

## **Mak-RIF Researchers Recommend Strategies for Re-entry of Teenage mothers back into Schools**

Makerere University researchers have recommended strategies to support the teenage girls who become pregnant during the CoVID-19 Lock down back into school including supporting the schools to care for these girls.

Researchers also recommend incorporating sexuality education early in the current curriculum to improve awareness among these teenage girls in school in order to reduce teenage pregnancy.

In addition, the Makerere dons have recommended community campaigns during long periods of out-school including lockdowns to guide teenagers on consequences of early sexual activities and training programs to empower parent-child discussions on sex emphasized.

Makerere University School of Psychology obtained a grant from Government of Uganda through the Makerere University Research and Innovation Fund 3 (Mak-RIF 3) to conduct a baseline study titled, *“The aftermath of COVID-19 School Closures: Exploring the Re-entry of Pregnant Girls and Teenage Mothers into Schools”*. The research sites included Kampala, Lyantonde and Buikwe districts in Busoga sub region.

The research team was composed of Dr. Richard Balikoowa from the School of Psychology (CHUSS) and Principal Investigator, Dr. Lydia Nakiyingi (Mak CHS) and Dr. Lydia Namatende-Sakwa from Kyambogo University among the project members and the Remnant Generation as a research collaboration organization.

Speaking during the third Research dissemination held on Thursday 18th January, 2024 at Makerere University, Dr. Balikoowa said over 2400 girls got pregnant during the lockdown; though recurrent while closely related challenges are: gender-based violence, early marriage, socio-cultural norms and school dropout.

Balikoowa observed that the Revised Guidelines for the Prevention and Management of Teenage Pregnancy in School Settings in Uganda (2020) provides supportive framework to curtail such factors to dropout, but lacks track of implementation.

This situation according to the Principal Investigator threatens the girl child education and future prospects hence, the team undertook a Pre-Intervention step to get perspectives of teachers, learners and parents on how they would like to be supported to prevent teenage pregnancy and/or support the re-entry of girls into schools.

Now that CoVID 19 is over, there is a debate as to whether these teenage mothers should be allowed back into school.

The study Balikowa explained explored experiences and views from teenage mothers, pregnant girls and crisis pregnancy organisations on the support for their re-entry, into schools in Uganda, documented the lived experiences of teenage girls who got pregnant during the COVID-19 school closures.

The team further sought to establish how teenage mothers would like to be supported to facilitate their re-entry into schools, reviewed and provided recommendations towards enriching the policy and practices on the management and re-entry of pregnant girls and teenage mothers into schools.

A cross-sectional mixed methods study was conducted in December 2021 and June 2022 involving quantitative survey with 205 pregnant girls and teenage mothers, qualitative interviews and focus groups with 20 teenage mothers (from 10 to 19 years) and 15 key informant interviews with senior educationists, religious leaders, parents among others.

The study according to Dr. Balikoowa involved school going pregnant teenage girls and teenage mothers accessible through *The Remnant Generation (TRG)* who were teenagers of 10 to 19 years of age, pregnant at the time of the study or were pregnant anytime during the CoVID-19 pandemic. Girls who got pregnant before the pandemic were excluded.

Investigations around the circumstances of conceiving revealed that of the 205 teenage mothers, 56 (27.3%) were forced while 149 (72.7%) willingly consented to the sexual act that led to the pregnancies. At the time of pregnancy, the study found out that 93 pregnant girls were in school while 112 were not in school.

“A big proportion of teenage school going girls became pregnant during the CoVID-19 epidemic and the average age at which the girls became pregnant was very low.

Majority of the school going girls who became pregnant were willing to re-integrate into school but the age at time of pregnancy significantly influence the willingness to return to school after pregnancy”, Dr. Balikoowa observed.

The other observation according to the PI was that CoVID-19/lockdown just amplified the already existing and recurrent challenge.

The researchers concluded that CoVID-19 preventive measures were more traumatizing to school children much more than the virus itself and that although children have been affected by the advent of CoVID-19 and school closure, there are much more psycho-social and socio-economic hinderances to their normal life, in the rural areas of Busoga and other sub regions.

### **Study findings needed by the Gender Ministry to guide policy and programming**

Representing the Minister for Gender, Labour and Social Development, Mr. Kyateka Mondo Francis, Assistant Commissioner, Youth Uganda Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development described teenage pregnancy and giving the girls a second chance back into schools as a challenging issue that government is trying to fix without any prior experience.

“ I want colleagues to appreciate that we are fixing a problem without prior experience. So where we have faulted, and I think as we go along, a lot of mistakes have been made. Perhaps we didn't prepare the schools enough to be able to take on these children.”, He said

The commissioner reported that government has put in place a number of programmes while many are in the offing to address the issue of teenage mothers.

“We did provide for breastfeeding mothers to have space where to breastfeed from. We need to speak about when the child cries, how would the mother know and a lot of other challenges. What about the income levels, how does this child who has produced a child look after the child, give them the tuition that the child needs, be able to raise the fees, because she must also have eaten well to breastfeed. And all these are the challenges that we face”, Mondo stated.

As consumers of data, the commissioner commended the university for the research on the plight of teenage mothers after CoVID and pledged to take back lessons learned to the boardrooms in the Ministry of Gender and eventually to cabinet to ensure that this is discussed further to see how to make the programs better.

Because children are there, Commissioner Mondo stressed that government cannot deny them an opportunity to go back to school noting that, there are successive stories of those who have been pregnant before, given a chance, and, were able to raise up to being EDs and beyond.

Citing Kofi Annan, the former Secretary General of the UN, Mondo said civilization should not be judged by the way people dress or the level of investment, but rather, how much investment is put into the vulnerable people to make them better.

Mondo said there is need to ensure that teenage mothers are able to educate their children, and be able to provide for them.

Quoting Mahatma Gandhi, the commissioner asserted that poverty is the worst form of violence, and that, it would be very difficult to extract the poverty from women without educating them.

“I’m taking on the recommendation and I want to assure you, Richard and team, that one of the things government introduced is sexuality education program. But after the launch, we've got some glitches here and there, but we are implementing.

What we are trying to agree is that sexuality education guidelines for the out-of-school is a must. And I must report to you that we are at the tail end of completing the sexuality education guidelines for the out-of-school”, He added

Mondo informed participants that majority of the youth in this country are children either not at school or going to school. He noted that Uganda produces about 1.8 million children every year, but only about 800,000 go to primary, 300,000 complete secondary and only . 100,000 plus come to senior six and all are within communities.

The commissioner warned that it was time for parents to take responsibility and talk to their children about their sexuality and child upbringing instead of leaving to religious leaders and aunties.

“We should come out of the times when we would bury our heads in the sand and say I can't talk to my children about their sexuality. If you're not going to do it, who is going to do it? The issue is for us now how we give age - appropriate information to the children that we bring up.

In the past we used to have people, our aunties, and everybody is busy. And sometimes the aunties don't wish you well, and you're entrusting your children with them, they will instead promote sex education and not sexuality education. And you will be in trouble. So you either do it yourself or be ready to face the world in another perspective”, The commissioner warned.

Mondo further reported that in 2016, government came up with the national integrated early childhood home policy that led to the implementation of breastfeeding corners in all institutions, being promoted to every school institution.

“By nature you have rights to produce, I think it's only right that you have a breastfeeding corner. Parliament has a breastfeeding corner. Museum, Theatre has a breastfeeding corner. . You have to employ a nanny. Nanny will be able to look after the children and be paid”. He said.

The commissioner unveiled the government plan to implement the National Service Scheme to enhance citizen knowledge about their country and to promote patriotism among citizens.

The national Service Scheme according to the Commissioner will be compulsory, but also very difficult, if not impossible, for anyone to be enrolled in public service without having obtained a certificate of national service.

In addition, the commissioner also said government has come up with parenting guidelines and a National Family Policy to strengthen the family/ marriage institution. He commended the PI and the research team for the study findings.

He implored them the team to present the findings to the senior management in the ministry for evidence based policy formulation and programming.

“I am happy and thanking the university by promising that we shall take on the recommendations. Research is almost as important as it informs policy and strategic innovation. If research cannot be embraced by government, then that research goes to waste.

So we need this, Dr. Richard Balikoowa and his team, get me the copy. And, I will, if you don't mind, arrange for you to come and brief senior management about the findings. It is important that this session today is shared with senior management to help us perfect what we are already doing”, Commissioner Mondo said.

**By Jane Anyango**

**Principal Communication Officer, CHUSS**