in sexual activity.

Parental pressure and harassment/violence

Cited as a cause of teenage pregnancies and early marriages in all the study districts, domestic violence arose mainly from men not providing for the home. Domestic violence creates conflict in the home and leads to dislike for the home. When girls reach teenage they are enticed by men into sexual relations because of the parental love they miss at home. Some girls reported that parents coerce their own children into sexual relations and early marriages for economic gain justifying it with their own lack of education. Some girls have also been forced into early sexual relations or early marriage due to harassment by step parents especially step mothers.

Girls as a source of wealth

Girls are still regarded as a source of wealth in many communities in Uganda especially in rural areas. The cultural practice of giving bride price to the family of the bride is still predominant in several communities especially where cattle are the means of exchange for the bride. Bride price

is a strong driver of early marriages in the Kaabong, Amuria, and Kabarole districts. For example in Lira district, in Oromo sub-county a bride market – ‘*Moo cwari*’ (*look for your husband*) exists where parents exchange their girls for cows in a secret marriage.

The study also established that conflict-ridden family situations increase chances of teenage pregnancy. Unstable family relationships, Poor or lack of communication between parents and teenagers; lack of parental guidance; Poverty, parental pressure/violence; girls as source of wealth to foster teenage pregnancy. The primary responsibility of guiding children during childhood falls on parents. Therefore, parents and guardians should talk to their girls on how to delay sex and the dangers of early marriages. These factors are deeply embedded in the social-cultural systems of the communities and the prevailing familial circumstances and drive teenage pregnancy and early marriage with implications to achieving a demographic dividend.