

Teenage pregnancy should not end a girl's education



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Each year, millions of Ugandan children start Primary. One with high hopes, yet over 60 per cent leave before completing primary school. By the end of secondary education, a further 25 per cent have dropped out, with girls disproportionately affected. These are not just statistics; they represent lost potential, reduced life chances, and diminished national productivity.

Teenage pregnancy is a major driver of this crisis.

Uganda has one of the highest adolescent birth rates in Africa. Approximately 24 per cent of girls aged 10 to 19 have experienced pregnancy, translating to 1,000 teenage pregnancies every day. For many, pregnancy marks an abrupt end to education, accompanied by stigma, health risks, and adult responsibilities for which they are unprepared. Only about a third of adolescent mothers return to school after childbirth.

The consequences extend beyond individual girls. When a girl drops out, Uganda loses human capital, future professionals, entrepreneurs, and leaders. Each additional year of education significantly increases a girl's earning potential and her ability to contribute to her family and the economy.

Keeping girls in school must therefore remain a national priority.

Through the Gender for Development Uganda Programme, the Government of Uganda, supported by the European Union under the broader Team Europe Initiative for social inclusion, and implemented with UNICEF and partners, is addressing the structural barriers that push girls out of school. This initiative brings together European Union Member States and partners around a shared commitment to equity, inclusion, and human capital development in Uganda.

G4DU focuses on girls in upper primary and lower secondary education across more than 200 schools in Lango, Acholi, and West Nile. This is a critical transition point where dropout rates sharply increase, particularly among vulnerable adolescents facing poverty, social pressure, and limited access to services. Intervening at this stage helps prevent permanent disengagement from the education system while reinforcing gains made in primary education.

The programme recognises that girls are pushed out of school by intersecting challenges including poverty, harmful gender norms, early marriage, pregnancy, exploitation, and weak protection systems. Its Cash plus approach combines financial support with mentorship, life skills, sexual and reproductive health referrals, and community engagement.

Importantly, early implementation is already delivering results. We have seen schools participating in the programme report improved enrolment, retention, and reduced dropout among supported girls. In some cases, nearly all beneficiaries have returned for subsequent school terms, demonstrating strong continuity once financial barriers are addressed. Girls and their families consistently report that without this support; they would not be able to afford school fees or essential learning materials. We have also seen improvements in how the programme is delivered, for example by linking cash disbursement directly to fee payment at schools, ensuring that resources translate into sustained learning. These early outcomes show that when financial support is combined with mentorship

and services, vulnerable girls are far more likely to stay in school.

However, no single programme can solve this challenge alone.

Sustained progress requires collective action. Government, development partners, civil society, the private sector, and communities must work together to address the root causes of teenage pregnancy and school dropout. This includes expanding comprehensive sexuality education, improving access to adolescent-friendly health services, strengthening child protection systems, and ensuring that schools are safe, inclusive, and supportive of pregnant girls and young mothers.

Uganda's youthful population is one of its greatest assets. But this demographic dividend can only be realised if the country invests in its girls, ensuring they can delay childbirth, complete their education, and participate fully in economic and social life.

Teenage pregnancy should not define a girl's future. With the right policies, partnerships, and investments, Uganda can ensure that every girl not only starts school but stays in school and thrives.

Uganda's future lies in its classrooms. Every girl deserves her place in them.

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