



A teenager contemplates her future after she became pregnant

# High schools testing for pregnancy in darkness

**Swept under the carpet.** For decades, schools have quietly enforced pregnancy tests on girls without clear policy, leaving a trail of trauma, ethical concerns, and growing calls for consent, dignity, and government regulation. School administrators, however, justify the practice.

BY SYLVIA KATUSHABE

For decades, secondary schools across the country have been conducting mandatory pregnancy tests on female students regardless of the absence of clear policy guiding the testing procedure.

However, school administrators justify the practice as a measure against learners who are suspected to be sexually active, with the aim of determining whether they are pregnant.

For years, schools relied on a traditional method of testing pregnancy, the physical examinations where school nurses pressed the abdomen for confirmation. Today, while some

schools have adopted urine pregnancy test for more accurate results, other schools particularly in rural areas continue to use the traditional methods.

For many former students, the experience remains deeply disturbing with still holding traumatic memories of the procedure.

Ms Doreen Ashaba, an old student of St Victor Secondary School in Buhweju District, recalls the distress.

"It was really a bad experience. The nurse would press your tummy until you couldn't bear it. After that you would have abdominal pain for about two days," Ms Ashaba said.

However, she is hopeful that with changing technology, the schools have since adopted the modern way of pregnancy test - taking a urine sample.

Interestingly, the Ministry of Education and Sport says there is no existing policy or guidelines on the practice, although this has been going on in schools for over 40 years.

"This has been a practice in schools for over 40 years to ensure schools don't get a surprise of someone getting pregnancy complications. But I have not seen a policy about it," Ms Kedrace Turyagyenda, Permanent Secretary

Ministry of Education and Sports said.

School administrators argue that the tests are necessary to ensure discipline, safeguard students, and protect the schools from medical surprises associated with pregnancies.

Mr Tophiiri Naturinda, deputy headteacher of Ntungamo Girls Secondary School, said the tests are conducted at the beginning of term to help qualified health workers to establish students' status after holidays.

"We are dealing with adolescent girls in a changing world. You need to be sure. If you don't, you may find a student is pregnant and complications arise at school," Mr Naturinda said.

He explained that according to the school policy, learners who are found pregnant are asked to return home for care.

"We cannot take care of a pregnant person, we are not a health facility. We are a learning institution," he said.

However, he emphasised that the girls are encouraged to return to school after giving birth, noting that education is a continuous journey.

## EDITOR'S PICK

### How French learning is evolving in schools

With Uganda eyeing East African Community integration and events like Afcon 2027, French, Kiswahili, Arabic, even Chinese will more than ever need to be integrated across sciences and humanities. For now, students near the border are learning French and Kiswahili, with hopes of promises beyond. / P23



### Govt orders schools to participate in the National Music Festivals

The Commissioner for Secondary Education at the ministry of Education, Ms Juliet Muzoora, has directed all secondary schools in the country to take part in national music festivals. The call came at the close of the national schools festival at Luzira SS, at the weekend. / P24

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**Process.** Testing helps establish whether a pregnancy occurred at home or during the school term. The school uses urine test kits to ensure accuracy and reduce discomfort.

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**M**s Priscilla Mukaneza, a career administrator at Ndeeba Secondary School, says the testing is done both at the beginning and end of term.

"When learners return from holidays, we cannot rule out that some may have engaged in risky behavior. The tests help us confirm that the girls we have in school are safe," Ms Mukaneza said.

She acknowledges that in many cases, parental consent is not sought before the tests are conducted, however parents are only engaged when a student is confirmed to be pregnant.

Other school leaders said the tests also shield schools from accusations of negligence.

Mr Moses Asiimwe, head teacher of Egaju Secondary School, said testing helps establish whether a pregnancy occurred at home or during the school term.

"It helps us avoid blame from parents," he said, before adding a disclaimer that the school uses urine test kits to ensure accuracy and reduce discomfort.

Mr Joel Angudri, deputy headteacher at Okollo Secondary School in Madi Okollo District, said the institution works with nearby government health centres to access qualified nurses and proper testing kits to conduct the tests.

In almost all the schools, once preg-

# Schools test pregnancy to prevent blame game



Parents are left to bear the burden when their daughters become pregnant. PHOTO/STEPHEN OTAGE

nancy is confirmed, the female learners are required to leave school immediately, regardless of their academic standing although they are encouraged to return after giving birth.

Mr Douglas Balikuddembe, Life skills and Business coach at Set Her Free, highlighted that the mandatory pregnancy test has made a significant contribution to keeping girls in school.

"Most of them fear to be netted so they protect themselves," Mr Balikuddembe said.

However, he argued that the government should come up with clear guidance and streamline the testing methods to be used in schools.

Ms Rose Kigere, the Executive Direc-

tor, Women Rights Initiative, emphasized the need for parent/guardian consent in this matter, urging schools to engage them before conducting the practice.

"I am sure in some schools parents sign health forms but it might not be the case in some schools," Ms Kigere said.

He also ruled out the need for the government to set guidelines on methods to be used, when, where and who does the tests.

## Pallisa case

In 2020, for example, the acting Pallisa District Education Officer, Ms Agnes Lukendo, said the exercise has fi-

nancial implications, which require procurement of testing kits and other logistics.

"The idea of mandatory pregnancy testing in schools is so good but needs collective efforts from different key players and financial support," she said.

The district health officer, Dr Godfrey Mulekwa, said manpower is available to carry out the exercise but they need to be facilitated.

"We are ready to partner with the education department in executing this exercise but we need to be facilitated in different forms," he said.

editorial@ug.nationmedia.com

## BUKEDI CASE

In 2020, Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) operating in Bukedi Sub-region in the districts of Pallisa, Kibuku, Budaka and Butebuka urged schools to subject learners to mandatory pregnancy tests to ascertain the rate of teenage pregnancies.

The CSOs recommendation was arrived at during a meeting, which was organised by Action Aid with funding from Democratic Governance Facility (DGF) in Pallisa Town Council.

Mr Francis Okirror, a field officer at Citizen Initiative for Democracy and Development, said mandatory pregnancy tests are necessary so that those found pregnant can be supported and counselled to stay in school.

Mr Okirror said the rate of teenage pregnancies and forced marriages in the sub-region had been on the raise during the Covid-19 lockdown.

Mr Moses Kaggwa, a field officer, working with Pallisa Civil Society Organisation, said government should make a policy on mandatory pregnancy tests.

"The girls should undergo pregnancy testing at every beginning and end of every academic term. This will discourage young girls from engaging in early sex," he said.

In the same year, Kibuku Uganda National Teachers' Union indicated that about 150 to 200 girls had been impregnated in the district.

25%  
PREGNANCY RATE  
FOR TEENS