STUDY ON INNOVATIVE PRACTICES TO PROMOTE GIRLS' RETENTION AND TRANSITION TO SECONDARY AND HIGHER LEARNING INSTITUTIONS IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

Report

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ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

AEP	Accelerated Education Program
ASCS	Annual School Census Survey
ASEP	Accelerated Secondary Education Program
ASRHS	Adolescent Sexual Reproductive Health Services
BFA	Break-Free Alliance
BPE	Bachelor in Primary Education
BRIBTE	Buganda Royal Institute of Business and Technical Education
CBO	Community-Based Organizations
CEFARH	Center Adolescent Reproductive Health Foundation
CEFORD	Community Empowerment for Rural Development
CESA	Continental Education Strategy for Africa
CSG	Child Support Grant
CSO	Civil Society Organizations
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
EST	Ecological Systems Theory
FACU	Friaries Aid Care Uganda
FAWE	Forum for African Women Educationalist
FAWE	Forum for Association of Women Educationalist
FCA	Finn Church AID
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
HCD	Human Capital Development
HDC	Human Capital Development
HIV/AIDS	Human Immunodeficiency Virus/Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome
HSM	Holy Spirit Movement
IDI	In-depth Interviews
IDP	Internally Displaced Persons
ISER	Initiative for Social and Economic Rights
JRC	Jesuit Refugee Council
KII	Key Informant Interviews
LC1	Local Council One
LRA	Lord's Resistance Army
ME&S	Ministry of Education and Sports
MoE&S	Ministry of Education and Sports
MP	Member of Parliament
MTVI	Mengo Technical and Vocational Institute
NDP	National Development Plan
NDP	National Development Programme
NGO	Non-Governmental Organizations
NRC	Norwegian Refugee Council
NRC	Norwegian Refugee Council
PARC	Partner for Resource and Community Connect
PI	Plan International

PTA	Parents Teachers Association
PTA	Parents Teachers Association
RHU	Reproductive Health Uganda
SAP	Social Assistance Programme
SCF	Save the Children Fund
SCF	Save the Children Fund
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
SMC	School Management Committee
SRHS	Sexual and Reproductive Health Services
SRHS&C	Sexual and Reproductive Health Services and Commodities
STMP	Spring Teenage Mothers Project
TMCSF	Teenage Mothers and Child Support Foundation
TSA	Teen Seed Africa
UBOS	Uganda Bureau of Statistics
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of Child
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Education Scientific Cultural Organization
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNSER	Uganda National Schools Electronic Registration
UPE	Universal Primary Education
USE	Universal Secondary Education
VWG	Violence Against Women and Girls
WCC	WAR Child Canada
WHO	World Health Organization
WTI	Windle Trust International
YMCA	Young Men Christian Association

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents the study's findings on “Innovative Practices to Promote Girls’ Retention and Transition to Secondary and Higher Learning Institutions in Uganda.” Despite efforts to expand access to girl child education through the UPE and USE programs, retention and transition of girls through primary and secondary education have been low. This has been due to the high dropout rates, particularly among girls. At the national level, the dropout rates are higher in primary than in secondary education, leading to the failure to achieve equity and equality in education between boys and girls. This situation calls for actions to promote the reentry of girls who previously dropped out of school and ensure their retention and transition from primary to secondary education.

The study's main objective is to identify innovative practices for promoting the reentry, retention and transition of girls through the primary to secondary levels of education and to highlight the barriers to the reentry, retention and transition of girls who previously dropped out of school. The specific objectives of the study are to:

1. Assess the status of girls' retention and transition at primary and secondary levels of education;
2. Determine factors that exacerbate the dropout of girls in primary and secondary school education;
3. Establish the adoption and status of implementation of school reentry policy and/or guidelines; and
4. Identify innovative and promising practices that promote school reentry and retention for girls at primary and secondary schools.

The study was conducted in the West Nile, Northern, and Eastern Uganda in the districts of Yumbe, Adjumani, Amuru, Bugweri, Dokolo, Manafwa, Pader, Lira City, Kamuli and Tororo. Collectively, the population of these districts was estimated at 2,150,000 million people in 2021. The socioeconomic indicators of the study population show that the population in these districts is multidimensionally poor with rates ranging from 41.5% in Busoga, 57% in Lango, 63.7% in Acholi, and 59.1% in West Nile. The economy of the study regions is predominantly agricultural with the majority of the population depending on subsistence farming, living in rural areas and currently, the poorest in all aspects of development in Uganda.

The study used a cross-sectional research design and collected both primary and secondary data. The primary data was collected by using 7 tools containing both quantitative and qualitative data. The structured questionnaire, in-depth interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were used to collect the data. An extensive literature review was also conducted to acquire some of the data that was used in the study. The target population for the study included teenage girls who previously dropped out of school due to pregnancy and motherhood, parents/guardians to pregnant or teenage mothers, learners in schools, school administrators and health facilities

serving the school communities and selected schools involved in the study and key education sector stakeholders in the selected districts.

The main findings of the study

a. From the perspectives of teenage mothers, learners, school administrators, parents/guardians and key community leaders, teenage pregnancy is a major concern in the study districts. Over 70% of participants reported that teenage pregnancy is a major problem that must be fought head-on. The majority of teenage pregnancies take place in primary schools at the ages of 15-17 years and in Grades 5-7. Yumbe, Kamuli, Manafwa and Adjumani districts were leading other districts in the study on the prevalence of teenage pregnancy among learners.
b. All learners who became pregnant dropped out of school. Of the pregnant teenagers, the majority were married by the time of the study. About 55% and 45% of the pregnant learners were married and single respectively.
c. The main causes of teenage pregnancy among learners were identified to be poverty in households that leads to failures of families to pay school fees and provide for the needs of girls, lack of guidance on sexuality by parents and schools, negative peer influence and defilement mostly perpetrated by older adult men.
d. Perpetrators of teenage pregnancy include male peers of similar age or slightly older, adult men including Businessmen, Boda Boda taxi riders and teachers who exploit the vulnerability of girls. Incest with relatives was also blamed for teenage learner pregnancy.
e. Dropping out of school temporarily or permanently is the most common short-term impact of teenage pregnancy. Teenage mothers who return to school are often required to repeat classes and perform poorly at school due to childcare challenges and socioeconomic hardships.
f. At the national level, there is a positive trend in the enrolment of both girls and boys in primary and secondary education and parity between boys and girls in each year of enrolment has been achieved.
    i. However, primary education completion rates stagnated and declined in the period for which national data is available (2013-2017).
    ii. The transition rate from primary to secondary declined from 72% in 2013 to about 60% in 2017. There were no differences between boys and girls in the transition from primary to secondary education.
g. The results from study districts revealed that the number of learners transitioning from P1 through completion at P7 for both boys and girls in rural and urban schools declined monotonically. The intergrade transition rate and primary 7 completion rate were lower for girls than for boys, confirming that fewer girls than boys complete P7 and transition to secondary education.
h. The study found that 428 girls became pregnant while studying. Of these, only 39.3% returned to school. The age, level of education and grade at pregnancy affected the likelihood of school reentry. Only 14.8% of teenage mothers under the age of 15 years returned to school, compared to 42.3% and 42.1% of teenage mothers who become

pregnant at the age of 15-17 years and 18 years or older respectively. Lack of fees, being married, fear of stigmatization by peers and teachers in schools, and low perception of self-worth and low esteem are some of the main barriers to school reentry.

i. The findings of the study show that of the 104 teenage mothers who returned to school, about 53% transitioned to secondary education. Another 13.5% joined alternative education pathways. The proportion of learners transitioning from primary to secondary education decreased with the age and grade at pregnancy.

Adoption and Implementation of Guidelines for Reentry and Retention

In 2020, the MoE&S passed and rolled out guidelines for the management of teenage pregnancy and reentry and management of teenage mothers in school settings. The study found that these guidelines are being implemented at various levels in several schools. These guidelines include:

a. Girls are required to come with a medical report while reporting back to school. They are also periodically tested for pregnancy during school terms.
b. Parents of girls, found pregnant are summoned to school to appropriately evacuate them home and plan for the way forward.
c. School send girls home as soon as they are discovered pregnant and pregnant learners and their parents are counseled on the type of support and care the girls need during pregnancy.
d. Teenage girls in candidate classes who become pregnant are allowed to come to school and sit their final examinations.
e. Some perpetrators of teenage pregnancy in school settings have been prosecuted. However, more needs to be done by putting in place deterrent measures to stop the vice.
f. Schools are allowing teenage mothers to return to school and some allow them to come to school with their babies as long as a childcare provider is present. However, no facilities have been provided for child care.
g. Schools having teenage mothers have instated mechanisms to protect them from stigma and discrimination by other learners and teachers.
h. Counseling of learners on sexuality is provided to learners by woman and man teachers. Schools are disseminating information about teenage pregnancy, its impacts and ways of protecting teenage girls against it.
i. Learners are provided regular briefs during assemblies on negative peer pressure and are also provided life skills to engage in responsible relationships in the community of learners.
j. Schools have teenage mothers with NGOs/CBOs for support for both reentry and retention in school as well as childcare support.
k. NGOs/CBOs in the education sector are conducting parents and community sensitization on the importance and benefits of keeping girls in school as well as reentry of girls who dropped out of school including those due to teenage pregnancy and motherhood.
l. NGOs/CBOs are implementing alternative education pathways such as the ASEP and skills-based education for school dropouts including those due to teenage pregnancy and motherhood.

Innovative and Promising Interventions

The study identified the following interventions for reentry, retention and transition from primary to secondary education:

a. Provision of childcare facilities in schools: Providing childcare facilities in schools could be a promising intervention for teenage mothers to reenter, remain in school and complete primary and secondary education.
b. Providing alternative learning environments: Enrolling teenage mothers in a different school could protect them from stigmatization by peers and teachers.
c. Providing alternative learning pathways: Alternative education pathways intended to build the knowledge and skills of teenage mothers to be able to navigate socioeconomic conditions as they grow into adulthood, should be promoted.
d. Introduction of Sexual and Reproductive Health Services and Commodities (SRHS&C): These services and commodities could prevent pregnancy and repeat pregnancies among sexually active girls and teenage mothers respectively.
e. Counseling services for pregnant and teenage mothers: Counseling has the potential to address not only stigmatizing attitudes by teachers and fellow learners but also issues of self-esteem and self-worth among teenage mothers.
f. Support for teenage mothers to reenter and remain at school: Government and other education stakeholders' support in providing conditional cash transfers for teenage mothers to meet school and personal needs and childcare has promise for the reentry and retention of teenage mothers in school.
g. Introduce courses that teach life skills to learners in primary schools: This will enable learners to understand and manage the physiological, psychological and emotional changes girls experience as they transition through the turbulent years of adolescence.

CHAPTER ONE

1.0 Introduction

Inclusive, equitable and quality education is critical to the overall sustainable wellbeing of individuals and societies. It contributes to personal, social and economic development and fosters a better understanding and addressing of national and global challenges. The education of women and girls is critical because of its role in enhancing the capacity and potential of women and girls for effective contributions to poverty eradication, improved health outcomes, improved gender relations and achieving other sustainable development goals (Pop & Morales, 2023; Tajammal et al., 2023; Somani, 2017). In the above regard, education is one of the critical global rights that must be provided for all as enshrined in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Sida, 2001) and other international declarations (World Conference on Education for All, & Meeting Basic Learning Needs, 1990; (African Union, 2016;(Albright & Bundy, 2018a). SDG 4 aims to “ensure inclusive equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning for all”. Target 4.1 aims to “By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and Goal-4 effective learning outcomes” (United Nations Development Programme, 2015).

Trends in global education show that enrollment in primary, secondary and tertiary levels increased for both boys and girls. At the primary level, enrollment increased from 99.4% for boys and 81% for girls in 1980 to more than 100% for both boys and girls in 2020 while at the secondary level, enrollment increased from nearly 48% for boys and 40% for girls in 1980 to 77.7% for boys and 76% for girls. As a result, parity in the enrolment of boys and girls was achieved globally by the beginning of the 21st century (UNESCO, 2020; Bonfert & Wadhwa, 2024). The increase in enrolment for boys and girls was a result of increased investments in education infrastructure, increased teacher training and policy reforms such as the introduction of free education and affirmative action for girls' and women’s education.

However, low retention in and transition from primary to secondary education is threatening to thwart the achievement of SDG 4 in general, and target 4.1 specifically due to the high dropout rate from primary education. UNESCO estimated that 250 million children of school age in developing countries were out of school in 2022, and 1 in 10 children of primary school age are out of school. Of these children, 122 million, equivalent to 48% are girls (UNESCO, 2023).

Although sub-Saharan Africa has made progress in increasing participation in education through increased access and enrollment in education in the recent past, the region remains behind other major global regions in achieving enrolment targets, retention and completion of primary and secondary education for both genders, but more so for girls. This has been due to the high dropout rate from schooling for girls. Data for 2022 shows that 1 in 5 children in sub-Saharan Africa, accounting for nearly 30% of the global estimate of children out of school, were in sub-Saharan Africa. The large number of children out of school in this world region has been attributed to the systematic exclusion of girls from schooling (Deloumeaux, 2019) and the high dropout rate

of girls from the education system. In this world region, compared to boys, girls have lower retention in and transition from basic education to higher education (Kissi & Issaka, 2023; Dube & Orodho, 2014).

1.1 Factors Influencing Girls' Dropout of School

Teenage pregnancy and child marriage have been identified as key factors leading to girls dropping out of school. It has been estimated that 21 million girls aged 15-19 years in developing regions become pregnant annually (WHO, 2020). Estimated at more than 98 million in 2021, most of the global out-of-school children are in sub-Saharan Africa (UNESCO, 2022) where the sequencing of teenage pregnancy and child marriage is difficult due to the high prevalence of teenage premarital pregnancy and the pervasiveness of cultural norms that perpetuate child marriage (Casey Foundation, 2021; Kidman et al., 2024). In some cases, teenage pregnancy precedes child marriage while in others teenage learners leave school voluntarily or are withdrawn from school by their parents, to get married. The individual circumstances of teenage learners such as being an orphan, lack of fees and lack of personal needs, also put them at risk of teenage pregnancy or early marriage. For example, studies have found that the likelihood of a teenage learner getting married is higher among orphans, child-headed households (Chae, 2013; Palermo & Peterman, 2009) and girls in poor families (Banik & Neogi, 2015).

Another factor that leads to pregnancy among teenage learners is Gender-based violence (GBV) perpetrated by men against Women and Girls (VWG). VWG is a pervasive global challenge (Muluneh et al., 2020; Itegi & Njuguna, 2013) and has contributed significantly to girls' dropping out of school. GBV is "any act that results in or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivations of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life" and is manifested physically, sexually and psychologically (Kaladelfos & Featherstone, 2014). Because of their lack of power in preventing violence and abuse, teenage girls are at greater risk of sexual violence which increases their risk of becoming pregnant and dropping out of school. Rape, defilement, coercion and incest are the main forms of violence used by perpetrators that could end in the pregnancy of teenage girls (Uwizeye et al., 2020; Yakubu & Salisu, 2018). Available evidence suggests that most sexual violence against women and girls is perpetrated by intimate partners such as husbands, boys/men friends and in some cases relatives (Ahinkorah et al., 2020; Violence & Africa, n.d.; (Clarke et al., 2020).

The Covid-19 pandemic worsened and compounded all forms of violence including sexual violence against teenage girls (Mwine et al., 2022). The most common form of violence during the peak of the pandemic was sexual, manifesting through forced marriage, child marriage, defilement, rape, sexual exploitation, and lack of access to reproductive health services. Many of these abuses occurred at home. The lockdown also compounded the risk of abuse by maintaining constant proximity between teenage girls and their actual and potential abusers (de Oliveira et al., 2020; (Women, UN, 2020).

Household poverty has been identified as another factor that perpetuates the school dropout of teenage learners, teenage pregnancy and child marriage. Household poverty significantly contributes to the dropout of girls from education through the inability of households to afford the indirect costs of education that are required to keep children in school, often leading to the withdrawal of the girl child from schooling. In countries where primary and secondary education is free, parents are still required to provide school uniforms, scholastic materials, costs of food, transportation and other indirect expenses from time to time that become prohibitive in the medium and long term (Ferguson et al., 2007; Nabugoomu, 2019; Ressa & Andrews, 2022). Failure to provide school fees and requirements and other basic needs of children makes teenage learners vulnerable to men who take advantage of their naivety, ignorance of sexuality issues and their circumstances, and use money to lure learners into sexual activities that could lead to pregnancy (Toska et al., 2015). In addition, and in the majority of cases for girls who have dropped out of school, poverty plays a major role in teenage motherhood and child marriage.

The cultural norm of child marriage is an important factor in perpetuating school dropout in many cultures in sub-Saharan Africa. Previous studies identified three main reasons for child marriage including the perpetuation of traditional cultural rites of passage, ensuring the gender disaggregation of roles and addressing the family's social and economic circumstances (Lowe et al., 2019; Kaplan et al., 2022). In these societies, early marriage takes place soon after menarche which is an indication that a girl has matured. This happens commonly where there is a strict divide in gender roles which views women primarily as wives and mothers. Child marriage is also used as a means for controlling the sexuality of women by using the perception that marriage protects families from dishonor as well as teenage girls from physical, reputational and psychological harm by ensuring that they do not become pregnant before marriage. Early marriage is also used as an economic mechanism to improve a family's economic circumstances through bride price as well as reducing the economic burden on the family through the cost of education (Anderson, 2007). In such circumstances, girls are withdrawn from school to get married.

1.2 Impacts of Teenage Pregnancy

Teenage pregnancy has significant adverse health and developmental impacts on both the young mother and her child. The impact of teenage pregnancy on the health of teenagers has been extensively researched and documented. Teenage pregnancy predisposes young women to higher risks of maternal morbidity and mortality characterized by complications before, during and after childbirth; increased risk of maternal mortality among teenage mothers and increased risk of infant mortality among babies of teenage mothers (Ursache et al., 2023; Diabelková et al., 2023; Omar et al., 2010). Teenage mothers are also more at risk of mental health problems including postpartum depression and stress. Mental health is a major factor leading to infanticide and child abandonment by teenage mothers (Cone et al., 2021; Garwood et al., 2015; Wall-Wieler et al., 2016). Studies have also shown that teenage mothers are less likely to complete their education as they drop out of school and the failure to complete their education puts them at risk of unemployment leading to serious financial instability in adulthood (Cantet, 2019). In

addition, teenage mothers are likely to experience an increased inability to provide for their children leading to child poverty, increased risk of their children not completing their education, becoming child mothers themselves and inheriting vulnerabilities that enhance their disadvantages and lack of opportunities in the future (Hofferth & Hayes, 1987).

1.3 School Dropout and Teenage Pregnancy in Uganda

Trends in school dropout rates have been consistently high in Uganda. This is manifested in the completion rate at primary (54%, Female; 52% male) and at secondary education (25% female; 28% male), which implies that the dropout rate from education in the country is high (UNESCO, 2024). Analysis of enrolment statistics for P1 and P7 for the period 2013-2017 revealed a consistent decline in enrolment at each grade. For each year, the number of enrolments in P7 was lower by more than 60% of the enrolments in P1, suggesting a high dropout rate from primary education (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2022). Of the number who drop out of school each year, there are more girls than boys. The high dropout rate of girls from schooling in Uganda is consistent with that in other countries in sub-Saharan Africa.

The low retention of teenage girls in the transition from basic education to higher education is taking place in the backdrop of existing enabling legislation to prevent factors leading to school dropout. These include the Domestic Violence Act (2010); the Prevention of Trafficking in Persons Act (2009); and the Anti-Defilement Act (2007). Policies and programs that aim at inclusive education including Universal Primary Education (UPE), Universal Secondary Education (USE) and Affirmative Action Policy for Girls Education (ACPGE), intended to expand access to education and retain girls and boys in school to completion, are also being implemented.

Despite having adequate knowledge of and plugging some of the factors influencing the dropout of girls at the basic education level, (teenage marriage, teenage pregnancy, childbearing, distance to schools, and lack of fees, etc), the efforts to reduce school dropout of girls have been unsuccessful especially in rural areas and among the poor. This has resulted in the low retention and transition of girls from primary to secondary and higher education. The questions that need to be answered are: what are the factors influencing school dropout in Uganda? These factors have been summarized into socioeconomic, cultural, institutional and quality of education factors.

Teenage pregnancy is one of the most important reasons for girls' drop out of school. This is mainly because it is considered to be a serious violation of institutional and cultural norms and, therefore, not tolerable by schools, families and communities. Teenage pregnancy, attributed to ignorance of reproductive matters, sexual harassment, rape, defilement, peer pressure and substance abuse are major causes of teenage learners dropping out of school in Uganda (Okot et al., 2023; Ochen et al., 2019). The prevalence of teenage pregnancy in Uganda was particularly more serious during conflict and the Covid-19 pandemic. Girls who become pregnant are automatically dismissed by schools or withdrawn from schooling by parents. Another factor that causes school dropout for girls is early marriage either due to getting pregnant or leaving school to get married (Ouma et al., 2018). Girls may also be withdrawn from school to get married

incentivized by the need to get bride price to solve family financial challenges and the preference for boys' education over that of girls (Casey Foundation, 2021).

The dropout of girls out of school is also caused by the poor economic circumstances of families. This is mainly because of the inability to afford the indirect costs of education even where education is free under the UPE and USE programs. The main indirect costs parents are required to provide are school requirements (scholastic materials), Parents Teachers Association (PTA) contributions, meals and girls' basic needs such as sanitary materials, leading to voluntary dropout or withdrawal from school by parents (Nannyonjo, 2005). Child labour has been identified as another cause of school dropout for girls in Uganda. In most poor households, girls constitute a big part of domestic labour and are required to support families by engaging in domestic work or self-employment. The most common forms of employment for teenage girls include petty trade such as vending food items, casual labour in farming and working as house help (Tamusuza, 2011; Njieassam, 2023)

The institutional or school environment is another critical factor contributing to the dropout of girls from education. This includes safety in the school environment especially for girls who have reached the age of puberty. The lack of safety is characterized by long walking distances to and from schools, poor school infrastructure such as the lack of furniture, studying in dirt, and lack of facilities and services for menstrual hygiene which have been reported as some of the reasons for the dropout of teenage girls from schooling (McCormac & Benjamin, 2008). In a related way, the poor quality of education due to the failure to enforce policies and regulations on the quality of education, lack of facilities, absenteeism of teachers and idleness of learners, is a major demotivating factor for learners, leading to school abandonment.

Addressing teenage pregnancy and school dropout requires comprehensive strategies that include access to comprehensive sex education, reproductive healthcare services, support for young parents, and economic opportunities for disadvantaged youth. By addressing the underlying social, economic, and health determinants, it is possible to mitigate the adverse impacts of teenage pregnancy; return and retain girls who previously dropped out of school due to pregnancy and motherhood; and ensure their transition through primary and secondary education.

1.4 Statement of the Problem

Despite efforts to expand access to girl child education through the primary and secondary education levels in sub-Saharan Africa, retention, and transition of girls through primary and secondary education have been low. Compared to boys, girls face many more challenges remaining at school and completing the primary and secondary levels of education. Although there is almost no paucity of knowledge on the factors inhibiting access, reentry, retention, and transition of girls through the basic level of education (primary and Secondary levels), the rate of dropout from schooling is high and, in Uganda, it is estimated at 45% and 30% at primary and secondary education respectively (Nalunkuuma, 2023). Of the number who drop out of school,

girls are the majority. This is despite having Universal Primary Education (UPE) and Universal Secondary Education (USE) programs and the Affirmative Action for Girls Education, which are intended to ensure that all learners in Uganda complete primary and secondary education. However, the adoption, implementation, and effectiveness of guidelines provided to enhance the reentry, retention and transition from primary to secondary education of girls who previously dropped out of school due to teenage pregnancy and motherhood is not known.

To achieve the education goal of equity and equality for boys and girls, there is a need to identify and implement innovative practices that promote the reentry, retention and transition of girls from primary to secondary and higher education. The focus of this study is to determine factors that exacerbate the dropout of girls from schooling; establish the adoption and status of implementing school re-entry policy and /or guidelines; establish the status of girls' reentry, completion and transition from primary to secondary education; and identify innovative and promising practices that promote school reentry and retention of girls in primary and secondary education.

1.5 Rationale for the Study

The research is motivated by the desire to achieve equity and equality in education between boys and girls. The failure to achieve this level of parity is anchored on vulnerabilities and disadvantages faced by girls that impede their retention and transition through different grades and levels of education leading to the failure to achieve the Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA 16-25). Agenda 2063 aspires for a prosperous Africa based on inclusive growth and sustainable development with well-educated citizens and skills, underpinned with science, technology, and innovation. In addition, an Africa whose development is people-driven relies on the potential of the African people, especially its women and youth, and ensuring children achieve full gender equality in all spheres (Addaney, 2018).

The research contributes to achieving SDG 4 (ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all); SDG 5 (achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls), SDG 8 (Decent work and Economic Growth), and Uganda National Development Plan (NDP III) program on Human Capital Development (HCD).

The research will add to the body of knowledge of the Global Partnership to Education (World Conference on Education for All, & Meeting Basic Learning Needs, 1990) and the United Nations Girls Education Initiative to address retention of and completion rates for girls who are affected by teenage pregnancy or child marriage, augmenting possible interventions for addressing barriers to girls' education (Albright & Bundy, 2018b). Some of the challenges are sociocultural factors such as early marriage, lack of female teachers, the opportunity cost of schooling to perform household chores and child labour, sexual violence and harassment at school or on the way to school, poverty, low value placed on girls' education and lack of appropriate sanitary services in schools. It will also contribute to achieving the objectives of the Break Free-Alliance (BFA) including:

a. Accessing quality education for girls at risk of child marriage/teenage pregnancy;
b. Duty Bearers and decision-makers, developing, resourcing, and implementing laws and policies that respond to adolescents' needs; and
c. Adolescents accessing quality Sexual & Reproductive Health Rights (SRHR) information, education, and services.

Advocating for the above outcomes requires evidence on the implementation of practices intended to keep girls in school and ensure their transition from primary to secondary education and identify innovative and promising interventions that contribute to the completion of primary education and transition to secondary and higher education.

1.6 Conceptual Framework

The Theory of Change (ToT) is a framework for planning, implementing and evaluating strategies for achieving desired goals (Hayward et al., 2024). It requires knowledge of the current conditions that need to be changed and planned desired time-bound goals in the future. It describes the interventions that should be implemented and the assumptions that must be controlled to achieve the desired goal. Previous researchers found the ToT an effective framework for education research, planning and development (Ren & McGuckin, 2022). This study used the theory of change to show how increased reentry, retention and transition from primary to secondary and higher education of teenage girls who dropped out of school can be realized.

The number of teenage girls dropping out of school has been rising and has become pervasive with serious adverse long-term impacts on the health and development of girls. The main aim of the study is to identify innovative practices that can promote reentry, retention and transition of girls through primary to secondary and higher education, and highlight the barriers thereto. The long-term goal of the study is to ensure teenage girls who previously dropped out of school due to teenage pregnancy and motherhood return and remain in school until they complete their education.

To achieve the above goal, our ToT framework requires the following: 1) Government education policy should provide specific guidelines for the management of teenage pregnancy and motherhood within school settings. 2) School management should ensure that pregnant teenage learners and teenage mothers are safe, feel appreciated, and provide specific support for the management of teenage pregnancy and motherhood within school settings. 3) Financial support towards school fees and other learning materials should be provided for teenage mothers to ensure that they reenter and remain in schools. 4) Schools should invest in appropriate infrastructure and facilities including that for baby care within school settings. 5) Families and communities should change the negative attitudes toward teenage mothers' return to school and provide appropriate support for teenage mothers and their children to do so.

The interventions to achieve the goal for the reentry, retention and transition of teenage girls who become pregnant and mothers while at school should among others include the following: 1)

Provide financial support for teenage mothers to pay fees, provide scholastic materials and provide appropriate childcare services for their children while they study. This can be done by the government as an obligation to ensure equity and equality in education for all. 2) Provide appropriate psychosocial support for teenage mothers to enable them to overcome the psychological effects of teenage pregnancy such as low self-esteem and negative perception of self-worth to enable them to integrate within school systems. 3) Engage families and communities where teenage pregnant/mothers live through supportive awareness creation and mindsets and attitude changes to support the reentry and retention of teenage mothers in school until they complete their education. 4) Establish and operationalize alternative education pathways such as the Accelerated Education Model (AEM) to enable teenage mothers to catch up with lost time due to pregnancy and childcare, alternative education environment by having them rejoin schooling in a different school and or establishing a flexible remote education models such as online learning and decentralized technology aided education for teenage mothers and other learners who cannot manage the face to face contact education model. Another promising education model, with early social and economic results for vulnerable learners, is skills-based education where teenage mothers can learn employable skills through apprenticeship and mentorship programs.

In implementing the above interventions, the following assumptions are important: 1) Government, and education sector NGOs/CSOs are willing and able to absorb the financial burden of returning teenage mothers to schools. 2) Government and school founding bodies and school management will support the creation of infrastructure and facilities including those for childcare. 3) Families and communities will change the negative attitude against returning previously pregnant and teenage mothers to school and support their education

Given that the conditions and assumptions discussed above hold, the proposed interventions will result in achieving the goal of returning previously pregnant teenage girls and teenage mothers to school until the completion of their education. Specifically, the following outcome will be realized: 1) Family and community attitudes towards previously pregnant teenage girls and teenage mothers change allowing them to reenter and remain in school. 2) Schools create supportive and welcoming attitudes among learners and teachers towards pregnant and teenage mothers and have established appropriate infrastructure and facilities including those for teenage mothers and their children within school settings. 3) Increased number of previously pregnant and teenage mothers returning and remaining in school through primary to secondary and higher education.

1.7 Purpose of the Study

Access to education at the primary level especially for girls has to a greater extent been realized across sub-Saharan Africa. However, school dropout remains high in primary education and is the cause of low transition rates from primary to secondary and higher education. This study aimed to identify innovative practices that can be used to promote retention and transition through primary to secondary and higher education. The study also aimed to highlight the barriers to the reentry, completion and transition of girls who previously dropped out of school. The findings of

this study will inform education stakeholders on advocacy for action on girls' education in general, and girls who drop out of school for any reason, especially teenage pregnancy, motherhood and marriage, in particular.

1.7.1 Specific Objectives

The specific objectives of the study are to:

a. Assess the status of girls' retention and transition at primary and secondary levels of education;
b. Determine factors that exacerbate the dropout of girls in upper primary and secondary school education;
c. Establish the adoption and status of implementation of school reentry policy and /or guidelines; and
d. Identify innovative and promising practices that promote school reentry and retention for girls at primary and secondary schools.

1.7.2 Research Questions

a. What is the status of girls' retention and transition through the primary level of education?
b. What factors exacerbate the dropout of girls at the primary level of education?
c. What is the status of the adoption and effectiveness of school re-entry policies and/or guidelines?
d. What practices have been effective in promoting school re-entry and retention of girls in education?

1.8 The Scope of the Study

The scope of the study focused on five major dimensions. 1) assessing the prevalence and understanding of the patterns of teenage pregnancy and school dropout among girls, identifying the factors that influenced teenage pregnancy and school dropout of girls. 2) Discussing the national primary school completion and transition rate from primary to secondary education; assessing the reentry rate, primary education completion rate and the transition rates from primary to secondary education of teenage mothers who dropped out of school. 3) The study also assessed the perspective of teenage mothers on teenage pregnancy and school dropout; assessed the perspectives of education stakeholders including that of parents, school administrators, education officials and local government leaders in the study districts on teenage pregnancy and school dropout of girls. 4) Assessed the adoption of policies and guidelines for the reentry, retention and transition of teenage girls who dropped out of school due to pregnancy, teenage motherhood and child marriage. 5) Identify innovative and promising practices for reentry, retention and transition of teenage mothers from primary to secondary education. 6) Document case studies and recommendations for action by different stakeholders in the education sector.

1.9 Report Outline

The study report is presented in eight sections. Section One presents the conceptual aspects of the study including the background, study problem and rationale. It also presents the conceptual framework, the aim and the specific objectives of the study and research questions. In the Second Section, the methodology, that describes the study design, sampling design and data collection and analysis methodologies are presented. Section Three presents the profiles of teenage mothers and that of their parents/guardians. Section Four presents findings on Objective One which assessed the status of girls' retention and transition at the primary and secondary levels of education. In Section Five, the findings of Objective 2 on the factors that exacerbate teenage pregnancy and the dropout of girls in primary and secondary education are presented. Section Six presents the findings of Objective Three which focused on establishing the adoption of and implementation of school reentry policies and or guidelines. In Section Seven the findings of Objective Four on identifying innovative and promising practices that promote school reentry and retention of girls in primary and secondary schools, are discussed. Section Eight presents a discussion of the main study findings, limitations of the study and recommendations for reentry, retention and transition of girls who drop out of school.

CHAPTER TWO

2.0 Research Methodology

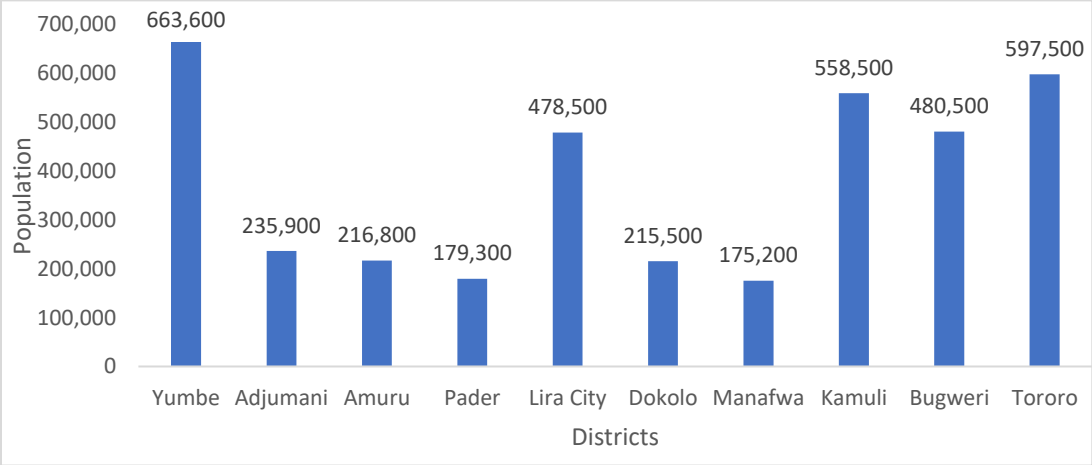
2.1 Introduction

This section describes the methodology used to conduct the study. These include the study setting, research design, sample design, and data collection tools and methods. The data analysis methods used, including quantitative and qualitative, are also described. Because the study dealt with a sensitive matter of pregnancy among a sensitive population group, teenage girls, the research ethics procedures appropriate to the target population are also described.

2.2 Study Setting

The study area comprises West Nile, Northern Uganda, and Eastern Uganda. The populations in these regions comprise various ethnic groups with varying cultures that have direct implications for teenage pregnancy, child marriage and girls' education. The main ethnic groups include Aringa/Lugbara and Madi in West Nile, Acholi and Langi in Northern Uganda, and Bagisu, Iteso, Japadhola, Basoga and Bagweri in Eastern Uganda. The population of the study districts was estimated at 2,150,000 million people in 2021. The distribution of the population by districts is presented in Figure 2.1. The study area is characterized by a youthful and predominantly rural population (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2022a).

Figure 2.1 Distribution of Districts by population size



Source: UBOS: Statistical abstract, 2022

The socioeconomic indicators of the study population show that the population is multidimensionally poor with rates ranging from over 41.5% in Busoga, 57% in Lango, 63.7% in Acholi, and 59.1% in West Nile (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2022b). The economy of the study regions is predominantly agriculture with the majority of the population depending on subsistence farming as the main source of livelihood. Although livestock farming was historically a significant

part of the livelihood system, this was destroyed by nearly 28 years (1979-2007) of war, instabilities and encampment, especially in the West Nile and Acholi sub-regions.

These insurgencies had adverse effects on the population of West Nile, Acholi and parts of Eastern Uganda. Apart from the loss of life, the insurgencies devasted the economic and livelihood systems of the population in these regions, destroyed social and economic infrastructures such as schools, health facilities, and roads, and drove the population to Internally Displaced People camps (IDPs), especially in Acholi sub-region, for more than two decades and exile in Zaire the (Democratic Republic of Congo) and Sudan South Sudan) for the population in West Nile. It also disrupted the social structure and social cohesion in these societies characterized by fragmented social networks, a high number of orphans and child-headed and women-headed households, and widening economic inequalities (Nannyonjo, Justine, 2005; Chi et al., 2015); governance failures, migration, unemployment, destitution and increased social conflicts and violence (Llamazares, 2013; Ssengooba et al., 2017).

Despite the several recovery programs implemented by the government and other multilateral and bilateral agencies, the population in these regions has remained the poorest in Uganda compared to others in Uganda in all aspects of development (Hopwood & O'Byrne, 2022). These experiences have had a lasting impact on the education of children. The educational disparities have widened, even after the government provided free access to basic education through the UPE and USE programs. In these districts, the majority of children, especially girls, do not complete primary education due to teenage pregnancy and marriage (UNESCO, 2024). Teenage pregnancy for the period 2019-2021, regardless of marital status, has also been on the rise in the study regions (UNFPA, 2022). Understanding the high dropout of education is critical for addressing low retention and completion of basic education for girls in the regions.

2.3 Study Design

The study used a cross-sectional research design and employed a mixed methods approach (quantitative and qualitative) to collect and analyze data. The cross-sectional design was chosen because of its appropriateness in assessing the prevalence of teenage pregnancy among a heterogeneous population. It is also appropriate for assessing the prevalence of teenage pregnancy at a particular point in time, identifying factors that may have influenced it, and the extent to which they are associated with other contextual factors. The diverse and large study population also makes the cross-sectional design the most appropriate. The design has a high external validity that makes it ideal for generalizing the study findings to the study population.

2.4 Study Target Population

The study population comprised previously pregnant or current teenage mothers identified at schools and the households in the school catchment area and parents/guardians to the pregnant or teenage mothers; school children from selected schools, school administrators and key informants selected from among the education stakeholders in the selected districts. These included the Departments of Education, district political leaders and community leaders. Health

facilities within the school catchment areas were also included to help in assessing the level of care provided for pregnant teenagers and teenage mothers. Headteachers of selected schools were also interviewed to get their perspectives regarding teenage pregnancy, school dropout, and the measures taken to prevent these vices.

2.5 Sampling Methods

The study used both probability and none probability methods to select the study participants.

2.5.1 Probability Sampling Design

Probability sampling design is a procedure of sampling in which all sampling targets, (districts, schools and households) have a known probability of inclusion in the study. The sampling approach allows for a more representative sample of the study population which allows for the generalization of the results. In this sampling design, the most appropriate sampling design was the cluster sampling design in which districts were selected as clusters.

2.5.1.2 Selection of Districts and Schools

A cluster sampling design was used to sample schools and school catchment areas from districts selected from the 6 geopolitical regions in which the study was conducted.

Table 2.1: Number of Districts and Sampled Districts by Region

Sub-Region	Number of districts	Number of districts selected	Name of district selected
West Nile	14	2	Adjumani, Yumbe
Acholi	9	2	Amuru, Pader
Lango	10	2	Lira City, Dokolo
Bugisu	8	1	Manafwa
Busoga	10	2	Kamuli, Bugweri
Bukedi	7	1	Tororo
Total	69	10	10

Using the cluster sampling design, 10 districts were selected from the 69 districts in the 6 regions. In selecting the districts, the proportion-to-size sampling criterion was used allowing regions with a higher number of districts to have more districts in the sample. In selecting the individual districts, the simple random sampling method was used due to the small number of districts to select from in each region. Table 2.1 shows the number of districts selected from each region.

2.5.1.2 Selection of Schools

The intended purposes of selecting primary and secondary schools were fourfold. 1) to identify pupils who got pregnant at school and follow them home; 2) to obtain the perspectives of school administrators and learners on teenage pregnancy/mothers' reentry, retention, and completion of education; 3) to obtain a recode of learners who became pregnant at school; and 4) where

applicable, to assess services provided to pregnant and teenage mothers in schools. The selected schools also identified health facilities that serviced communities around the schools including learners. Table 2.2 presents the number of schools by district and the number of selected schools from which teenage pregnant girls were identified for follow-up interviews at home. From these schools, school communities were identified and a sample of households was selected from the communities for parent/guardian interviews. From the household interviews, teenage mothers regardless of their marital status were also interviewed.

Table 2.2: Total Number of Schools Sampled Schools by Level and Districts

District	Number of Primary schools	Number of secondary schools	Number of primary schools selected	Number of secondary schools selected
Yumbe	137	25	14	3
Adjumani	161	22	16	2
Amuru	97	11	10	1
Pader	205	15	21	2
Lira City	141	45	14	5
Dokolo	78	6	8	1
Manafwa	81	17	8	2
Kamuli	213	65	21	7
Bugweri	85	26	9	3
Tororo	230	51	23	5
Total	1428	283	144	31

Source: Uganda National Schools Electronic Registry (UNSER)

2.5.1.3 Selection of Households

The household was used to identify and interview teenage mothers and their parents/guardians to collect quantitative data. In the selection of households, the none probability method of purposive sampling was used. This was because a house was eligible for sampling if it had a teenage mother or a pregnant teenage girl in the household regardless of marital status. Using this inclusion criteria, only households with a teenage mother or pregnant teens were selected for the interview. In total 428 households, equivalent to the number of teenage mothers and or pregnant teenagers were selected. Table 2.2 presents the number of households selected for the study.

2.5.2 Non- Probability Sampling Design

This is a sampling design in which selecting a target participant does not affect the selection of another participant as they are not based on random selection. Thus, results obtained from such samples cannot be generalized. The criteria for inclusion in a sample is having the characteristics that the study wants to study. In this case, the non-probability sampling method was used to select individuals with knowledge and information about teenage motherhood including school authorities, health authorities, education stakeholders and district and local leaders. The

purposive sampling technique was used to select Key informants for interviews (KII) and learners for the Focus Group Discussions (FGD).

2.5.2.1 In-depth Interviews

Participants in the In-depth Interviews (IDI) were selected using a purposive sampling technique that involves identifying and selecting individuals or groups of individuals who are knowledgeable about teenage motherhood, girls' school re-entry and retention of teenage mothers in school. The IDI participants included school administrators, the education sector stakeholders, and district and community leaders. Although in some districts the number of KIs selected was much higher than in others, at least five (5) KIs were interviewed from each participating district and one (1) from each school in the study sample. The IDI participants provided information on the prevention of teenage pregnancy among learners, factors promoting teenage pregnancy among learners, measures for the reentry and retention of teenage mothers in school, and investments that may be needed to increase the number of teenage mothers returning to school.

2.5.2.2 Focus Group Discussions

The FGDs were conducted among learners in all schools. Learners, both boys and girls from P5-P7, were selected for the FGD sessions. In each school, FGDs comprised of 8-12 individuals. The average age of FGD participants was 15 years for both boys and girls. The FGDs gathered data on the perceptions and attitudes of learners on teenage pregnancy, perspectives on the consequences of teenage pregnancies, factors influencing teenage pregnancy and measures at school and community levels for preventing teenage pregnancy. The perspectives of learners towards the reentry and retention of teenage mothers were also collected. The learners were also asked to provide their attitudes and behaviors toward teenage mothers who have returned to school.

2.6 Data Collected by Districts

From each district, data was collected from schools and school communities (villages that supply schools with learners). Specifically, data were collected from parents/guardians, teenage mothers/and dropouts, learners in schools and school authorities namely the school administration and senior woman teachers/school matrons. Data was also collected from health facilities serving the learners and district and community-level key informants.

Table 2.3 presents the districts where data was collected by type of data and the number of participants. In one and three districts, only one case and one recode of pregnant girls respectively, were obtained. Information obtained from schools suggests that girls who become pregnant drop out of school before school authorities get to know their pregnancy status. Several schools also reported that they have no formal records for pregnant learners. The pregnant and teenage mothers interviewed from these districts were identified using local community leaders, teachers and peers at school.

Table 2.3: Summary of Data Collected by Districts

Districts	Respondents						
	Teenage Mothers	Parents/ Guardians	Schools with Recode of Pregnant Learners	FGDs with pupils	Interviews with School authorities	Health facilities	Key Informant
Adjumani	69	70	17	16	18	17	5
Yumbe	68	70	14	14	14	7	6
Pader	31	20	15	7	18	9	4
Amuru	32	17	10	7	10	7	4
Lira City	30	29	5	5	10	7	4
Dokolo	32	34	10	6	7	10	4
Bugweri	33	13	1	7	11	4	4
Kamuli	51	43	No data	6	31	6	4
Tororo	52	62	No data	6	31	6	4
Manafwa	30	46	No data	5	16	12	4
Total	**428**	**404**	**72**	**79**	**166**	**85**	**43**

2.7 Case Studies

In-depth interviews were held with headteachers and teenage mothers who became pregnant while at school but returned to school after giving birth. This was to learn from their experiences and later use them as models for other girls. Typical cases in terms of measures adopted by schools and a case of successful school reentry have been discussed.

2.8 Data Quality Assurance

To ensure that robust data was collected, the research team employed several quality assurance procedures including the following:

2.8.1 Training of Research Assistants

Two research assistants were engaged in the enumeration of data in each district. The enumerators were degree holders with previous experience in conducting social science research. They were recruited from the districts in which data was collected. This was necessary because they had expert knowledge of the cultural and socioeconomic conditions in the districts. They were trained on how to conduct research among adults and young people and on the 7 tools used to collect data. The Research assistants were also thoroughly briefed on the study to enable them to appreciate the purpose, objectives and procedures for conducting the study including sampling of the research participants by type of participants.

2.8.2 Pretesting of tools

After the research assistants were trained on the data collection tools, they were taken out to pretest the tools. The pretesting had two objectives 1) to ensure that the tools would collect data they were intended to collect and 2) that the enumerators understood the tools and could use them effectively.

2.8.3 Supervision

The Research assistants were supervised by the research coordinators in each district. The coordinators comprise the PI and two other Co-investigators who traveled to each district for data collection. All three members of the research team have a lot of experience in conducting education research.

2.8.4 Editing

Random spot checks were conducted by the study supervisors which ensured that research assistants conducted themselves appropriately and collected good data. At the end of the day of each interview and FGD, debriefing sessions were held with the research supervisors during which completed questionnaires were reviewed and preliminary quality checks were made.

2.9 Data Processing and Analysis Procedures

2.9.1 Quantitative Analysis

Quantitative data collected from teenage mothers, parents/guardians and schools was entered in the SPSS statistical package. This saved the research team time in data entry and processing. Frequency distributions were used to describe the distribution of the various outcomes of interest in the data set. This includes current age, age at pregnancy, class of pregnancy, religious affiliation, level of education, marital status, place of residents and districts. The frequency distribution is an appropriate method for summarizing and describing large data sets and identifying patterns of teenage pregnancy and motherhood on one hand and school reentry on another.

Contingency tables were used to analyze the relationships between teenage motherhood with other variables of interest. This method is appropriate as both the dependent and independent variables are categorical. The Pearson chi-square statistics is appropriate for assessing the relationship between reentry, completion and transition from primary to secondary education by independent variables including the demographic and social characteristics of teenage mothers and the factors that influence the reentry, completion and transition of teenage mothers from primary to secondary education. The Pearson Chi-square statistic used is of the form

$$x^2 = \sum_{i=1}^{i} \frac{(O_{i-} E_{ij})^2}{E_{ij}}.$$

2.9.2 Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative data collected through In-depth Interviews and FGDs were analyzed using thematic analysis, a common method in the analysis of qualitative data. The following procedure was used for the qualitative data analysis: 1) Transcribe the audio data into written texts. 2) Transcribed data was read deeply to enable familiarization with its content. 3) The transcribed data was coded using a code sheet developed for that purpose. 4) Emerging patterns were identified and categorized into themes hence constituting thematic analysis, interpretation and discussion of the findings.

2.10 Ethical Considerations

The research involved the understanding of the dynamics of teenage pregnancy among the schooling population and how it affects the completion of primary education and transition to secondary education. The study targets teenage mothers and their parents/guardians, schools where they might have studied and stakeholders in the education eco-system in the 10 selected districts. In this regard, the study is about vulnerable teenage learners which requires strict adherence with research ethics requirements. Ethics approval was obtained from the Kabale University Research Ethics Committee (KAB-REC) under number KABREC-2023-47. Informed consent was obtained from all adult participants and an ascent of the teenage participants before data was collected from them.

2.11 Challenges Faced by the Study

The study experienced several challenges. These include the following:

a. The study had seven (7) data collection tools each requiring significant time to collect, process and analyze the data set. All the data collection tools have both qualitative and quantitative aspects as a result, data processing was done using both quantitative and qualitative procedures. The qualitative data was more challenging to process because it required transcription from the various languages into English which had both budget and time implications that affected the timing of data analysis and report writing. However, the qualitative data collected from the various research participants using IDI and FGDs provided a reach in-depth knowledge of the perspectives of the participants on school dropout, teenage pregnancy and motherhood and their implications for the education of the girl child.
b. The study was conducted in 6 geopolitical and linguistic regions comprising 10 districts. The seven data collection tools were, therefore, translated into nine languages which had both budget and time implications. The districts were also far apart and this required more time and money for travel than originally planned. Because of the nine languages spoken,

the number of research assistants needed for the study was also large, thereby increasing the budget for data collection beyond the amount originally provided. However, the diverse geographical, economic and cultural scope of the study was able to help understand and integrate the diverse patterns of school dropout and teenage pregnancy and their impacts.

The study was seriously affected by the limited financial resources available for the study. The large geographical, economic and cultural scope of the study could not be achieved on schedule using the resource envelope provided by FAWE. This delayed the completion of data collection and data processing.

CHAPTER THREE

3.0 Profile of Teenage Mathers and Their Parents/Guardians

3.1 Introduction

Adolescents are a group of young people aged 10-24 years. Of these groups, there is the teenage group that comprises young people aged 10-19 years. Adolescence is a transitional period during which young people experience significant physiological, psychological and emotional changes that are normal but could predispose girls to challenges leading to poor health and development outcomes. One of these challenges is teenage pregnancy and motherhood which has become a global public health and development challenge and more specifically in poor countries like Uganda that lack the resources needed to mitigate the impacts that come with teenage pregnancy and motherhood. In this section, the profiles of teenage mothers and that of their parents/guardians are described.

3.2 Profile of Teenage Mothers and their Parents/Guardians

3.2.1 Profile of Teenage Mothers

The study aims to identify innovative practices to promote school reentry of girls who drop out of school due to pregnancy and motherhood, ensure their retention and transition from primary to secondary education as well as contextualize the patterns of teenage pregnancy and its impacts. Demographic and socioeconomic data were collected from teenage mothers and the results are presented in Table 3.1 showing the distribution of teenage mothers by current age, age at pregnancy, grade at pregnancy, religious affiliation, level of education, current marital status and current place of residence.

The table shows that the current mean age of teenage mothers is 18.3 years and 36.2% of them are 18-19 years old followed by 29.7% and 29.2% who are 15-17 and 20 years or older respectively. Only about 5% of the teenage mothers are under 15 years of age. The table further shows that the median age of teenage mothers at the time of pregnancy was 18.3 years. More than 62% and 26.6% of the mothers were 15-17 and 18 years or older respectively, and only 10% were under 15 years old at the time they became pregnant. The majority of the teenage mothers, 39% and 30.4%, were Catholics and Protestants respectively, while 26.9% were Muslims. Only 1 in 3 of the teenage mothers were Pentecostal. Overall, 60.7% and 39.3% of teenage mothers became pregnant when they were in primary and secondary education respectively. The majority, 76.2% of the mothers, lived in rural areas.

Table 3.1 Distribution of Teenage Mothers by Selected Characteristics

Characteristics of teenage mothers	Number	%
Current age		
<15	21	4.9
15-17	127	29.7
18-19	155	36.2
20+	125	29.2
Age at pregnancy		
<15	47	10.0
15-17	267	62.4
18+	114	26.6
Grade at pregnancy		
<P5	60	14.0
P5-P7	200	46.7
S1-S3	168	39.3
Religious affiliation		
Catholic	167	39.0
Protestant	130	30.4
Pentecostal	16	3.7
Muslim	115	26.9
Level of education		
Primary	260	60.7
Secondary	168	39.3
Marital status		
Single	237	55.4
Married	191	44.6
Place of residence		
Urban	102	23.8
Rural	326	76.2
Total	428	100.0

3.2.2 Profile of Parents/Guardians of Teenage Mothers

Table 3.2 presents the profiles of the parents/guardians of teenage mothers. Parents/guardians' characteristics could greatly contribute to the prevalence of pregnancy and school dropout of teenage girls. The table shows that most parents/guardians interviewed were female (62.6%); their mean age is 44 years with 35.1% and 36.1% of them belonging to the 30-39 and 40-49 years age groups respectively. Only 28.7% of the parents/guardians are 50 years or older. The distribution of parents/guardians by religious affiliation shows that the majority are Catholics (39.6%), followed by Protestants (30.2%) and Muslims (27.5%). Pentecostals, with only 2.7%, constituted the lowest religious group. Regarding the level of education, Table 3.2 shows that nearly 40% of the parents/guardians had primary education, 30.9% attained secondary education and a large proportion of 29.2% did not receive any education. The table also shows that just over 78% and nearly 22% of the parents/guardians lived in rural and urban areas respectively at the time of the study.

Table 3.2 Distribution of Parents by Selected Characteristics

Characteristics of parents/guardians	Number	%
Gender		
Male	151	37.4
Female	253	62.6
Age		
30-39	142	35.1
40-49	146	36.1
50+	116	28.7
Religion		
Catholic	160	39.6
Protestant	122	30.2
Pentecostal	11	2.7
Muslim	111	27.5
Highest level of education		
No education	118	29.2
Primary	161	39.9
Secondary or higher	125	30.9
Place of residence		
Urban	88	21.8
Rural	316	78.2
Total	404	100.0

3.3 Conclusion

The distribution of teenage mothers by age shows that the majority of girls are in the middle teenage years of 15-19 where the effects of physiological, psychological and emotional changes associated with the transition from childhood to young adulthood are significant. Their parents/guardians are in middle age, which could influence their perceptions regarding sexuality and sexual education for teenage girls. Religious affiliations are critical in determining sexual behaviour and responses to teenage pregnancy and motherhood. Christians and Muslims consider the open discussion of sexuality with children inappropriate and have very low tolerance for teenage pregnancy and motherhood, especially while unmarried. This attitude could greatly influence how parents/guardians respond to incidents of teenage pregnancy. Distribution by education also suggests that the majority of teenage mothers are in upper primary which is consistent with the age of menarche increasing their vulnerability to pregnancy. The parents/guardians of the girls are also poorly educated and therefore, more likely to hold onto traditional cultural values and norms and less likely to provide adequate support for teenage girls in navigating the turbulent ages of transition to adulthood, increasing their risk of teenage pregnancy and school dropout. Most parents and teenage mothers live in rural areas where attitudes in favour of cultural norms and negative attitudes to teenage pregnancy are strong. The rate of school dropout in rural areas is also high indicating that teenage girls who become pregnant while schooling will certainly drop out of education.

CHAPTER FOUR

4.0 Objective One

The Status of Girls' Retention and Transition at Primary and Secondary Level of Education

4.1 Introduction

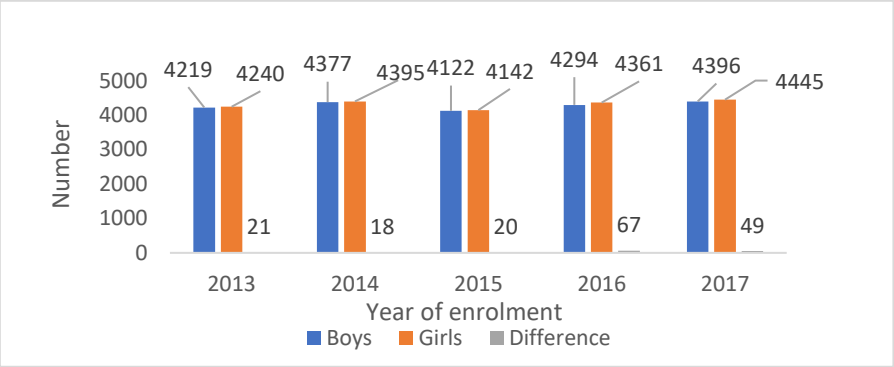
Enrolment of girls and their retention in school is crucial in achieving SDG 5 and other Global Education Goals for girls (United Nations Development Programme, 2015) (United Nations Girl's Education Initiative et al., 2022). It is the key to achieving equity and equality in education between the genders and empowerment of women. Education equips girls with the knowledge and skills to realize their potential, increase their urgency, enhance their capacity and ability for gainful employment, and improve health outcomes for women and their families as future mothers. However, the enrolment and retention of girls are affected by several barriers including cultural gender norms that view and prepare girls to be wives and mothers, household poverty that prevents the enrolment or encourages the withdrawal of girls from education, and sexual harassment and exploitation of girls that lead to early pregnancy, early marriage and school dropout. In these regards, ensuring the retention and transition of girls in and through different levels of education is important for achieving the education goals for girls and women. Therefore, objective one of this study aimed to assess the status of girls' retention and transition at primary and secondary levels of education.

4.2 Enrolment and Transition from Primary to Secondary Education

4.2.1 Enrolment in Primary Education

Primary school enrolment refers to the number of pupils attending primary education in a given period irrespective of age (Ariely et al., 2014). An assessment of enrolment and transition of learners in primary to secondary education, for both boys and girls was conducted using the Annual School Census Survey (ASCS) data for 2013-2017. As a result, it was impossible to assess enrolment and transition rates for 2018-23 using national data.

Figure 4.1: Primary School Enrolment by Gender 2013-2017 in 000

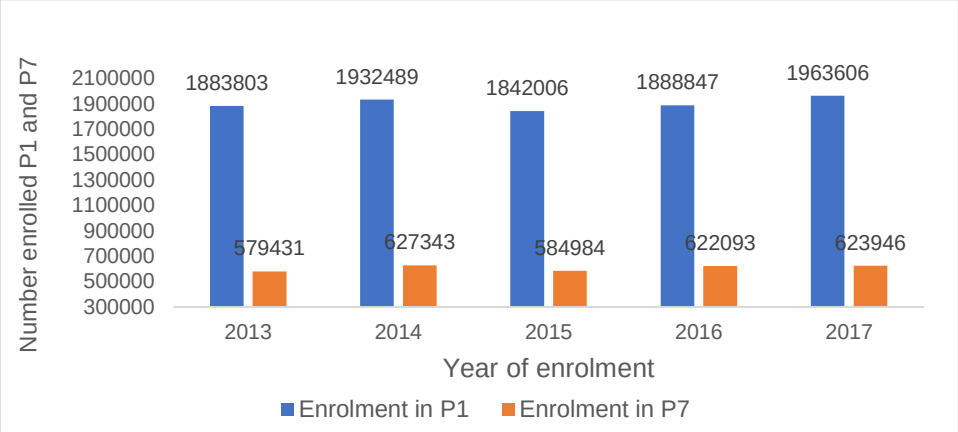


Source of data: Annual School Census, 2013-2017

The enrolment data from the ASCS for 2013-2017 is presented in Figure 4.1 showing that at the national level, there was a positive trend in enrolment of both girls and boys in primary education. The data also shows that there was parity between boys and girls in each year of enrolment. This achievement has been made possible by a number of factors including the increased access to primary education provided under the UPE program, increased advocacy and support for the education of the girl child, pursuit of policies and legal frameworks against child marriage and gradual attitudinal changes about cultural norms regarding the roles of women. The factors have collectively contributed to the acceptance of and community support for girls' education.

However, despite the increased enrolment, the level of attrition through dropout at the different grades of primary education over the reference period was high. This suggests that far fewer children enrolled in P1 completed P7. Data presented in Figure 4.2 shows enrolment statistics for P1 and P7 for the years 2013-2017.

Figure 4.2: National Enrolment in P1 and P7 2013-2017



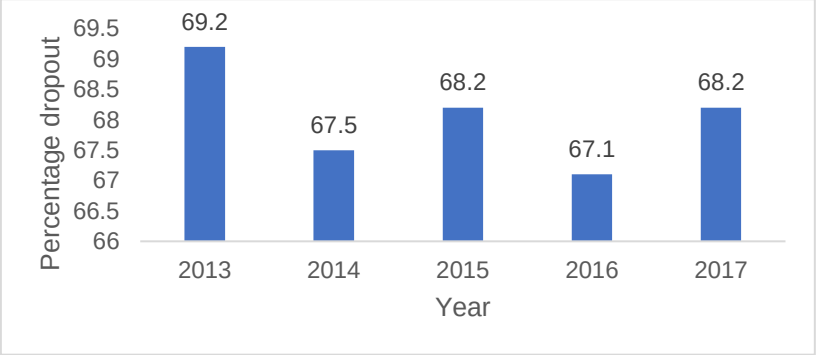
Source of data: Annual School Census, 2013-2017

The dropout rate between P1 and P7 for each year (2013-2017) is presented in Figure 4.3. The figure shows that the lowest dropout rate over the reference period was estimated at 67.1% in 2016 and the highest was estimated at 69.2% in 2013. Although data from sample surveys suggest that the transition rate at each grade of primary education might have improved, it remains high as will be demonstrated later using data from selected schools from three districts of this study. Previous research has already identified several factors influencing the high dropout rate from primary education. These include the failure of families to pay fees and provide school requirements due to poverty, long distances from home to school for learners, especially girls in rural areas and the involvement of children as labour in household production and income-generating activities (Ngabirano et al., 2023; Nabugoomu, 2019a).

Furthermore, the actual or perceived poor quality of education in primary education under the UPE program, characterized by inadequate school infrastructure, absenteeism of learners and teachers, the low teacher-learner ratio and inadequate teachers in schools, were identified as some of the factors that demotivate learners from schooling leading to drop out of education (Mwesigwa, 2015). For the girl child, in addition to the other factors outlined above, teenage

pregnancy and child marriage have contributed significantly to the continued high rate of school dropout (Tushabe et al., 2024).

Figure 4.3: Dropout Rates Between P1 and P7 2013-2017



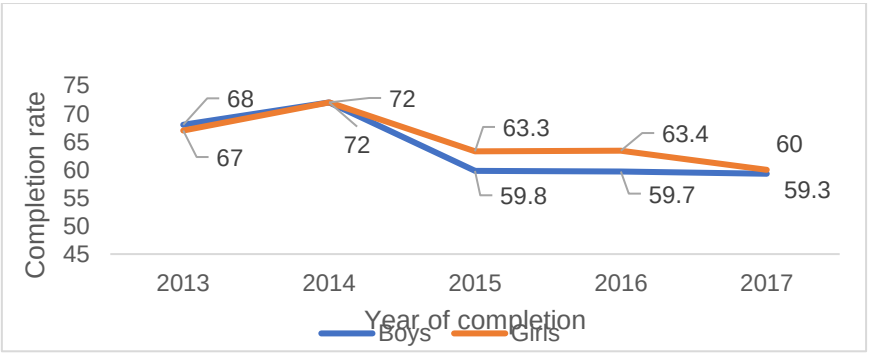
Source of data: Annual School Census, 2013-2017

There are also cultural factors that have contributed to the high dropout rate for girls because parents and communities prioritize traditional norms and values of girls as wives and mothers over their education, thereby marrying them off at a young age (Neema et al., 2021). In addition, changes in family structure due to the death of parents, loss of means of income and family disintegration have also been mentioned as factors that contribute to school dropout of girls (Colin et al., 2022).

4.2.2 Primary Education Completion: 2013-2017

UNESCO defined “primary completion rate, or gross intake ratio to the last grade of primary education, as the number of new entrants (enrollments minus repeaters) in the last grade of primary education, regardless of age, divided by the population at the entrance age for the last grade of primary education. Data limitations preclude adjusting for students who drop out during the final year of primary education.” Using national data, the estimated primary school completion rate presented in Figure 4.4 shows an increase in completion rate between 2013 and 2014 before it started a decline between 2014 and 2017.

Figure 4.4: National Primary Education Completion Rates: 2013-2017



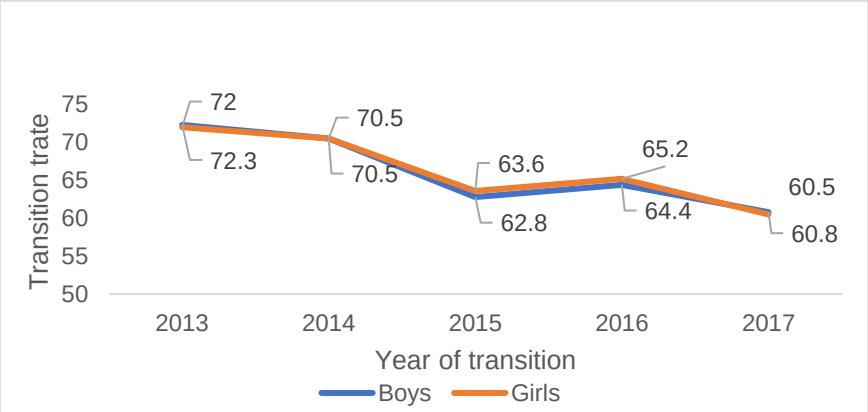
Source of data: Annual School Census, 2013-2017

The decline in the completion rate is the result of the high dropout rate already discussed in the previous section which noted high levels of poverty, child labour, inadequate school infrastructure and cultural factors as some of the main reasons for the low primary completion rate. Due to a lack of national data for 2018-2023, it was not possible to assess the primary completion rate for that period.

4.2.3 Primary to Secondary Education Transition Rates: 2013-2017

The transition from primary to secondary education is an important indicator of HCD. It has both individual and social benefits. At the individual level, it equips individuals with advanced knowledge and skills needed for higher education, improved employability, higher incomes and increased opportunities for social mobility. At the societal level, the transition from primary to secondary education contributes to greater social integration, greater social equity, and a skilled labour force needed to drive economic development and socioeconomic transformation.

Figure 4.5: National Primary to Secondary Transition Rate 2013-2017



Data on primary to secondary transition in Uganda for 2013-2017 is presented in Figure 4.6, showing that there was a decline in the transition rate from approximately 72% in 2013 to about 60% in 2017. There were no differences between boys and girls in the transition from primary to secondary education. The low transition rate from primary to secondary education could be attributed to the prohibitive cost of secondary education for most rural families, the limited access to secondary schools in rural areas and gender preferences in education that favours boys while preferring traditional roles for girls as wives and mothers as required by cultural norms. However, due to a lack of national data for 2018-2023, it was not possible to assess the primary to secondary transition rate for Uganda for the above period.

4.3 Enrolment and Transition in Selected Study Schools: 2021

The study examined the primary school enrolment and transition to completion of primary education by learners in selected schools from Adjumani, Yumbe and Bugweri districts. The purpose is to examine the inter-grade transition and more specifically, to assess the transition rates from P1 to P7 using the number of learners enrolled in each grade in 2021. As expected in nearly all schools in rural and urban areas, the results presented in Table 4.1 show that

overall, except for a few schools, the number of girls enrolled in P1 is higher than that of boys suggesting that parity in enrolment between boys and girls was achieved. However, the number of learners transitioning from P1 through completion at P7 declined nearly monotonically for both boys and girls in rural and urban schools, suggesting an equally high dropout rate for both genders.

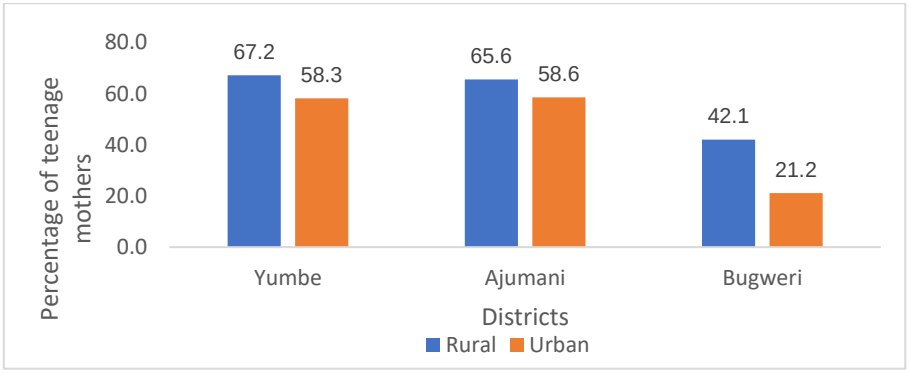
Table 4.1 Enrolment in Primary Schools in Rural and Urban Settings, 2021

District/Grade	Rural Schools				Urban Schools			
	Boys		Girls		Boys		Girls	
Grade	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
				YUMBE				
P1	316	32.5	352	35.1	123	22.9	140	19.0
P2	210	21.6	231	23.1	84	15.6	110	14.9
P3	158	16.2	149	14.9	102	19.0	121	16.4
P4	156	16.0	149	14.9	77	14.3	168	22.8
P5	64	6.6	61	6.1	64	11.9	103	14.0
P6	45	4.6	40	4.0	45	8.4	52	7.1
P7	24	2.5	20	2.0	42	7.8	43	5.8
Total	973	100.0	1002	100.0	537	100.0	737	100.0
				ADJUMANI				
P1	80	21.7	70	23.3	95	16.2	106	15.6
P2	63	17.1	57	19.0	86	14.7	101	14.9
P3	57	15.5	56	18.7	114	19.5	110	16.2
P4	68	18.5	53	17.7	105	17.9	131	19.3
P5	51	13.9	32	10.7	98	16.7	99	14.6
P6	30	8.2	21	7.0	43	7.3	90	13.3
P7	19	5.2	11	3.7	45	7.7	41	6.0
Total	368	100.0	300	100.0	586	100.0	678	100.0
				BUGWERI				
P1	57	25.8	69	37.9	112	24.0	111	24.6
P2	39	17.6	20	11.0	72	15.5	69	15.3
P3	48	21.7	30	16.5	60	12.9	56	12.4
P4	17	7.7	30	16.5	65	13.9	64	14.2
P5	29	13.1	19	10.4	57	12.2	52	11.5
P6	22	10.0	13	7.1	55	11.8	56	12.4
P7	9	4.1	11	6.0	45	9.7	44	9.7
Total	**221**	**100.0**	**182**	**100.0**	**466**	**100.0**	**452**	**100.0**

The finding further shows that in nearly all schools, in both rural and urban areas, the intergrade transition rate and primary 7 completion rate were lower for girls than for boys, confirming that fewer girls than boys complete P7. The factors influencing the higher dropout of girls before primary 7 in the study district have been attributed to several factors including household poverty, cultural factors, and school factors and these have been discussed exhaustively in objective 2 which determined the factors that exacerbate the dropout of girls in upper primary and secondary school education in the study districts.

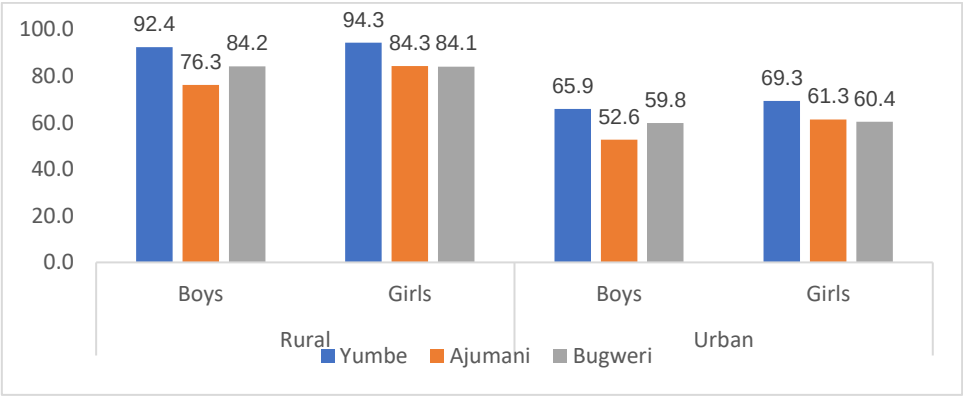
However, an important observation is that the dropout rate for boys and girls escalated significantly from P5. Among girls enrolled in schools in Yumbe and Adjumani, more than 65% and 58% of girls in rural and urban areas respectively who enrolled in P5 dropped out of school before completing P7. Figure 4.6 presents the distribution of girls who enrolled in P5 but dropped out by P7 by district and place of residence.

Figure 4.6: Girls Dropped Out by Place of Residence and Districts



The dropout rates for both boys and girls using data on enrolment in P1 and P7 in 2021 were used to assess the transition rate of learners enrolled in P1 but dropped out of school before P7. The findings presented in Figure 4.7 revealed that dropout between P1 and P7 are highest in Yumbe district followed by Bugweri districts; dropout rates are higher in rural schools, and in both rural and urban settings, dropout rates are higher among girls.

Figure 4.7: Dropout Rates by Grade Place of Residence and Districts



Overall, over 84% of girls in rural schools and over 60% of girls in urban schools dropped out of school before reaching P7.

4.4 School Reentry of Teenage Mothers

Although parity to access and enrolment in education for boys and girls has been achieved in Uganda, the ultimate goal for equity and equality in education between boys and girls has largely not been achieved. This has been because of the high dropout rate of girls from the education system in general and at the primary level in particular. One of the factors leading to high dropout rates among teenage girls from the school system is pregnancy and motherhood. Reentry into the school system at primary and secondary levels for all teenage dropouts and teenage mothers, in particular, is a key requirement for addressing equity and equality in education for boys and girls and improving lifelong opportunities for women. One of the objectives of this study is to assess the school reentry status of 428 teenage mothers and examine the factors that influenced the likelihood of their returning to school.

Overall, the findings show that of the 428 girls who became pregnant, only 39.3% reentered the school system. The differentials in reentry are examined by selected demographic and social characteristics of teenage mothers. The demographic factors include the age at pregnancy and current age while the social factors are grade at pregnancy, level of education at pregnancy, religious affiliation, marital status and place of residence. Table 4.2 presents differentials in school reentry by age at pregnancy and current age of the teenage girls. The table shows that only 14.8% of teenage mothers <15 years of age returned to school compared to 42.3% and 42.1% of teenage mothers who become pregnant at the age of 15-17 years and 18 years or older respectively.

Table 4.2 Reentry Status of Teenage Mothers by Selected Characteristics

Characteristics	School Reentry Status		Total number	p-value
	Reentered school	Did not reenter school		
Age at Pregnancy				
<15	14.8	85.1	60	0.001
15-17	42.3	57.9	200	
18+	42.1	57.9	168	
Current Age				
<15	52.4	47.6	27	0.194
15-17	40.9	59.1	127	
18-19	40.0	60.0	155	
20+	51.2	48.8	125	
Total	**39.3**	**60.7**	**428**	

Differentials of school reentry by the current age of teenage mothers show no significant differences in the influence of current age and the likelihood of teenage mothers returning to school. Slightly more than half (52%) of mothers aged <15 years and a similar number (51%) of mothers aged 20 years or older returned to school.

The above results suggest that girls who become pregnant at older ages are more physically and emotionally mature, and more capable of coping with the stresses associated with teenage pregnancy and motherhood even when they return to school. They are also likely to be more motivated to complete a level of education and have a better and clearer understanding of the value of education leading to their reentry back to school. One of the teenage mothers who returned to school testified why she chose to return to school:

> *I became pregnant when I was in Grade 7 and soon got married. After giving birth to twins they later became seriously ill and they were admitted to hospital. One day I noticed that some of the nurses who came to look after the children were very young and looked like they were my age mates. I later learned that they were studying at the nurse training school in the hospital. I was shocked but was motivated and inspired by the nurses. After the children were discharged and we returned home I decided to return to my family and told my father that I wanted to return to school and he agreed. I am now back to school in P 7.*

Furthermore, the study assessed the influence of selected social characteristics of pregnant/teenage mothers on the likelihood of school reentry. Table 4.3 shows that the likelihood of returning to school varied by the level of education at pregnancy. The table shows

that the likelihood of school reentry increased with the level of education attained by girls when girls became pregnant.

Table 4.3 Teenage Mothers and School Reentry by Selected Social Factors

Characteristics	School Reentry Status		Total number	p-value
	Reentered school	Did not reenter school		
Level of Education				
Primary	2.7	97.3	260	0.000
Secondary	95.8	4.2	168	
Grade at Pregnancy				
<5	1.7	98.3	47	0.000
5-7	3.0	97.0	267	
S1-2	95.8	4.2	114	
Religious Affiliation				
Catholic	41.3	58.7	167	0.469
Protestant	43.8	56.2	146	
Muslim	48.7	57.3	115	
Marital Status				
Single	54.1	45.6	237	0.000
Married	31.4	68.6	191	
Place of Residence				
Urban	44.1	55.9	102	0.542
Rural	44.2	55.8	326	
Total	**44.2**	**55.8**	**428**	

About 2.7%, compared to 95.8% of girls who became pregnant at primary and secondary education levels respectively, returned to school. The findings of the study show that teenage motherhood is more prevalent at Grades 5-7 of primary and in Seniors 1-2. The table further shows that returning to school increased with the Grade at which girls became pregnant. Whereas only 1.7% and 3% of girls who became pregnant at less than Grade 5 and Grade 5-7 returned to school respectively, nearly 96% of girls who became pregnant at Senior 1-2, reentered schooling. The finding suggests that girls who become pregnant at higher levels of education are more likely to return to school. This is likely because they are mature and better understand the long-term benefits of education and, therefore, willing to participate in flexible learning programs. The study found that the Accelerated Secondary Education Program (ASEP) provided by Windle Trust International has successfully returned many boys and girls including teenage mothers to secondary education. The beneficiaries of the program are refugees and refugee-hosting communities. A community leader familiar with ASEP reported that:

> *Windle supports students who dropped out for reasons such as forced marriage, early and unwanted pregnancy, family poverty and the need to work, or due to school closures during the Covid-19 pandemic. ASEP gives them the chance to return to school and provides childcare facilities and services for teenage mothers.*

In addition, compared to primary education, there are more alternative education opportunities for girls who drop out of secondary school including several vocational education programs. Learners who drop out of secondary education may also have stronger networks that may encourage them to enroll in these vocational education programs. A successful organization

that provides vocational education for school dropout youth is CEFARH Foundation Uganda operating in Northern Uganda. One of the beneficiaries of CEFARH, a teenage mother reported:

> *When I decided to return to school, one of my friends introduced me to CEFARH which provides training for youth in tailoring, hairdressing, motor vehicle repairs and making liquid soap. I chose to study tailoring and I have no regrets. I am now financially stable making my own income at my own pace while looking after my child.*

Another factor that significantly influenced the reentry of teenage mothers to school is marital status. The results presented in Table 4.3 show that 54.1% of teenage mothers who remained single reentered schooling compared to only 31.4% of married teenage mothers. Apart from the childcare responsibilities of teenage mothers, married teenage mothers have additional responsibilities as wives that can impede their likelihood of returning to school. This can occur due to forced exclusion by husbands, household responsibilities, low self-esteem and fear of stigma at school as already observed by a previous study (Mukabana et al., 2024). Other factors that have been identified by previous studies include age at marriage, partners' education, and wealth status of the marital household (Howlader et al., 2023). However, single mothers remain more autonomous and can schooling choices individually, especially if they have family support than married teenagers, making it easier for them to reenter schooling, than married teenagers who need the approval of their husbands. A married teenage mother's testimony illustrates well how a husband can be an obstacle to school reentry.

> *I know a young girl who, after becoming pregnant and giving birth, returned to school. But when I told my man that I also wanted to return to school, he flatly declined and asked me, what are you going to get from school that I do not give you.*

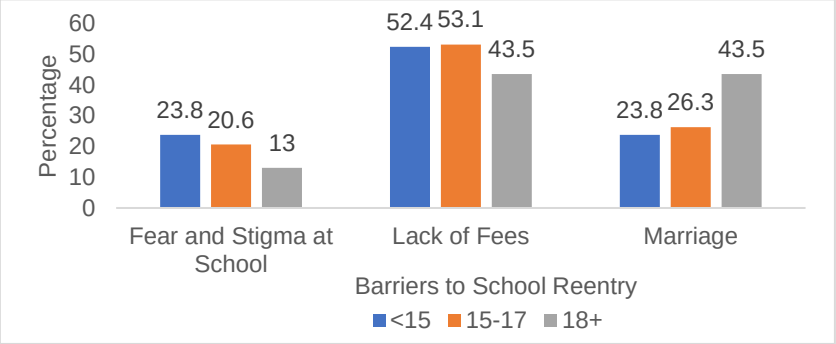
The study also assessed the effect of urban and rural settings on school reentry. The differences in education outcomes between rural and urban stings in sub-Saharan Africa in general and Uganda in particular are well documented. The evidence suggests that the retention of learners, both boys and girls and their performances are better in urban than rural settings, due to the differences in individual, family and school environments (Ishii & Meke, 2022; Sumida & Kawata, 2021). Uganda's education landscape suggests that schools in urban settings perform far better than rural schools. There is also a stark difference between enrollment and dropout between rural and urban schools that has already been discussed earlier. However, a comparison of school reentry of teenage mothers in urban and rural settings did not show any significant differences. The results in Table 3 show a similar and low proportion (44%) of the teenage mothers who returned to school in both rural and urban areas of the study districts. This low and similar finding suggests that cultural, family, community and school environments are similar in rural and urban settings in of districts that participated in the study.

4.5 Barriers to School Reentry

The study identified three key barriers to the reentry and retention of teenage mothers through different grades of primary and secondary education. The findings are presented by age and grade at pregnancy. There is evidence suggesting that age and grade at pregnancy can exacerbate the barriers to the reentry and retention of girls who previously became pregnant in their education journey.

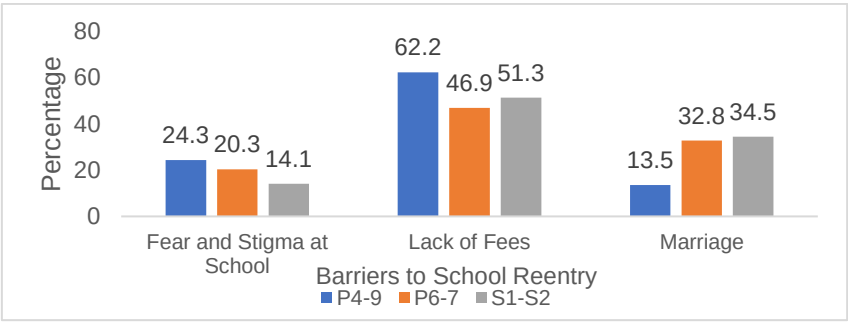
The findings presented in Figure 4.8 show that regardless of age at pregnancy, lack of fees, followed by marriage are the two major barriers to school reentry for pregnant/teenage mothers. The lack of appropriate support from family and other sources, and the marriage of pregnant/teenage mothers could impede school reentry. The result further showed that compared to other ages at pregnancy/motherhood, girls aged 18 years or older at pregnancy/motherhood are more likely not to return to school due to marriage. Combining the

Figure 4.8: Barriers to Return to School by Age at Pregnancy



equally heavy responsibilities of schooling, marriage and childcare, could be insurmountable for young mothers and, therefore, major barriers to returning to school. The findings, further suggest that addressing poverty by providing financial support to teenage mothers to pay fees, and scholastic and personal effects could greatly increase the number of pregnant/teenage mothers returning to school. In addition, the results show that the adverse effect of stigma on school reentry is higher among pregnant/teenage mothers aged <15 years of age at pregnancy/motherhood. The finding suggests that returning to school is influenced by fear of stigmatization by fellow learners and teachers.

Figure 4.9: Barriers to Return to School by Grade at Pregnancy



Data from the in-depth interviews and FGDs appear to corroborate the above findings. The data shows that the leading barrier to school reentry identified by in-depth and FGD data is poverty. The data suggest that households are already overburdened by the expenses of sending children to school under the normal school program. Having a girl repeating a class due to pregnancy or motherhood is an additional burden that parents/caretakers want to avoid. A parent and a community leader reported how poverty is a barrier to school reentry:

It is very frustrating to see a girl whose cost of education was already paid drop out of school due to pregnancy. It means all that money was wasted. Now parents are being told to return girls who become pregnant and left school, back to school. Where will the money for fees, uniforms, books and other needs at school come from?

Families and communities sometimes think that returning a teenage mother to school is like throwing away money preferring that they would rather be married off. They say the girls are already spoiled and spending money which is difficult to find on them is not worth it.

My parents told me that they were poor and could not afford to send me back to school. I should get married. The money available will be used to send my siblings to school. This is mainly because families are becoming poorer as the cost of education is increasing.

I cannot afford to go to school and look after my baby at the same time. I just do not have the money. I have to work hard and get money to look after my child instead of schooling.

The data from FGD participants, who are currently learners suggest that the reason why pregnant/teenage mothers do not return to school is due to fear and shame as pregnancy among unmarried teenage girls is considered to be a serious violation of not only school policy but also religious and community moral doctrines. Cultural norms also encourage teenage mothers to opt for marriage instead of completing their education because communities disapprove reentry and retention of teenage mothers in school. In this regard, girls who become pregnant at school are scorned, creating fear and shame among them. A learner's testimony reads*:*

Most teenage mothers do not return to school because of fear and shame. They think other learners will embarrass them and call them all sorts of bad names.

In our culture, girls are usually married early. So, when a girl gets pregnant while at school, it is like giving the parents and the community a reason to marry you off.

In some communities getting pregnant while a student is a very big shame to oneself and families. The only solution in such cases is to go and get married.

Box 4.1 presents the most prevalent barriers to the reentry of girls who previously dropped out of school due to pregnancy/motherhood:

Box 4.1: Barriers to School Reentry of Teenage Mothers
- The negative perception of self-worth by teenage mothers - Negative family and community perceptions of teenage mothers. - School rules that punish teenage girls who get pregnant with expulsion. - Cultural prohibitions that regard teenage premarital pregnancy and childbearing as a disgrace to communities and families. - Religious prohibitions especially in schools founded by religious organizations. - Reluctance and unwillingness to implement policies and guidelines that promote the reentry of teenage mothers into school.

Teenage mothers have also provided their perspectives on the barriers to school reentry suggesting that childcare is a major barrier to school reentry for many teenage mothers. This is because most of them do not have nannies to look after their children when they are away

from home. The data from teenage mothers also suggest that once they got pregnant, they were married off which further complicated the possibility of returning to school due to a significant erosion of individual autonomy.

> *Teenage mothers fail to return to school because they have to care for their babies. My mother said I should stay home and look after the baby because I wanted a baby instead of schooling.*

> *Once you are married, you cannot individually decide to return to school. If your partner (husband) does not consent, you cannot go back to school. Period.*

4.6 Completion of Primary and Transition to Secondary and Alternative Education

4.6.1 Completion of Primary Education

Completion of primary education is a milestone achievement for all learners. However, several factors influence the completion of primary education in Uganda. Previous research has grouped the factors affecting primary education completion rate into individual, familial socioeconomic, and community levels factors. In this study, the completion of primary education by teenage mothers was assessed using various perspectives including the individual, family, community and school environments. At the individual level, we examined the effects of age and grade at pregnancy and selected social factors including religion, marital status and place of residence of the learners.

Of the 260 girls who became pregnant/mothers at the primary level of education, 104 returned to primary school. Of these, 68.3% completed primary education. Table 4.4 shows that nearly 71% and 69% of the girls who became pregnant at <15 and 15-17 years of age respectively, completed primary education compared to only 61.5% of those who became pregnant at 18 years or older. The effect of current age on completion of primary education also shows that completion rates significantly increased with the current age of the girls with more older adolescents (80.0%) compared to younger teenage mothers (14.3%), completing primary education. The results suggest that completion of primary education decreased with increasing age at pregnancy/motherhood and older girls at pregnancy/motherhood are less likely to complete primary education. On the other hand, the finding suggests that older girls by their current age are more likely to complete primary education than younger pregnant/teenage mothers.

The effect of grade at pregnancy on completion of primary education by pregnant/teenage mothers was also assessed. The results in Table 4.4 show that girls who become pregnant/mothers in Grades 6-7 (76.7) are significantly more likely to complete primary education than those who become pregnant/mothers in Grades less than Grade 6 (46.4%). This is likely to be the result of a combination of factors including girls wanting to return to school, support from parents for girls in a candidate class and the requirement of candidate learners who become pregnant to sit for their final examinations by the guidelines of MoE&S.

Furthermore, we examined the effect of religious denominations on the completion of primary education. Although the results show that Catholic learners (62.9%) who become pregnant/mothers complete primary education, probably due to their strict adherence to the

catholic moral codes, no significant differences in primary education completion rates were noted between Protestants (70.0%) and Muslims (72.4%). The findings also appear to disapprove of the commonly held notion that Muslims do not encourage the education of girls and would quickly marry them off when they become pregnant. The lack of differentials in school reentry by religious denominations could be explained by the experience of common barriers faced by girls in school reentry, non-discriminatory policies that regulate the education sector in Uganda, including guidelines for the reentry of learners who dropped out of school. There is also an inter-denominational convergence of views on the importance of education for girls in Uganda, making it possible for religious groups to support the reentry of pregnant/teenage mothers in school.

Table 4.4 Teenage Mothers Completing Primary Education by Selected Characteristics

Characteristics	**Primary Education completion status**		**Total**	**p-value**
	Yes	**N0**		
Age at pregnancy				
<15	70.8	29.2		0.840
15-17	68.7	31.3		
18+	61.5	38.5		
Current age				
<15	14.3	85.7	7	0.005
15-20	70.7	29.3	82	
20+	80.0	20.0	15	
Grade at Pregnancy				
4-5	46.4	51.6	31	0.005
6-7	76.7	23.3	73	
Religion				
Catholic	62.9	37.1	35	0.684
Protestant	70.0	30.0	40	
Muslim	72.4	27.6	29	
Marital Status				
Single	74.0	26.0	73	0.041
Married	59.8	45.2	31	
Place of Residence				
Urban	60.0	40.0	25	0.218
Rural	70.9	29.1	79	
Total	**68.3**	**31.7**	**104**	

Another factor that significantly affects the likelihood of completing primary education is the marital status of pregnant/teenage mothers. The data in Table 4.4 show that learners who remain single (74.0%) after pregnancy and childbirth are significantly more likely to complete primary education than those who are married (59.8%). This difference could arise because single mothers, apart from childcare, do not have additional household responsibilities as married teenagers. They are also, unlike their married counterparts, not bound by the cultural requirements of bride price and, therefore, can make independent decisions to return to school and complete their education.

The place of residence has been proven to greatly influence primary education completion rates. The study has already shown in section 4.3 that rural schools experience higher dropout rates than urban schools before P 7. However, although the results align with the above observation, there is no significant difference in the primary completion rate between pregnant/teenage mothers in rural (60.0%) and urban (70.9%) settings, which could be explained by similar individual, and family and community circumstances, and school environments faced by learners in rural and urban settings in the district of study.

4.6.2 Transition from Primary to Secondary Education

The transition from primary to secondary education is equally important as it marks the beginning of another phase of education that aims to transform learners to become more mature academically, skilled and responsible members of society. The findings of the study show that of the 104 pregnant/teenage mothers who returned to school, nearly 53% transitioned to secondary education, which is more than half of the learners who returned to school. Another 13.5% joined alternative education pathways after completing primary education.

The findings show that the proportion of learners transitioning from primary to secondary education decreased with age at pregnancy from 62.5% among the <15 years old to 53.7% among the 15-17 year old. Only 30.8% of the girls aged 18 years or older at pregnancy/motherhood transitioned to secondary education. Conversely, 23.1% of girls who became pregnant at 18 years or older, joined alternative education pathways after completing P7 compared to those who became pregnant at younger ages. Regarding the effect of current age, the results show that the proportion of pregnant/teenage mothers who joined secondary education decreased from 14.3% at <15 years of age to 56.1% at 15-19 years of age. Conversely, girls joining alternative education increased with the increase in current age from 14.3% at <15 years of age to 26.7 at 20 years or older. The results show that the transition from primary to secondary and alternative education is significantly influenced by the current age of girls.

Table 4.4 presents results on the effect of grade at pregnancy on transition from primary to secondary education. The result shows a significant association between the grade at pregnancy and transitions to secondary and alternative education. About 62% of learners who became pregnant at Grades 6-7 joined secondary education compared to only 32.3% among those who became pregnant at Grades 4-5. However, more girls who became pregnant in Grades 6-7 (16.1%) joined alternative education compared to only 12.3% of girls who became pregnant/mothers in Grades 4-5. The likely reasons for this finding have already been discussed in Section 4.6.1.

Furthermore, the study examined the association between religious affiliation and transition to secondary and alternative education for pregnant/teenage mothers. The results in Table 4.4 revealed a slightly lower proportion of Catholic pregnant/teenage mothers joining both secondary (48.6%) and alternative education (11.4%) compared to Protestant (57.5%; 15.0%) and Muslim (51.7%; 13.8%) pregnant/teenage mothers. However, the results revealed a similar direction and pattern for all religious groups, suggesting that Uganda's non-discriminative education aspirations and policy impact similarly on education in general, and

girls' education in particular. The result also shows that religious differences are not influencers of transitions from primary to secondary and alternative education for girls and women.

The study also assessed the effect of marital status on transitions from primary to secondary and alternative education by pregnant/teenage mothers. The results show that single mothers are more likely (58.9%) to transition to secondary education than married teenage mothers (38.7%). However, married teenage mothers are more likely to join alternative education systems (22.6%) than single teenage mothers (9.6%). The results also show that marital status is a significant influencer of transitions from primary to secondary and alternative education. The differentials between single and married teenage women in school reentry could be explained by differences in their roles and rights as single and married women.

Table 4.5 Transitions from Primary to Secondary and Alternative Education

Characteristics	Transition to Secondary Education		Transition to Alternative Education	Total	p-value
	Yes	No			
Age at Pregnancy					
<15	62.5	25.0	12.5	24	0.433
15-17	53.7	34.3	11.9	67	
18+	30.8	46.2	23.1	13	
Current Age					
<15	14.3	71.4	14.3	7	0.082
15-19	56.1	32.9	11.0	82	
20+	53.3	20.0	26.7	14	
Grade at Pregnancy					
4-5	32.3	51.6	16.1	31	0.018
6-7	61.6	26.0	12.3	73	
Religion					
Catholic	48.6	40.0	11.4	35	0.854
Protestant	57.6	27.5	15.0	40	
Muslim	51.7	34.5	13.8	29	
Marital Status					
Single	58.9	31.5	9.6	73	0.093
Married	38.7	38.7	22.6	31	
Place of Residence					
Urban	44.0	36.0	20.0	25	0.452
Rural	55.7	32.9	11.4	79	
Total	**52.9**	**37.1**	**13.5**	**104**	

The transition from primary to secondary and alternative education was examined by place of residence. The results show that transition to secondary education was higher among rural girls (55.7%) than urban girls (44.0%). However, transitions to alternative education pathways are higher among teenage mothers in urban (20.0%) than in rural settings (11.4%). While the relocating of urban teenage mothers to schools in rural settings could explain the higher proportion joining secondary education in rural settings, the low supply of alternative education systems in rural settings appears to explain low enrolments in alternative education.

4.7 Conclusion

The study found that at the national level, enrolment in primary and secondary education increased for both boys and girls and parity in enrolment of boys and girls was already achieved by 2017. Furthermore, for the 2013-2017 period for which national data is available, the completion rate of primary education and transition rate from primary to secondary education also increased. However, there was stagnation and decline in the primary completion rate and transition from primary to secondary education.

The assessment of parity in enrolment for boys and girls in the study districts was found to be consistent with national trends and patterns. However, retention from P1 through P7 was poor implying that the dropout rate for both boys and girls was higher at each successive grade to P7. Furthermore, the assessment of retention suggests that more than 60% of the learners, especially girls who enrolled in P1, dropped out of school before P7. Poverty, teenage pregnancy and motherhood, early marriage and negative peer influence were some of the factors for low retention. Regarding the school reentry of girls who previously dropped out of school due to teenage pregnancy/motherhood, the rate of school reentry is low. Poverty, poor perception of self-worth, fear of stigmatization at schools, being married and childcare responsibilities were reported as the main barriers to school reentry, retention and transitions from primary to secondary and alternative education. However, the findings suggest that regulations permitting the reentry and retention of girls who get pregnant or become teenage mothers while at school are becoming effective.

CHAPTER FIVE

5.0 Objective 2

Determine the Factors that Exacerbate Teenage Pregnancy and the Dropout of Girls in Primary and Secondary Education

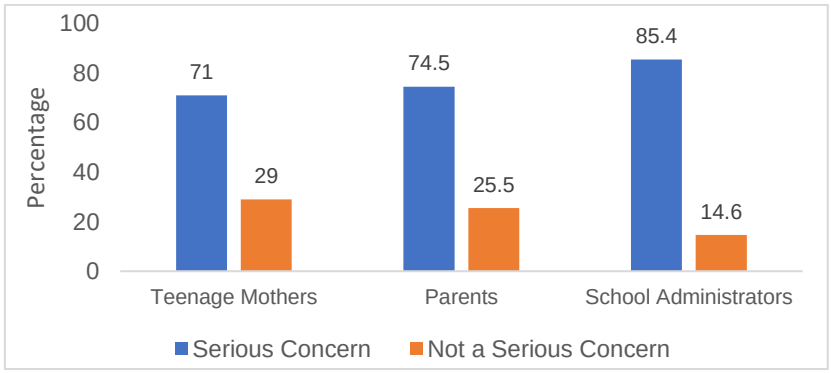
5.1 Introduction

Teenage pregnancy and school dropout are high and pervasive in the global south in general and sub-Saharan Africa in particular. Uganda is one of the countries with high teenage pregnancy rates and high school dropout rates among girls. The prevalence of pregnancy among teenage girls is particularly high and concerning at primary education, which is also the period during which girls experience significant physiological, psychological and emotional transformations that are normal but could predispose girls to challenges leading to poor health and development outcomes. This section reports the patterns and factors influencing teenage pregnancy and school dropout in the study districts.

5.2 Perceptions on the Prevalence of Teenage Pregnancy

Knowledge of the perception of learners, communities and schools on the prevalence of teenage pregnancy is important for developing interventions to prevent the vice. In this regard, teenage mothers, parents/guardians and school administrators were asked whether or not they consider teenage pregnancy in schools and their communities a serious concern. The results presented in Figure 5.1 show that 71% of teenage mothers reported that teenage pregnancy is a serious concern in their communities. The results of parents and school administrators corroborated the perception of teenage mothers with nearly 75% of parents and 85% of school administrators confirming that teenage pregnancy is indeed a serious concern in communities needing urgent attention.

Figure 5.1: Perceptions on the Prevalence of Teenage Pregnancy



Learners in their FGDs also revealed that teenage pregnancy in communities is a matter of concern. The learners unanimously reported that teenage pregnancy involving school girls is becoming pervasive. Learners reported that teenage pregnancy rose dramatically during the two years of school closures and lockdowns caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, causing the escalation of teenage pregnancy among learners which led to a high number of girls dropping

out of school. The following are the testimonies made by a learner and a community leader about teenage pregnancy:

> *Teenage pregnancy has always been an issue, but it increased very much during the Covid-19 pandemic. A lot of school girls became pregnant and others got married and did not return to school even when schools reopened.*

> *Culturally, girls marry young, normally between 15 and 19 years of age. So, in a way, becoming a mother was normal for married girls. However, in the last few years, the number of girls becoming pregnant while at school has increased. The COVID-19 pandemic lockdown made a bad situation worse.*

Teenage pregnancy is a serious concern because it is associated with adverse educational impacts on individuals and the broader society. At the individual level, the immediate effect of teenage pregnancy is the disruption of the education of girls due to school dropout and marriage. The failure to continue with education reduces opportunities for employment and participation in the formal structures of society by girls. For those who return to school, challenges of childcare and inadequate support, stigmatization at school and economic challenges lead to voluntary drop out of school, absenteeism from schooling and poor academic performance. The adverse impact of teenage motherhood is not only limited to teenage mothers. It also extends to their children by showing the seeds for an intergenerational transfer of vulnerabilities and perpetuation of teenage pregnancy. In the following sections, the patterns of teenage pregnancy as an important factor for the dropout of girls from education are discussed.

5.3 Patterns of Teenage Pregnancy and Motherhood

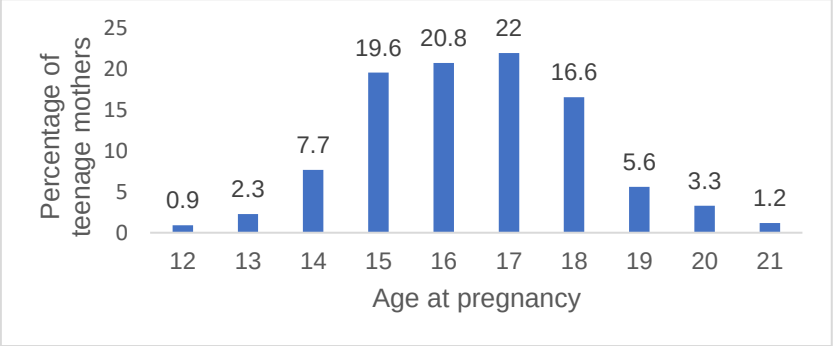
Teenage pregnancy is influenced by demographic, socioeconomic, health and cultural factors. Understanding the patterns of teenage pregnancy is critical in developing interventions to prevent further rise and mitigate the adverse health and development impacts of teenage pregnancy and motherhood. The study presents the patterns of teenage pregnancy/motherhood. The causes of teenage pregnancy and its perceived and actual impacts are also discussed.

5.3.1 Age at Pregnancy

In the 21st century, teenagers are influenced by many factors ranging from the widespread use of social media and fading traditional values. As they navigate the complexities of teenage life, they are exposed to a myriad of influences that affect their sexuality. One of the factors influencing teenage pregnancy and motherhood is the age-associated physiological and psychological changes experienced by girls.

The results presented in Figure 5.2 show that the prevalence of teenage pregnancy/motherhood increased with age from 12 years (0.9%) and peaked at 22% at 17 years of age before starting a gradual decline to 16.6% at 18 years of age and further to 1.2% at 21 years of age. The observed age pattern of pregnancy/motherhood is consistent with the physiological, psychological and emotional transformation girls experience as they grow from childhood into adults.

Figure 5.2: Distribution of Teenage Mothers by Age at Pregnancy



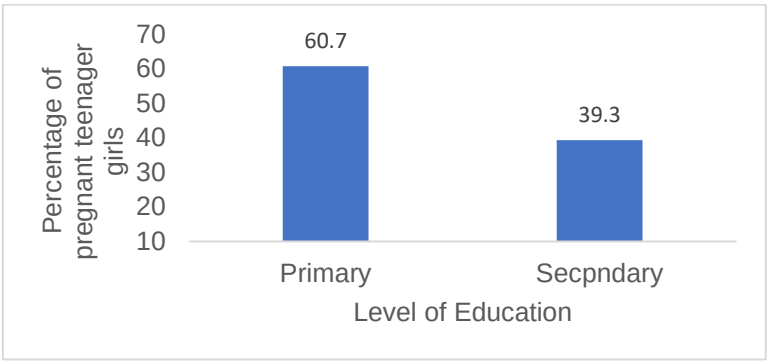
Although dropout of school is inevitable regardless of the age at pregnancy mainly due to the current regulatory and cultural regimes regarding teenage pregnancy, the return of teenage mothers to school is made difficult by institutional rigidities, weak policy implementation, and economic and cultural barriers (Initiative for Social and Economic Rights (ISER), 2022). Additionally, individual circumstances of teenage mothers such as the health effects of pregnancy, self-esteem and perception of self-worth, the ability to manage school and community stigmatization, lack of access to flexible education programs and the financial burden of motherhood (Ministry of Education, Science, Technology and Sports, 2016) are more likely to affect younger teenage mothers more than older teenage mothers, thereby preventing their return to school.

5.3.2 Level of Education and Grade at Pregnancy

Similar to the effects of age, the level of education and grade play important roles in the prevention of teenage motherhood. Previous research has shown that the prevalence of teenage pregnancy is higher at the primary than at the secondary level of education (Nuru Nabwire, 2023). The finding of this study appears to support this earlier finding and shows that the prevalence of teenage pregnancy decreases with the level of education.

Figure 5.3 shows that the majority, 260, equivalent to 60.7% of the 428 teenage learners who became pregnant, were in primary education. Only 39.3% were in lower secondary education at the time they became pregnant. The higher prevalence of teenage pregnancy at the primary

Figure 5.3: Distribution of Teenage Mothers by Level of Education



level is mainly a result of the combined effects of the physiological, psychological and emotional changes during teenage, the lack of awareness of the risks of sexual activity at a young age and the lack of age-appropriate sexual education and guidance at school and home.

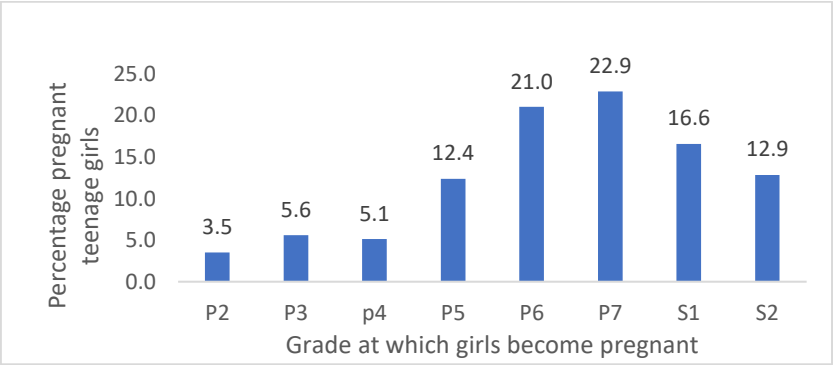
FGD findings suggest that schools and parents do not provide appropriate sex education in schools. The sexual education provided at schools and parents focuses more on what learners should not do than making them know and understand holistically the dynamics of sexuality issues along the life course of young people, including the provision and uptake of SRHS. Teenage mothers reported that:

> *At school, we do not get proper sexual education. The teachers are mostly men and many of them only threaten girls when talking about sexuality matters.*

> *Our parents do not explain to us much about sexuality either. What they only do is give orders, don't do this don't do that or else….!*

Furthermore, the differentials in pregnancy among teenage girls by grade at which the girls became pregnant show that the prevalence of pregnancy increased with the grade of learners, rising from only 3.5% among P2 learners and peaking at 22.9% among P7 learners. On the other hand, the prevalence of pregnancy declined among learners in secondary education from 16.6% in S1 to 12.9% in S2, which projects a positive trajectory in the decline of teenage pregnancy as learners advance to higher grades in secondary education (Figure 5.4).

Figure 5.4: Distribution of Teenage Mothers by Grade at Pregnancy



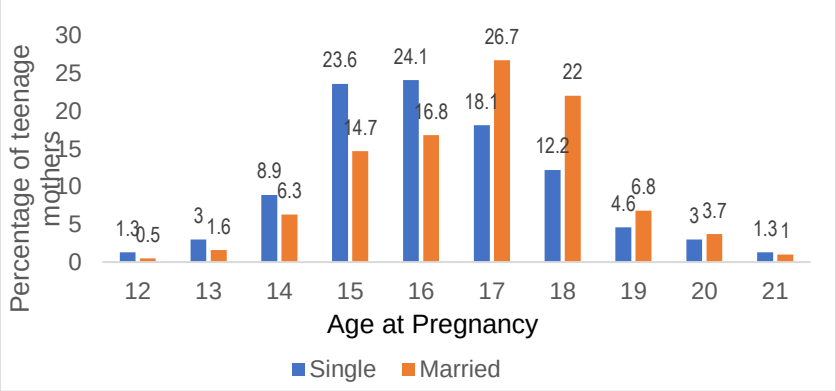
As previously observed, regardless of the grade and level of education, learners who become pregnant at primary and secondary levels of education eventually drop out of school temporarily to give birth or permanently. Previous studies found that many learners who become pregnant in primary do not return to school due to the health effects of pregnancy, individual perception of self-worth, institutional policies, economic situations of the learners and cultural resistance (Morgan et al., 2022; Twalo, 2024). In Uganda, institutional rigidities, economic challenges faced by learners and cultural resistance are major barriers to the return of teenage mothers to school (National Planning Authority, 2024). Furthermore, the above factors also make transitioning from primary to secondary and alternative education pathways difficult.

5.3.3 Teenage Pregnancy/Motherhood and Marital Status

In societies where the age of marriage is low, it is not surprising that many teenage girls get married before the statutory age. However, there is evidence suggesting that a high proportion of marriages among teenagers are the result of unplanned pregnancies. Despite having a legal age and severe penalties for defilement (for marriages or sexual intercourse involving minors under 18 years of age), Uganda is one of the countries where teenage marriage is pervasive. A UNICEF study estimated that the rate of teenage marriage in Uganda stands at 34% for girls below 18 years of age and 7% for girls below 15 years of age (UNICEF, 2022a). There are also significant ethnic and regional variations with the greater Northern Uganda comprising West Nile, Acholi, Lango and Karamoja sub-regions, and Eastern Uganda having higher rates of teenage marriages than the rest of the country. The high rate of teenage marriages in these regions has been blamed on cultural norms that promote early marriage and high poverty levels that act as barriers to girl child education as well as a motivation for early marriage in exchange for bride price.

The assessment of the marital status of teenage mothers who became pregnant when they were still at school is presented in Figure 5.5. The findings show that of the 428 girls, 237 (55.4%) and 191 (44.6%) of the girls were single and married respectively at the time of the study. The results suggest that marriage is more or less an inevitability for older girls who become pregnant when unmarried regardless of age or school. The data shows that while the majority of girls who were younger when they became pregnant remained single, the majority of girls who became pregnant at the ages of 17 and 18 got married and were still married at the time of the study.

Figure 5.5: Marital Status of Teenage Girls by Age at Pregnancy



The findings suggest that there is an opportunity for the reintegration of girls who became pregnant in their early teenage years to school as most of the girls who became pregnant before 17 years of age remained single. Without returning to school, the vulnerability to and susceptibility to a repeat pregnancy increases as the girls get older.

Data from in-depth interviews with teenage mothers and community leaders observed that young women who get pregnant before marriage should get married irrespective of schooling status. Most households are poor and a girl who gets pregnant is not only a source of shame

and conflict in households but also is an economic burden. Below are the testimonies of some teenage mothers:

> *When my mother discovered that I was pregnant, she told me there was nothing more she could do for me. Mine is straight to go and get married to the man who made me pregnant.*

> *In this community, keeping pregnant girls at home is both an embarrassment and an economic burden to parents. The only solution is to make them go into marriage with the men who make them pregnant.*

Tolerance and support for teenage marriage vary across cultural and economic groups in Uganda. The prevalence of early marriage is higher in Northern and Eastern Uganda and lowest in the central region. For example, in the greater northern region that comprises the West Nile, Acholi, Lango and Karamoja sub-regions, teenage marriage is prevalent and culturally supported. In these societies, early marriage is traditionally normative and considered to be a rite of passage from childhood to adulthood, and the marriage of teenage girls is tacitly encouraged under the pretext of securing the social and economic futures of young women (Ayiga & Rampagane, 2013). It is also used as a strategy for improving the household economic situation by acquiring pride price that is often used to marry wives for the brother of the teenage girl who gets married (Neema et al., 2021). In a predominantly patriarchal society, teenage marriage is used to enhance the maternal role of women. Due to the certainty of dropping out of school, becoming pregnant while schooling is, therefore, a license for early marriage in most communities in greater Northern Uganda, which partly explains the poor educational outcomes for women in the region.

5.3.4 Regional Variations in Teenage Pregnancy/Motherhood

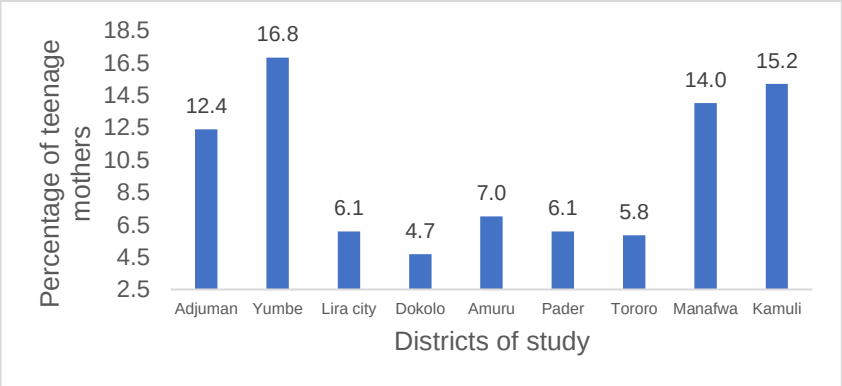
Understanding the prevalence of teenage pregnancy and its variation by district is important for several reasons. These include 1) understanding the role of cultural and economic differences as factors perpetuating teenage pregnancy/motherhood; 2) allocating resources where the need for intervention is highest; 3) promoting interventions such as SRH care interventions that are culturally sensitive more effectively; and 4) making relevant and more effective policies to combat teenage pregnancy/motherhood and child marriage. Anecdotal evidence based on cultural practices, and social and economic conditions, most of which have already been discussed in the previous sections, suggests that the prevalence of child marriage is high in the regions where the study was conducted. The results presented in Figure 5.6 show the variations in pregnancy among teenage girls by district showing that the prevalence of pregnancy/motherhood among teenage girls was highest in Yumbe (16.8%) followed by Kamuli (15.2%) and Manafwa (14%) districts. The findings are consistent with a previous national survey by UNFA (UNFPA, 2022) which found that the study districts were among those with high rates of teenage pregnancy/motherhood.

The regional variations in teenage pregnancy in Uganda have blamed the variations on two main factors. The first of these is cultural differences with the northern and eastern regions having cultural values and norms that support early marriage and practices such as the “embalu” a cultural initiation ceremony of the Bagisu that increases the risk of teenage pregnancy. The second factor is the high level of poverty in Northern and Eastern Uganda

(Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2022b) which continues to contribute to the practice of early marriage in exchange for bride price used to cushion household poverty and parents' inability to provide for girls, driving them into early sexual activity in exchange for money or material needs.

In the case of greater Northern Uganda, the continuing poverty and economic malaise are historical covering over 30 years having started with the overthrow of the Military government of Idi Amin in 1979 and the brutal insurgency of the LRA of Joseph Kony, a successor to the Holy Spirit Movement (HSM) of Alice Lakwena and several other rebel formations. The insurgency and social disruptions caused widespread violence, destruction, and internal displacement into IDP camps and exiles as refugees to the DRC and Sudan/South, significantly affecting young people, especially girls' participation in education even in the post-war recovery period (Oosterom et al., 2022). The adverse effects of insurgencies on women and girls are well illustrated by the distortion of gender roles and family dynamics with women assuming greater family responsibilities often at a very young age, thereby adversely affecting their education. In addition, trends in teenage pregnancy/motherhood in Uganda since 2019 show an increasing trajectory in all districts. The increase has been more remarkable since 2020 suggesting that the Covid-19 pandemic appears to have contributed greatly to the escalating teenage pregnancy in Uganda.

Figure 5.6 Pregnant Teenage Girls by Districts



The trends in teenage pregnancy in Table 5.1 show that teenage pregnancy in the study districts has been increasing over three consecutive years. This suggests that interventions, including those that have been implemented to reduce teenage pregnancy such as legislative frameworks, ASRHS, peer education programs, and initiatives to ensure girls remain in school and community-level sensitizations, have been quite modest or largely unsuccessful. The failure of the programs for the reduction of teenage pregnancy could be attributed to the persistence of cultural norms that support early marriage and bride price and the socioeconomic conditions in greater Northern Uganda that suffered over three decades of social disruption due to the wars and insurgencies described earlier. The continued post-war vulnerability to poverty appears to have influenced the increase in teenage pregnancy and early marriage in greater Northern Uganda (Ochen et al., 2019). The Bugisu and Busoga sub-regions, although socially and economically stable, also have cultural values that encourage early marriage and practices that perpetuate teenage pregnancies (Egwayu, 2022).

The table also shows that for the three years under review, the prevalence of teenage pregnancies in the districts under study increased annually. The collective percentage change for all the districts in the study between 2019 and 2021 was a hooping 70.6%. The findings suggest that the exponential increase in teenage pregnancy between 2020 and 2021 was the direct effect of the Covid-19 pandemic and the economic and social challenges it caused. The high teenage pregnancy rates described above have caused the dropout of thousands of girls from schooling and increased the risk of failure to achieve gender equity and equality in education in Uganda.

Table 5.1 Distribution of Pregnant Teenage by Districts: 2019-2021

	2019		2020		2021		Total		%change 2019/2021
District	**No**	**%**	**No**	**%**	**No**	**%**	**No**	**%**	
Adjumani	1716	6.1	1794	5.6	1853	5.0	5363	5.6	7.4
Yumbe	3840	13.7	3973	12.4	4843	11.2	12656	13.2	20.7
Pader	2061	7.3	2003	6.3	2076	5.6	6140	6.4	0.0
Amur	3004	10.7	2750	8.6	3094	7.7	8848	9.2	2.9
Lira City	-	0.0	2221	6.9	2743	6.2	4964	5.2	19.0
Dokolo	2292	8.1	3098	9.7	3261	8.7	8651	9.0	29.7
Bugweri	1856	6.6	1920	6.0	2014	5.4	5790	6.0	7.0
Kamuli	6009	21.4	6535	20.4	6511	18.3	19055	19.9	7.7
Tororo	5765	20.5	5816	18.2	6711	16.3	18292	19.1	14.1
Manafwa	1588	5.6	1892	5.9	2514	5.3	5994	6.3	36.8
Total	**28131**	**28131**	**32002**	**32002**	**35620**	**35620**	**95753**	**100.0**	**70.6**

UNICEF, 2022

In support of the above findings, Key Informants and teenage mothers testified that:

> *Early marriage is culturally encouraged and traditionally most girls would marry as soon as puberty kicks in. As a result, when a girl gets pregnant, she simply provides herself for her parents to marry her off. But Covid-19 lockdown significantly increased the number of girls who got pregnant and as a result, dropped out of school.*

> *The Covid-19 pandemic was bad but the effect of the pandemic was worse than the disease itself. This is seen by its effects on children, especially girls many of who are now either mothers, are married or both. Pregnancy has ruined futures completely as they may never go back to school.*

In the West Nile region where Yumbe and Adjumani districts are located, the rate of teenage pregnancy is escalating among the refugee population attributed to poverty, inadequate access to SRHS, inadequate parental control and support as parents would from time to time return to South Sudan leaving children to fend for themselves. The refugee communities also share cultural practices that exacerbate early marriage with the host communities, and refugee conditions are major factors in the rise in teenage pregnancy among the refugee population in the region (Okiror et al., 2022). Other studies on teenage pregnancy among refugees blamed the lack of adequate protection along with sexual violence against women and girls, sexual predation and defilement as leading factors for the high teenage pregnancy rate among

refugees (Karooma et al., 2024; Nakisita & Kirabo-Nagemi, 2023). One of the key informants reported:

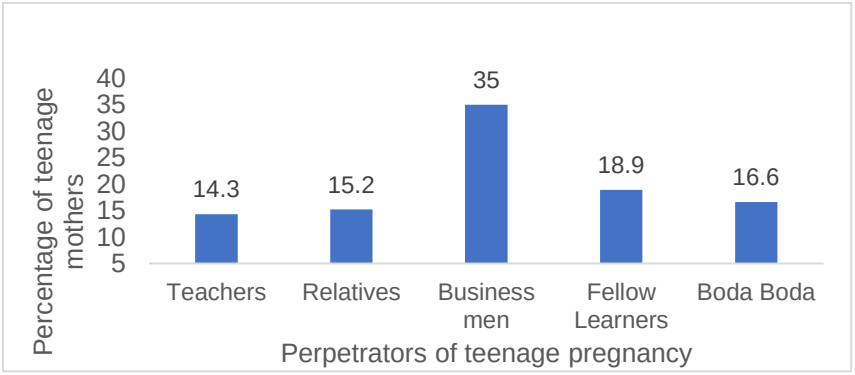
> *Teenage pregnancy is a major problem in the district. However, it is worse in the refugee camps where there are many children without adequate protection. Most of the teenage pregnancies are a result of sexual violence and defilement which are common in these settlements.*

5.4 Perpetrators of Teenage Pregnancy

Perpetrators of teenage pregnancy include institutions and individuals who have significant power and control over teenage girls and society. These include cultural institutions that promote norms and values that encourage child marriage (Cislaghi et al., 2019), school teachers who are entrusted with significant responsibility and authority over learners, individuals with command over resources such as the local economic and political elites, and male peers and fellow learners who are ignorant of sexual and reproductive health matters and are unaware of the consequences of early sexual activity. In the majority of cases, the sexual acts between perpetrators and teenage girls that lead to pregnancy are consensual. Perpetrators exploit the ignorance of teenage girls on sexuality, their lack of knowledge of SRHS&C and their economic vulnerability in having consensual sexual relationships (Bazubagira & Umumararungu, 2023; Kotoh et al., 2022).

The findings in Figure 5.7 show that businessmen (35%) followed by fellow learners (18.9%) and Boda Boda riders (operators of motorcycle taxis) (16.6%) are the leading perpetrators of pregnancy among teenage learners. In addition, teachers (14.3%) and relatives (15.2%) who have the primary responsibility to protect learners are also among the perpetrators of teenage pregnancy.

Figure 5.7: Distribution of Perpetrators of Teenage Pregnancy/Motherhood



The findings from FGDs and in-depth interviews are consistent with the findings presented in Figure 5.7. The FGD data show that financially capable perpetrators influence teenage girls by assuring them of social and economic protection. Male peers on the other hand, some of who are casual acquaintances, often make girls pregnant while experimenting with sexual intercourse. Incidences of incest with close relatives, often living together have also been reported to occur, leading to pregnancy. Some of the key informant participants' reports on perpetrators of teenage pregnancy are presented below:

The local businessmen are a major cause of teenage pregnancy and child marriages. They use money to convince young girls into sexual activities and many of them would abandon the girls if they become pregnant.

Some of the girls are impregnated by their age mates from the same school during acts of casual sex not knowing that it could lead to pregnancy.

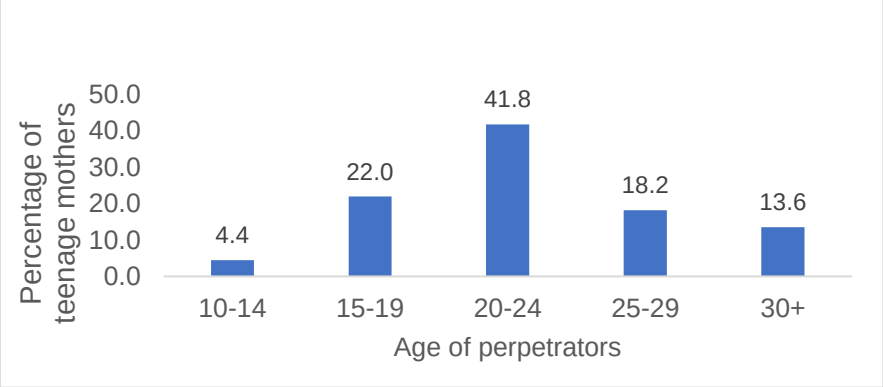
Incidences of incest involving teenage girls and their relatives were reported during the Covid-19 lockdown. This suggests that this vice is there only that it is kept under wraps.

The findings suggest that the perpetrators of teenage pregnancy range from people entrusted with the responsibility of caring for them and those by the nature of their work are expected to provide unfettered services to learners. Box 5.1: Summarizes the categories of perpetrators of teenage pregnancy.

Box 5.1: Perpetrators of Teenage Pregnancy
- Parents and guardians who condone cultural practices that sustain child marriage. - Most of the perpetrators of teenage pregnancies are boys of similar age and fellow learners. - Businessmen who use money to entice girls into sexual activities. - Motorcycle transport operators also known as Boda Boda riders (public transit bikers) in Uganda. - Some of the perpetrators work in law enforcement agencies such as the police force and the Uganda People Defense Forces (UPDF). - Teachers, health workers and local politicians were also reported to be perpetrators of teenage pregnancies

Perpetrators belong to diverse age groups. They include male peers of similar age and men much older than teenage girls. The study found that, overall, the perpetrators of teenage pregnancy are much older than their teenage victims. Figure 5.8 shows that about 24% of the perpetrators are of similar age (10-19) as teenage girls. However, nearly 42.0% and 18.2% of the perpetrators are 5-9 years older than the teenage girls. Another 14.0% of the perpetrators are aged 30 or more years older than teenage girls, implying that they were at least 10 years older than their teenage victims.

Figure 5.8: Distribution of Perpetrators of Teenage Pregnancy by Age



FGDs and in-depth interview results corroborate the findings from teenage mothers regarding the age of the men who made them pregnant. Teenage mothers are made pregnant by older men than teenage girls. The statements made by the teenage mothers themselves and key informants below show that the perpetrators of teenage pregnancy were much older:

> *Young girls are being made pregnant by old men, I mean men much older than them perhaps by more than 10 years. Imagine such young girls being given in marriage to such old men.*

> *The father of my child is much older than me by more than 10 years. But he gave me everything I needed and takes of me and my child well.*

5.5 Factors Influencing Teenage Pregnancy and Marriage

Having discussed the patterns of teenage pregnancy/motherhood which themselves also influence teenage pregnancy, in this section, the factors influencing teenage pregnancy/motherhood are discussed. This is important for effective interventions to combat teenage pregnancy, early marriage and school dropout among teenage girls. The factors influencing teenage pregnancy were examined by asking the views of teenage mothers, parents and headteachers of schools. The findings, presented in Figure 5.9, show that poverty, negative peer influence and lack of guidance were the main factors influencing teenage pregnancy and marriage. These are further discussed below:

a. Poverty has been reported to be a leading cause of teenage pregnancy. It increases the risk of teenage pregnancy and early marriage because it contributes to reducing opportunities for education for girls through lack of support for girls in school in the forms of lack of fees, scholastic materials and other personal effects making girls enter into relationships that often end in pregnancy. It is also responsible for family pressure on girls to leave school and get married to gain financial and social security as well as ensure family honor. A testimony by one of the teenage mothers on the role of poverty in teenage pregnancy is reported below:

> *Girls need many things, not only fees and scholastic materials. Due to poverty, parents cannot provide most of girls' needs. This makes you get a man who is willing to provide for you and this can lead you to becoming pregnant or getting married to him.*

Parents and guardians of the learners also confirmed the increase in teenage pregnancy during Covid-19 lockdowns but also reported that the economic challenges following the nearly 2 years of economic slowdown as a result of Covid-19 pandemic, have increased the vulnerability of learners in general, and girls in particular to premarital pregnancy and early marriage.

> *Poverty is forcing some parents to prefer marriage for their daughters. Some parents are not willing to keep girls in school as soon as they start menstruating. They consider menstruating girls ready for marriage and make them get married and bring bride wealth.*

b. During the Covid-19 pandemic, teenage girls in Uganda were significantly affected. It was estimated that more than 354,736 teenage girls and as many as 30% of girls aged

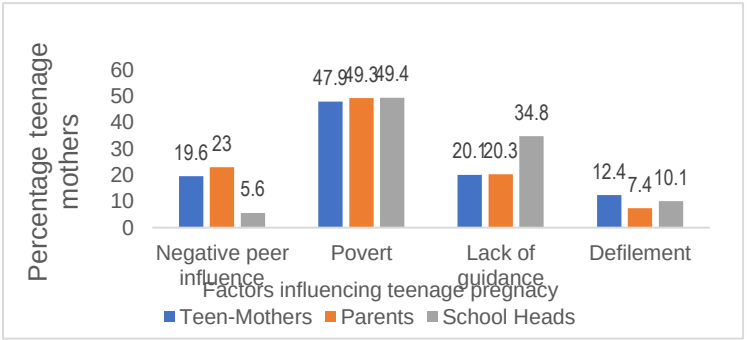
15-19 became pregnant or got married (Watsemba et al., 2022). This was attributed to the long duration of school closures which removed the protective environment for girls and increased their vulnerability. Covid-19 also increased the vulnerability of families to financial poverty which led to a rise in early marriage as families used bride prices to cope with the financial challenges imposed by the pandemic. Additionally, the pandemic severely limited access to SRHS&C which contributed to unintended pregnancies. Testimonies from a male FGD learner and a parent on the role of Covid-19 pandemic are reported below:

> *Many girls became pregnant during the Covid-19 lockdown because they had a lot of freedom since they were idle. Many of them become easy targets for men because they also need money that their parents cannot give them.*
>
> *Some parents were worried that their girls were getting old and because of the high rates of pregnancies, they could become pregnant while unmarried. They believed the best option was to get them married since there was no money to return them to school.*

c. Defilement and sexual coercion were reported by FGDs and in-depth interview participants as causes of teenage pregnancy and early marriage. There is also a high level of ignorance among girls on sexuality issues making teenage girls engage in sexual activities without appropriate protection, leading to pregnancy. One of the main ways of exploiting their ignorance is the offer of money, material things like phones and alcohol. One of the teenage mothers reported as follows:

> *Many girls get involved in sexual activities with men mostly unwillingly. They are either coerced or manipulated with offers of money. Others are given alcohol in nightclubs and when they are drunk, boys take advantage of them and sleep with them.*

Figure 5.9: Factors Promoting Teenage Pregnancy and Marria**ge**



d. Furthermore, the findings from IDIs with parents suggest that parents' anger and intolerance toward daughters is a serious factor contributing to teenage pregnancy and marriage. It is also evident that some parents are ignorant of strategies that could be used to counsel their teenage daughters. As a result, they drive them into behaviours that increase their vulnerability.

Parents are hard on us girls. They do not want us to mix with boys and when they see their girls with boys often they conclude that they are already spoiled, refuse to provide for your needs saying go get them from your men.

e. The study further found that parents contribute directly to their daughters getting married as soon as they have reached the age of menarche. They inadvertently or intentionally set up their daughters in marriage to fulfil cultural expectations and or protect family honor. In addition, most poor and rural families marry daughters motivated by the need to secure economic stability and enhance family social standing through bride price. A married adolescent woman testified on the role parents play:

I am now married and I do not think I can go back to school. I was in P7 when my father made me get married by telling me that he could not afford to provide for me. That I would get the things I am asking of him from a husband.

5.6 Impacts of Teenage Pregnancy on Girls

Pregnancy of teenage learners has a wide range of adverse short and long-term impacts on the girl child. In the short term learner pregnancy is a major cause of school dropout and an impediment to the full realization of the potential of women (Karabo & Ayiga, 2014). Dropping out of school temporarily or permanently is the most common short-term impact of teenage pregnancy (Alyai et al., 2023). For teenage mothers who return to school, they are often required to repeat classes and their progress in education is negatively affected by stigma and poor performance (Nkabura, 2020). The challenge of schooling and childcare demands in terms of time, irregular attendance and resource constraints make teenage mothers who return to school perform poorly.

In the long term, pregnancy increases the vulnerability of girls to poverty, loss of social and economic opportunities in adulthood, and susceptibility to intergenerational vulnerabilities (Odiri & Anthonia, 2023). Teenage pregnancy is a major cause of poor mental health and infant health outcomes (Kumar et al., 2007). Socially, teenage pregnancy has also caused long-term stigma and discrimination in society and contributes to the low self-esteem of teenage mothers (Mutahi et al., 2022).

The study assessed the impacts of teenage pregnancy on the education of girls who became pregnant at school by age and level of education. The findings in Table 5.2 show that the permanent dropout from education is higher among teenage mothers who become pregnant at 15-19 years of age compared to those who became pregnant at <15 years of age and 20 years or older. Conversely, the rate of repetition is higher among the younger teenage girls who become pregnant at <15 years followed by those who become pregnant at 20 years or older.

Regarding the impacts of pregnancy and the level of education, the results in Table 5.2 show that regardless of the level of education at which pregnancy takes place, permanent drop out of school is the most common adverse impact of pregnancy on the education of learners. Nearly 60% of the learners who became pregnant dropped out of school permanently, while 25.9% repeated grades and 14.3% performed poorly at school.

Table 5.2: Impact of Teenage Pregnancy by Age and Level of Education

Characteristics	Impact on Education			Total	p-value
	Permanent Drop out	Repeated	Poor performance		
Age at pregnancy					
<15	44.7	36.2	19.1		0.083
15-17	59.9	24.3	15.7		
18+	65.8	25.4	8.8		
Level of education at pregnancy					
Primary	64.6	22.7	12.7		0.041
Secondary	52.4	31.0	16.7		
Total	**59.8**	**25.9**	**14.3**		

The FGDs and In-depth interview results corroborate the quantitative findings and show that the impacts of pregnancy on teenage learners in Uganda are both short and long-term and dropping out of school is the immediate short-term effect. This is because school rules, the socioeconomic condition of teenage mothers, childcare responsibilities and family reluctance to support them to continue their education, take immediate effect.

> *I did not have fees and money to go back to school. But even if I had, I had to take care of my child. He was frequently ill and although my mother helped, she also had other things to do.*

> *I know another girl who also became pregnant at school but returned to school after giving birth. She was forced to abandon school to work and earn a living because there was no one to help her with fees and money to take care of her child.*

Box 5.2 presents a summary of the adverse impacts of teenage pregnancy and motherhood on the education of girls:

Box 5.2: Perceived Adverse Impacts of Teenage Pregnancy

- Some girls have died in the process of giving birth while others went through cesarean section which left their family with hefty medical bills.
- Most of the teenage girls who got pregnant dropped out of school and the majority did not return to school after giving birth.
- There were reported cases of teenage pregnancies leading to an increase in domestic violence as the pregnant girls' fathers often blame the girls' mothers for not doing enough to protect their daughters.
- Some teenage girls contracted sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV/AIDS in addition to getting pregnant.
- Teenage pregnancies were reported to be the major cause of poverty in the family. This is because the men or boys responsible for the pregnancies often leave the burden of care of children to the teenage mothers and their families.
- Teenage girls have committed suicide after discovering that they were pregnant.
- Pregnant teenage girls have been banished from their family home for bringing shame to the family by getting pregnant.
- There are many child-headed households due to teen pregnancies.

5.7 Perspectives on School Drop Out of Teenage Girls

There is agreement among education stakeholders that at the primary level, parity between boys and girls has been achieved in Uganda. This study was also corroborated, by using enrolment statistics of several schools sampled for this study, that indeed parity has been achieved in enrolment. However, although both boys and girls drop out of school, the dropout rate is higher among girls than boys. The data collected from the key informants at the district, community and education sectors CSOs revealed that in nearly all grades from 5-7, the transition rate is higher among boys than girls, confirming that the number of girls dropping out of school at each grade is higher than that of boys. This section discusses the perspectives of education stakeholders, teenage mothers, and parents on the factors that contribute to the high dropout of girls from education.

5.7.1 Perspectives of Education Stakeholders

5.7.1.1 Teenage Pregnancy

Teenage pregnancy is a threat to Uganda's efforts to increase girls' agency and make them achieve their potential. Previous studies in Uganda and elsewhere have identified teenage pregnancy as a leading cause of school dropout (Kawoya Lizza, n.d.). In this study, teenage pregnancy was reported to be a leading cause of primary school dropout among girls because of greater freedom for girls, inadequate guidance of girls by parents and the increasing tendency for girls to self-provide most of their basic needs. Parents are also reported to be losing control of the girl child under the pressure of peers and modernizing influences. This has increased the early use of alcohol and unregulated nighttime activities, which has exposed young girls to early sexual activities and increased the risk of pregnancy. A community leader reported that:

> *These days, girls have become very stubborn and uncontrollable. This situation has been made worse by the increased number and frequency of nighttime activities and drinking of alcohol.*

Between 2020 and 2022, the COVID-19 pandemic caused the closure of schools nationally and the domestic quarantine of learners. In some cases, teenage girls were locked down with their abusers which increased the risk of sexual abuse and the rate of teenage pregnancy. In addition to preventing the likelihood of a teenage girl getting pregnant, some parents believed that their daughters were already old and better married. An LC official reported that:

> *In some families, parents look at girls as the only source of wealth as such they are supposed to be married off as soon as they attain menarche. Delay in marrying girls off would lead them into getting pregnant at home which will bring dishonour to families and this is what my daughter did to my family.*

5.7.1.2 Household Poverty

Poverty and teenage pregnancy are related in complex ways. IDI interviews found that poverty contributes in several ways to teenage pregnancy and school dropout including parent's inability to provide the girl child's basic needs, school fees, clothes, basic cosmetics, and scholastic and sanitary materials required by girls to remain at school. Poverty is also a major

factor that contributes to girls initiating and sustaining relationships that lead to teenage pregnancy and or marriage. In some families, parents have used the veil of poverty and failure to provide for girls to encourage girls who have attained menarche to get married. A sub-county Chief and a school administrator explained the mechanism through which household poverty contributes to dropping out of school by teenage girls by saying:

> *Failure of parents to provide basic needs like clothes, medication scholastic materials like books, pens, etc. is one of the leading causes of schoolgirls dropping out of school. This is mainly because families are becoming poorer as the cost of education rises.*
>
> *Young women now are concerned about themselves. It is shameful for girls not to have sanitary materials that they need to maintain bodily hygiene and look good. All girls, especially older ones, want to look good and when parents cannot provide, they will find whatever they need from men.*

5.7.1.3 Cultural and Religious Influences

Cultural and religious norms and values are some of the major factors contributing to the undervaluing of the education of girls. Some key informants reported that in some cultural and religious communities, girls are valued for their virginity more than their education. The lack of appreciation of girls' education and fear of breaking their virginity, make parents prefer marriage as soon as a girl attains menarche. This is particularly common in traditional families in rural areas and predominantly Muslim communities. One of the leaders of a CSO reported that:

> *Cultural norms that compel girls to marry soon after the onset of puberty. This practice used to be particularly common among some cultures and religious affiliations, especially Muslims*.

5.7.1.4 Inadequate School Infrastructures

The lack of appropriate school infrastructure, especially sanitary facilities for girls in schools was reported as a major challenge in most rural schools. Girls reaching menarche are reported to be more likely to drop out of school due to the failure of schools to provide appropriate facilities for good school hygiene. Some schools also lack staff with the knowledge and skills to deal with hygiene and sexuality issues that concern girls. A school senior woman teacher reported that the:

> *Lack of sanitary materials for girls contributes to dropping out of school. Girls fear the embarrassment of being seen with blood on their clothes due to the lack of pads. The school latrines are also another problem as they are dirty and lack privacy which forces older girls to drop out of school.*

5.7.1.5 Child Labour

Child labour was identified as a major factor contributing to school dropout by community leaders. They reported that children are distracted from schooling because they are engaged in farm work during farm clearing, planting and harvesting periods. They are also used in vending food and other merchandise on streets sometimes during school hours or after school, where they are not only vulnerable but also introduced to making money causing them to lose interest in schooling and voluntarily drop out of school. In all these activities, the girl child is

the most affected as they are the majority of participants in most child labour activities. A community leader testified that:

> *Children are engaged in farm work like digging or harvesting, and food vending on the streets during school hours instead of going to school. The children eventually get used to these activities thus losing interest in school. If you go to town now, you will find many young girls vending on streets or hocking around selling all sorts of foods*.

5.7.2 Perspectives of Teenage Mothers on Dropout of School

Findings from FGDs with learners and in-depth interviews with teenage mothers revealed that school dropouts were on the rise in all the study districts. According to participants, teenage pregnancy reached its peak during the Covid-19 pandemic, facilitated by the 2 years of school closures. Previous studies estimated an increase of 30%-50% in teenage pregnancy in some districts in Uganda during the pandemic (Olukya, 2021; Mbazzi et al., 2022). The findings also show that the causes of teenage pregnancy were similar across all districts. From the perspectives of teenage mothers and learners, teenage pregnancy, peer influence, household poverty and sexual abuse and exploitation. Other factors mentioned are domestic violence, media influence and domestic handling of defilement cases by parents, the following factors were responsible for the increase in teenage pregnancy and motherhood.

5.7.2.1 Teenage Pregnancy

Teenage pregnancy has been a problem for a long time and has been a major factor in the dropout of girls from school. However, teenage pregnancies and motherhood increased during the Covid-19 pandemic. The increase was exacerbated by the closure of schools for nearly 2 years from 2020 to 2022. The pandemic also caused the lockdown of people in their homes to contain the spread of the disease which led to many cases of teenage pregnancy. Access to health centers, pharmacies and clinics was also significantly impaired making it difficult to get basic reproductive health commodities such as condoms. Some teenagers reported that during the pandemic, their parents encouraged their daughters to get married. Teenage mothers illustrated their perspectives with the statements below:

> *School closures for two years due to Covid-19 lockdown measures. Many teenage girls became pregnant during this period. Before Covid-19, teenage pregnancy cases were low but this increased during the school closures and post Covid-19 period.*
>
> *It was very difficult to access reproductive health services in general and condoms in particular as all services were halted by the lockdown. The effect of the lockdown was particularly severe for rural residents.*
>
> *Many girls did not return to school because they eloped to stay with men. Others were encouraged by their parents to get married due to the widespread economic hardships caused by Covid-19.*

5.7.2.2 Peer Influence

Peer pressure was reported as a major factor contributing to the increase in negative teenage behaviors including the use of alcohol and drugs, unregulated participation in nighttime activities especially nightclubs and engaging in commercial sexual activities. In the process,

some teenage girls engage in unprotected sex with the belief and wrong perception that they cannot get pregnant, encouraged by men who do not want to use condoms or because condoms cannot be accessed in the “heat of the moment”. This has contributed greatly to the spike in pregnancy among learners. In many cases, girls decide to drop out of school and get married to these men voluntarily or get pregnant to create a justification to drop out of school and get married. One of the teenage mothers testified that:

> *Some girls get pregnant because they want to be like their friends who get things from men. They are enticed by their colleagues also to have boyfriends then they will be ok and enjoy life.*

> *Some girls deliberately get pregnant for a guy if they have decided to get married. They know that in such a situation, parents from both sides will not raise serious objections.*

5.7.2.3 Household Poverty

Poverty in families was widely reported as one of the most common causes of teenage pregnancy. The failure of parents or guardians to provide the basic personal and scholastic materials to children in general, but girls in particular, drives them to men who offer them financial support and induce the girls to offer sexual favours in return. The use of money to induce teenage girls into sexual activities has become common in the face of what is perceived to be the increasing level of poverty among the population, especially in rural areas. Teenage mothers reported that older men use money to ensnare girls into sexual activities that make them pregnant and then drop out of school.

> *My parents failed to provide me with basic things that girls need such as clothes, sanitary pads, soap and other things I needed. The man who made me pregnant is a boda boda rider and he used to provide the things for me. Then he convinced me to have sex with me which I allowed and I became pregnant. I am now living with him.*

> *Older men take advantage of young girls by offering them financial support. This has led to many cases of girls getting pregnant.*

5.7.2.4 Domestic Violence

Domestic violence between parents is reported to contribute to the rise in teenage pregnancies and eventual school dropout. Many girls run away from home to escape a violent home environment and as a result, they end up in the hands of men who promise to protect and provide for them. However, after getting pregnant, while some of the girls get married to the men, others abandon the girls. An adolescent girl who dropped out of school during the Covid-19 pandemic narrated her experience:

> *Some girls find their home unbearable because their parents do not provide for them, they quarrel among themselves and their children. My father beat me seriously because I came home late. He believed that I was coming from seeing a man. I decided to leave home and go to the man’s home. It is now one year since I have not gone back.*

5.7.2.5 Sexual Abuse

Sexual assault and coercion have always been a challenge for women in general and teenage girls in particular. Teenage mothers reported that they were sexually assaulted by men, some including relatives such as uncles and cousins which resulted in them getting pregnant. Data from teenage mothers revealed that the majority of teenage girls who report sexual assault know their abusers well. In most cases, the sexual assaults go unreported because the victims are either afraid of exposing their abusers, especially if they are relatives or they fear the embarrassment of exposing abusers will cause them. The unlikelihood of abusers not being reported is also sustained by the fear that girls would sometimes be the ones to be blamed rather than the abusers. It is also not uncommon that even when the abuse is reported to authourities, nothing is either done or the case is withdrawn and settled quietly by parents and abusers. Teenage mothers reported as below:

> *Girls know most of their abusers. In many cases, it is not a coincidence as most abuses are perpetrated by a boy/man who has been disturbing a girl for some time. Some do it deliberately as an act of revenge against girls who they say are difficult.*
>
> *Girls fear reporting abusers especially if they are related. Parents prefer settling such cases at home as they would not like to escalate the problem by making one of their own go to jail.*
>
> *In some cases, the girls end up being the ones to be blamed for the abuse attack. They can say you are the one who looked for it.*
>
> *I was attacked and rapped from the way from school to home. My parents reported the matter to the police and he was arrested. But after spending a few days in the police he was released and we could do nothing about it. I gave birth to my child and my parents returned me to school.*

5.7.2.6 Influence of Social Media

In recent years, there has been an explosion in the availability of smartphones. Apart from being used to entice young girls, young people are using them for social networking and accessing social media platforms that have increased exposure to sexually explicit materials. Many teenage boys and girls try out and practice such content, hence leading to pregnancy and school dropout.

> *Many boys and girls now have access to social media on their own or through their friends. There was this friend of ours who showed us a short film of people having sex. We were excited and also felt like doing it.*
>
> *Social media show things that are attractive to adolescents and many of them try to practice it, not knowing the dangers of doing so.*

5.7.2.7 Domestic Settlement of Defilement Cases

The failure of parents to report teenage pregnancies to authorities for legal action has been blamed by some participants to be a major factor exacerbating teenage pregnancies. This is because when perpetrators are not held accountable, it encourages others to also prey on young girls. Amicable settlement of defilement cases by families is a common practice and

mostly aims at demanding of bride price as compensation for pregnancy if the perpetrator is unwilling or not able to marry the girl. However, full payment of bride price is arranged if marriage is an accepted term of settlement. This practice is common in rural areas, in poor households and in communities where traditional values of teenage marriages are strong. Lack of faith in the justice system also contributes to this practice because offenders are often released or no action is taken even when a case has been reported. A teenage mother's testimony is presented below

> *I was rapped and got pregnant. My parents reported the man who rapped me and he was arrested by police. However, to our surprise, after a few days of detention, he was released without our knowledge.*

5.7.2.8 Inadequate Reproductive Health Knowledge and Services

Low access to SRHS&C for sexually active learners due to the prohibition or resistance of information in schools and community resistance to contraceptive commodities for schooling teenagers is contributing to an increase in teenage pregnancies. Lack of knowledge of contraceptive measures, inappropriate use and non-use of contraceptives was reported as a factor for the increased teenage pregnancy and school dropout.

> *It is time girls are taught about contraceptives to prevent them from getting pregnant. At the moment, parents, religious leaders and even schools are hiding under their heads in the sand and shying away from educating girls on measures that can prevent pregnancy even when it is apparent that the number of sexually active teenage girls is on the rise.*

> *Most girls are sexually active at an early age. By the time they become pregnant, they would have been sexually active for a while. The continued denial of access to contraceptives for such girls due to moral considerations and negative stereotyping is a major factor fuelling teenage pregnancy.*

5.8 Conclusion

Objective 2 addressed the factors that influence teenage pregnancy and school dropout by learners who become pregnant. From the analysis of results, it can be concluded that the factors influencing teenage pregnancy range from the socioeconomic characteristics of learners who become pregnant. The findings suggest that teenage pregnancy has been on the increase facilitated by the measure for preventing the spread of Covid-19. The findings further revealed that the majority of teenage girls who become pregnant eventually get married, mostly dictated by cultural norms and the economic circumstances of families. Household poverty is the leading cause of teenage pregnancies manifested by the failure of parents to provide for the basic needs of girls. The poor social and economic circumstances of teenage girls are exploited by perpetrators, mostly businessmen who are much older than the girls. Other causes of teenage pregnancy and school dropout identified are peer pressure, defilement, sexual abuse, the effect of social media and the lack of SRHS&C for teenage school girls.

CHAPTER SIX

6.0 Objective 3

Establish the Adoption of the Implementation of School Reentry Policies and or Guidelines

6.1 Introduction

The rate of dropout of teenage girls from school in Uganda is unprecedented and pervasive, leading to the failure to achieve gender equity and equality in education. This is notwithstanding the availability of education programs such as the UPE and USE and other affirmative policies that support girls' education. Ensuring the reentry of girls who drop out of school, especially due to motherhood is critical in closing the education gap by addressing the various barriers to the reentry and retention of girls through different grades and levels of education. Some of the areas that require attention are engaging communities, providing financial support for girls, introducing alternative education pathways, creating a supportive school environment, providing appropriate health education and services and instituting policies and regulations that promote and enforce the reentry and retention of girls in education.

In this section, the status of the “Adoption of and the Implementation of School Reentry Policies and or Guidelines” in Uganda, is assessed. The implementation of the guidelines is a monumental task that requires the intentional actions of government, communities, families, schools and CSOs. A review of Uganda’s school reentry and retention guidelines and the perspectives of research participants on the implementation of the guidelines are presented.

6.2 Overview of School Reentry Policies and or Guidelines

The school reentry and retention guidelines comprise three critical areas of response, 1) prevention of pregnancy among learners, 2) management of pregnancy cases within school settings, and 3) management of school reentry and retention of children who drop out of school regardless of reasons for dropout. The development of the guidelines was based on seven key principles including rights to education for all; positive change of attitudes of school communities including teachers and learners; building partnerships with families, communities and NGOs/CSOs; and prevention of harm to learners, pregnant learners, and schooling teenage mothers and their children. The other guiding principle is ensuring the confidentiality of learners who are pregnant/mothers; providing continuous sexual education to learners so that they can protect against pregnancy; responding to incidences of abuse and willingness to rehabilitate if they become pregnant/mothers. The guidelines also emphasize the learner as a priority for all actions taken to prevent pregnancy, manage pregnancy within school settings, and provide opportunities for school reentry and retention.

The guidelines on school reentry and retention were approved in 2020 following the devasting effect of the Covid-19 pandemic on the schooling community in Uganda and more specifically on teenage learners in primary and secondary schools. The guidelines were a response to the high learner pregnancy and high dropout of learners, mostly girls, from the education system.

The responsibility of implementing the guidelines was given to the Chairperson School Management Committee (SMC) or Parents and Teachers Association (PTA) and the senior woman/men teachers. The guidelines can be found in the revised guideline report (MoE&S, 2020). However, a few of the critical guidelines and their implementation on school reentry and retention of pregnant/teenage mothers, are assessed.

6.3 Implementation of Guidelines on Managing Pregnancy in School Settings

There is evidence that the guidelines for managing pregnancy and managing school reentry by pregnant/teenage mothers are being implemented. Although there are no formal reports in this regard, some schools reported allowing teenage mothers back in school. Both primary and secondary schools that participated in the study confirmed that they have implemented several provisions of the guidelines. These include allowing pregnant learners in candidate classes to come and do their final examinations; admission of teenage mothers back to school; and allowing teenage mothers to come with their children to school, provided, a caretaker is available while the girls attend classes. Schools have supported some of the teenage mothers who rejoined school to obtain community-level and education sector NGOs/CSOs support and are providing counseling services for teachers and learners to prevent discrimination and stigmatization against pregnant/teenage mothers. The case studies provided show that schools are adopting the guidelines. The adoption and implementation of selected guidelines that directly affect the retention of pregnant/mothering learners in schools have been assessed and discussed below:

The guideline requires that girls who are rumored or suspected to be pregnant are tested along with other girls to protect them against stigmatization and maintain confidentiality of pregnancy. In many schools in Uganda, especially in boarding primary and secondary schools, pregnancy test results for post-menarche learners are required at the beginning of the school term. The schools also carry pregnancy tests of their own at certain intervals during school terms. In these schools, parents of girls who report to school when pregnant or are found to be pregnant during a school term are invited to the schools and asked to take their daughters home. However, this practice is not common in rural schools, where learners come from home daily and learners who become pregnant simply vanish from school.

The findings suggest that school authorities in urban areas follow the pregnancy disclosure guidelines and try to protect pregnant learners. However, rural schools have little reaction time to deal with learners who become pregnant. This is because most leaner pregnancies are discovered at home and in communities and the girls stop coming to school. A Headteacher and a teenage mother reported their experiences as follows:

> *By the time the school gets to know that a learner is pregnant, they will have stopped coming to school. In most cases, it is the parent who informs the school that a learner is either pregnant or married after inquiry by teachers*.

> *For me, I did not wait for the Headteacher to report me to my parents or be dismissed from school. When I missed my periods for two months, I told my mother. She started asking me many questions about whether I had had sex and when and with who. After quarreling with me for some time, she said I was pregnant. From that day, I did not go back to school.*

Another guideline requires that counseling services be provided to girls who become pregnant while schooling. This is intended to help learners deal with the psychological and emotional impact of pregnancy. However, there was no evidence from participating schools that this guideline was implemented as nearly all girls found pregnant were immediately suspended and sent home or dismissed. In addition, another guideline requires that pregnant schoolgirls take mandatory maternity leave after three (3) months of the pregnancy. This guideline contradicts the previous guideline as most cases of pregnancy are discovered late or are immediately sent home or the learners do not return to school after learning they are pregnant.

Furthermore, it is mandatory for pregnant learners in candidate classes of P 7, S 4 and S 6 to sit for their final examinations. The study found that this guideline is being implemented in primary schools where cases of pregnancy involving P 7 candidates occur. Although such learners were sent home, they were allowed to come and sit for their final examinations. In a few cases, the girls sat for their examinations while still pregnant and in other cases by the time the examinations were done, the learners had given birth. One of the teenage mothers, reported attending her examination when pregnant:

> *When I became pregnant, I had to leave school and the Headteacher told me and my parents that I should come back to school when the examinations were being done. I went to school sat my examinations and when the results came, I passed in Grade II.*

The guidelines for managing pregnancy in school settings consider discrimination against pregnant learners and psychological and emotional violence. School authourities are required to handle such cases like any other form of school violence in line with existing guidelines. The study found, as observed with other guidelines, that there was no evidence that this guideline was implemented as the study did not find any known pregnant learners in schools that participated in the study. The more or less automatic drop out of school by learners who know that they are pregnant makes the implementation of this guideline rather difficult. Other guidelines that are difficult to implement for the reasons outlined above include guidelines requiring the protection of pregnant learners by teachers from stigma and discrimination; requiring follow-up of pregnant learners by teachers to ensure their wellbeing and return to school after giving birth; and ensuring non-discrimination and provision of psychological support.

Another guideline that appeared to have been implemented is the counseling of parents/caregivers of pregnant learners when they are taking them home. There is evidence to suggest that schools and teachers, especially the senior woman teachers performed the counseling roles entrusted to them by the relevant guidelines including counseling pregnant learners and parents/caregivers about healthcare practices, antenatal care, nutrition care, and material and emotional support to their pregnant daughters. However, there is no evidence of continued tracking of pregnant learners out of school as most relocated or got married. A senior woman teacher in one of the schools reported that schools have no resources and expertise to perform this role.

> *Yes, we received the guidelines. However, I think a lot of schools find implementing some of the guidelines challenging. As schools, we do not have the resources and even the expertise in schools to implement some of the guidelines. For example, how do you start following the girls to their homes? Some of them get married or relocate to live elsewhere*

either with other relatives or by themselves. Counseling on healthcare, nutrition, antenatal, parental support, etc should be done by parents/caregivers and health workers.

6.3.1 Implementation of Guidelines for Managing School Reentry

Regarding the implementation of guidelines on managing school reentry of teenage mothers, selected guidelines that directly apply were assessed. The first of these is the requirement for schools to prioritize the readmission of returning learners to the same school or the admission of young mothers if entering a different school. The study found evidence that this guideline is being implemented. Young mothers who wished to return to school have been readmitted or admitted if they chose to reenter schooling in the same school or other schools respectively. Parents, learners and school administrators have testified that teenage mothers have returned to school under the normal school program or under the AEP program implemented by CSOs that support the education sector. Three case studies, one of teenage mothers and two of schools with experience in handling teenage mothers' returning to school are presented.

6.3.1.1 Learner Case Study

The experience of a refugee learner from South Sudan in one of the schools shows that with the appropriate encouragement and support, teenage mothers can return and remain in school. Box 6.1 presents a narrative on the experience of a learner who after giving birth returned to school.

Box 6.1: The Story of a Previously Pregnant Learner
Jane (not her real name) got pregnant when she was in P7. She was 16 years old. She was made pregnant by one of her fellow refugees. On realizing, she was pregnant, Jane was sent into marriage to the man, a fellow youth aged just 18 years old, Peter (not real name) who made her pregnant. The two are among several South Sudanese refugees who came to Uganda in 2015 due to the South Sudan civil war now in its 12th year. They lived in one of the refugee camps at Bidibidi. Jane enrolled in a Primary School in 2016 in P4 and was progressing well with her education. However, this changed when her mother relocated out of the camp and started a life in the neighbouring trading center and engaged mainly in petty vending of local snacks commonly known as Mandazi. It was during this period that she met Peter and started a relationship which soon resulted in her becoming pregnant. Jane lived with the father of her child until she gave birth. However, a year after giving birth, Jane informed her husband that she wanted to return to school and continue with her education. The husband promptly refused which prompted Jane to consult with her mother about her plans to return to school, which she agreed to. Jane's mother asked her to return home and bring the baby along, which she did. Jane, now in P7, returned to school and left her baby to be taken care of by her mother. To ensure that female learners concentrate on their education in preparation for their final UPE examinations, Jane was admitted to the boarding section and now stays at school, only visiting her baby from time to time. In the school where Jane reentered, two other girls who previously became pregnant also reentered the school. Jane's dream is to complete her education and become a nurse.

6.3.1.2 A Primary School Case Study

Cases of pregnancy among learners at the primary level are complex to deal with. In most cases, the decision to drop out of school due to pregnancy is made by the girls and their parents without the knowledge of school administrations. Box 6.2 presents the actions of a school administration of a primary school that readmitted learners who dropped out of school due to pregnancy.

Box 6.2: A Primary School Case
A few of our learners became pregnant. However, most school administrators including myself (the Headteacher) become aware of a schoolgirl becoming pregnant when she stops coming to school. In most cases, parents prefer keeping the matter to themselves and would not want to involve schools in dealing with pregnancy cases unless a school teacher or male learner is involved. - Our school allows girls in candidate classes who get pregnant to continue attending school. Those who drop out and the school knows where they live are encouraged to return and sit for their final examinations as required by the guidelines on managing pregnancy in school settings. - Learners with young children are allowed to return to school and continue their education regardless of the class in which they became pregnant. We have a learner who became pregnant in P4 and returned to school. She is now in P7 and is doing well. Another learner returned to school after giving birth. She is now in P6. However, the school tries to prevent pregnancy by displaying messages that help fight pregnancy among learners; providing counseling services by senior and men teachers; and periodically inviting trained reproductive health counselors to talk to learners at school.

6.3.1.3 A Secondary School Case Study

There are many cases of learner pregnancy in primary and secondary schools. To address challenges faced by teenage mothers with young children, the school has a deliberate policy that allows and encourages student mothers to return or enroll in this secondary school. To do this the school has partnered with education sector NGOs/CSOs and some individuals, especially the area Woman MP to support teenage mothers who have expressed interest in returning to school. Box 6.3 presents family and community-level practices, and school practices aimed to support the reentry and retention of girls who dropped out of school due to pregnancy/motherhood.

Box 6.3: Secondary School Case

Family and Community-Based Activities

The school has engaged the following strategies to ensure that learners who became pregnant return to school and complete their education:

- Following pregnant or student mothers' home and discuss their coming back to school.
- Dialoguing with the parents of students and their pregnant or student mothers and finding ways to support the girls to continue schooling.
- Encouraging parents to support pregnant and student mothers at home with childcare and other provisions.

School-Based Practices

Within the school environment, we deal with the attitudes of fellow learners and teachers with the view of making them support student mothers and pregnant learners.

- Ensuring all students and teachers understand that being a student mother is acceptable.
- Ensuring that students do not blame and stigmatize learners with children.
- Ensuring that teachers do not deny student mothers attendance of classes.
- Assigning student mothers to specific teachers to mentor them.
- Counselled the whole school community on tolerance and support for student mothers.
- Allowing student mothers to bring their children with them to school and providing a safe place for the children and caretakers.

Through this initiative, more parents are willing to return their daughters who have given birth to school. There are also ongoing community interventions that engage parents to focus on the education of their children including those who became pregnant.

The guideline requiring teachers to provide remedial classes, implement a flexible education system for returning learners, and facilitate reentry into alternative education pathways for teenage mothers appeared to have been implemented at various levels. The study found that in some schools, teenage mothers who returned to school are assigned teachers to support their learning and provide them with remedial classes as and when required. Girls who drop out of school are also provided with alternative education pathways such the ASEP and vocational education. This practice has reduced the risk of teenage mothers dropping out of school completely. A Headteacher of one of the secondary schools having teenage mothers reported:

> *The school encourages teenage mothers to return to school. Currently, we allow learners to come along with their children to school provided they have a caretaker when they are attending classes.*

Another participant reported that the ASEP programme is being implemented by SCF and Windle Trust International (WTI) in refugee-hosting districts for both refugees and host community learners who have not completed secondary education.

The ASEP has been implemented in the district, especially among refugees to enable learners who previously dropped out of school to catch up with other learners in the normal school system. Many of the refugees only completed primary education and are not eligible for post-secondary education. The ASEP is intended to help such learners complete secondary education quickly.

Some CSOs have started vocational education for children who previously dropped out of school for any reason but are willing to gain skills that can help them look after themselves. These learners are skilled in tailoring, hair platting and manicure to mention but a few.

Furthermore, the guidelines for managing school reentry require that schools support adolescent mothers to obtain support from community structures for childcare and economic support services. The study found that attempts to implement this guideline have been made. Schools that admitted teenage mothers have engaged education sector NGOs/CSOs and influential people such as Members of Parliament to address the challenge of school reentry of teenage mothers. For example, in the refugee hosting districts where the problem of teenage motherhood is pervasive, education sector NGOs/CSOs such as WTI have responded to the appeal to support learners who dropped out of school including those due to motherhood. Scholarships, scholastic materials, baby care support, provision of sanitary materials and counseling services have been provided to teenage mothers to ensure they remain in school. A Headteacher in one of the schools reported that:

We have engaged CSOs and notable individuals to support teenage mothers, which has started to bear fruit. For example, the area Woman MP is paying fees for two teenage mothers in our school. We have approached CSOs that support children's causes to support girls who dropped out of school and we have received positive responses in some areas such as the provision of scholastic materials and sanitary materials. We are hopeful that more support will be extended for girls' reentry into schools.

With the help of a CSO, the school implemented a boarding section for girls in primary seven. Two teenage mothers are currently in the section.

The guidelines also provide that schools shall provide counseling on the consequences of early sexual behavior, adolescent sexuality, negative peer influences, and building self-confidence and self-esteem of learners. Our study found that this guideline is being implemented. Most schools that participated in the study have erected posters or written on school walls sexual education information guiding learners on sexuality, sexual behaviours, and prevention of adverse effects of early sexual activity. Headteachers, especially those of primary schools also reported that age-appropriate counseling sessions are provided to learners by senior woman/man teachers. Furthermore, some Headteachers reported inviting trained counselors to schools to provide sexual education to learners. The testimonies by learners and teachers about counseling services to learners are reported below:

One of my responsibilities as a senior woman teacher is to teach girls to know, understand and respond correctly to the physiological and emotional changes they experience as they grow. This includes teaching them about sexuality and appropriate sexual behaviours. As a school, we sometimes invite trained counselors from RHU to come talk to our learners.

During assemblies, the teachers tell us to avoid having relationships with boys, avoid bad groups that lead us astray and leave us in great danger to our health. It will also affect our

education. They also bring visitors to come and talk to us about the dangers of sexual activities and advise us on how to avoid them as we are still young.

6.4 Challenges Faced in Implementing School Reentry and Retention Guidelines

Schools face challenges ensuring teenage mothers remain in school and complete their education. Some of the challenges originate from the school system while others originate from pregnant/teenage mothers. A major challenge in schools that adversely impedes the reentry of teenage mothers in school is the lack of appropriate infrastructure. Teenage mothers have more needs than their learner counterparts. They need spaces for baby care as sometimes it is inevitable for them to come with their babies to school. However, the current guidelines require them to only come back to school when the babies are at least six months old. For many of the mothers, even at six months, they have no one to take care of the babies at home, creating a need for space so that they can come to school with their babies. A Headteacher of one school reported that:

Lack of space for baby care is a major barrier to maintaining teenage mothers in schools. In this school, I have a young mother who sometimes comes to school with the baby and a caretaker. But because of a lack of space, the caretaker sometimes stays under the tree. As a result, during the rainy season, she does not attend school regularly.

The sanitary facilities at the school are not good for teenage mothers who sometimes come to school with their young babies. So, I stopped bringing my baby to school when my mother is at home to take care of her. If my mother is not available, I do not come to school that day.

Teenage mothers are subjected to teenage motherhood stigma in both school and community. At school, they are called all sorts of names by peers and sometimes teachers, making it a challenge to make friends and effectively integrate into the school system and activities upon reentry. As a result, they may suffer from low self-esteem, and isolation and become demotivated from continuing with schooling. Teenage mothers reported that:

At school, they call you derogatory names such as "jerrycan liri" loosely meaning "broken jerrycan" to shame or embarrass you. Then you feel better when you are alone then you wonder why you should even go back to school.

I became pregnant when I was in primary four when I was 14 years old and I quit school when I discovered I was pregnant. I stayed home for one year after delivery. On returning to school, I was older than my classmates and some of them would tease me calling me "mama" meaning mother. At first, I felt insulted but overcame it with time. Otherwise, I would have dropped out of school.

The study found that childcare responsibilities are a significant barrier to the reentry and retention of teenage mothers in school. Childcare is a demanding responsibility that requires a lot of time that competes with the time needed for schooling. As a result, teenage mothers have to balance their need to study with the time needed for childcare. This situation is often exacerbated by a lack of childcare options at home or school. In addition to providing for the needs of the child, teenage mothers also lack the financial resources to hire caretakers to look after their children while they are in school. Time constraints, therefore, lead to frequent absenteeism from schooling, poor performance and ultimately, school dropout. The lack of financial resources for childcare also makes teenage mothers opt out of school in preference

for employment. The following testimonies by school administrators and teachers illustrate some of the challenges teenage mothers face staying in school:

> *I had two teenage mothers in this school. We tried to encourage them and support them in their studies but they were struggling. The childcare demands affected their schooling very much. They were often late at school and abstained a lot especially when the children were sick. These seriously affected their performance, but they completed their primary education.*

> *It is hard to go to school when you have a baby. Other learners stigmatize teenage mothers in ways that are sometimes embarrassing forcing them to drop out or abstain from school leading to poor academic performance.*

Box 6.4 summarizes the main challenges that could affect the retention in education of teenage mothers.

Box 6.4: Challenges Faced in Retention of Teenage Mothers in School
- Pregnancy is very stressful for young learners and makes them sometimes fail to cope, leading to frequent absenteeism from school which could lead to school dropout. - Fear, shame, stigmatization and use of derogatory descriptors by peers and some teachers while in school affect the performance of learners who are mothers. - Poor performance can be another source of stress that affects self-esteem and attitudes toward self-worth and can lead to school dropout. - Childcare demands are too big for the learners which can seriously affect their ability to focus on schooling. - Cultural disapproval of teenage mothers to return to school.

At the community level, the stigma of being a young mother while unmarried is even troubling for both teenage girls and their parent families. The cultural expectation is that girls who get pregnant while unmarried should be married off as a means of redeeming themselves and saving their parents from embarrassing dishonor. The study found that the majority of teenage mothers opted for marriage voluntarily or under pressure from their parents. Those who chose either schooling or marriage remained at home, relocated with other relatives or became self-sustaining. One of the teen mothers testified that she did not return to school and instead later got married.

> *After I got pregnant, my parents became very angry and my father banished me from home. He said that I did not like schooling that is why I got pregnant, and I should go to the man who made me pregnant. I did not want to marry at the time, but because of his reaction, I took refuge at my paternal Aunt's home where I later got married.*

6.5 Strategies to Address Challenges of Reentry and Retention of Teenage Mothers

Ensuring teenage mothers remain in school is important for achieving gender equity and equality in education. This is because motherhood is one of the major causes of school dropout in Uganda in general and the study districts in particular. The study found that some of the strategies are consistent with the guidelines for managing school reentry and retention of learners who previously dropped out of school. These include providing protection, counseling services, financial support, alternative learning options, and school-community-education stakeholder partnerships.

Protection of teenage mothers and their children was found to be a key strategy for retaining them in school. This strategy is consistent with one of the guidelines for managing school reentry and retention of teenage mothers. In some of the schools, Headteachers have provided regular counseling for the girls, have dedicated teachers to help them in their studies and allow them to come to school with their babies. The counseling and bringing of children to school has raised the confidence of the mothers and won the respect of other learners. Schools have also instituted disciplinary actions such as inviting parents of learners who engage violently against other learners including teenage mothers, to school to caution them against such indiscipline. Some school has a school nurse who looks after all the learners and teenage mothers are not exempted from school-based health care services.

> *The school regularly provides counseling to all learners and the very few teenage mothers in particular. We also encourage them to bring the children and their nannies along to school. This has increased their confidence and respect from other learners*.

> *The school nurse also provides available care to the mothers and their babies if they do not feel well when at school. However, we usually refer the mother and the child to the hospital in Town for appropriate care.*

Box 6.5 summarizes the main strategies for counteracting the challenges preventing the reentry and retention of teenage mothers in school.

Box 6.5: Strategies for Retention of Teenage Mothers in School
- Protection from discrimination and stigmatization. - Repeated counseling of teenage mothers and other learners and teachers. - Taking disciplinary actions against indiscipline learners who engage in acts of violence against learners including teenage mothers. - The health school services for all learners including teenage mothers. - Building partnerships to support teenage mothers' reentry and retention in school.

6.6 Education Sector NGOs Providing Education Support Services

NGOs/CSOs have become partners in providing social sector services especially education support in Uganda. The study found that Education Sector NGOs provide various forms of support for learners in some of the districts under study. These NGOs include Finn Church Aid (FCA), Plan International (PI), FAWE, WINDLE Trust International (WTI), Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), World Vision and Agha Khan Foundation. Others are CEFORD, Save The Children Fund (SCF), and Adolescent Reproductive Health (CEFARH). Others that contributed significantly were Reproductive Health, Uganda (RHU), Fairies Aid Care Uganda (FACU), Teenage Mothers and Child Support Foundation (TMCSF) and Spring Teenage Mothers Project (STMP). These NGOs provide technical, financial and social support to individual learners and schools.

Teenage mothers are one of the groups supported by these NGOs/CSOs. These organizations are championing sensitization campaigns in communities and highlighting the importance and values of girl education and supporting activities to return girls who dropped out of school back to school. They have facilitated the reentry of teenage mothers back to

school, supported the care of children, integrated teenage mothers into their parent families and communities and increased their livelihoods and functioning. Through their activities, the NGOs/CSOs are contributing to achieving the guideline on community and stakeholder involvement in managing the reentry and retention of girls who drop out of school back into the classroom. Box 6.6 presents some of the support provided for teenage mothers by NGOs/CSOs.

Box 6.6: Support Provided by NGOs/CSOs for Teenage Mothers

- Scholarships for vulnerable and poor children;
- Scholastic and other learning materials;
- Personal daily needs for daily use;
- Sanitary materials
- Childcare facilities and services in some schools;
- Supplementary Baby fees; and
- Supporting Boarding facilities for vulnerable girls

Some of the successful interventions made by NGOs are summarized below:

- Mobilizing and providing financial support for improving school infrastructure and facilities, scholarships to vulnerable learners, scholastic materials and textbooks and school feeding programmes. An NGO that has successfully Implemented the above support is WTI, Uganda. The NGO operates mainly in refugee settlements and refugee-hosting communities in the West Nile and Northern regions of Uganda. A Headteacher of one of the schools reported the impact of the NGOs/CSOs:

  > *NGOs have contributed a lot in promoting education in the district. They have provided schools with some of the infrastructure we have in our schools building classroom blocks and dormitories. They also provided school furniture, conducted health camps and training under the WASH program and provided sanitary pads for girls.*

- Ensure access to health care, mainly prenatal and post-natal care for pregnant and teenage mothers and their children. Several NGOs have made significant contributions to addressing and improving the SRH of teenage girls. One of the most successful NGOs in providing SRHS to teenage girls is Reproductive Health, Uganda (RHU). The NGO is a leading provider of SRH education, contraceptives, and antenatal and post-natal care among others to both adolescent girls and boys. Other successful NGOs in the provision of health care to pregnant and teenage mothers include the Centre for Adolescent Reproductive Health (CEFARH) in Kole district in Northern Uganda and the Fairies Aid Care Uganda (FACU). One Teenage mother reported that:

  > *After discovering I was pregnant, I started to attend antenatal care at RHU in … Town. The services were provided for free and when the time came for me to deliver, that was when I went to the health center to deliver.*

- Support of childcare services to enable teenage mothers to return and remain at school. Spring Teenage Mothers Project (STMP) whose objective is to provide nannies to look after the children of teenage mothers while they study has supported many

teenage mothers. STMP is operating in Kampala, Uganda's capital. Other services provided by STMP include medical checks and sensitization of teenage mothers on hygiene and child-feeding practices.

- Provision of alternative learning through practical skills training for teenage mothers so that they can support themselves and their children. A successful NGO in providing opportunities for teenage mothers is the Teenage Mothers and Child Support Foundation (TMCSF). Since its inception, the TMCSF has supported about 970 teenage mothers and their children. The key areas of support include the provision of SRHS, rehabilitation, and integration of teenage mothers back into society and enrolment in alternative education such as skilling in tailoring, hairdressing and farming. The TMCSF is operating in Jinja, Kamuli and Wakiso. A teenage mother reported that she was trained by an NGO when she failed to go back to school.

> *After giving birth, I did not want to go back to school. I was now a mother with a child and I needed to learn skills that can help me make some money to look after myself and the child. I enrolled to learn tailoring with the help of one of the NGOs***.**

- Provision of counseling services to families and communities. This is needed to improve family relationships with teenage mothers and mobilize support systems to provide for them and their children. NGOs/CSOs have engaged and advocated for the prevention and reduction of community-level stigma against teenage mothers and enable the inclusivity of teenage mothers in their communities. All NGOs/CSOs working on teenage pregnancy and motherhood engage with communities to fight the stigmatization of teenage mothers and reintegrate them into communities effectively. A Local Council 1 (LC) Chairperson shared his perspectives about NGOs/CSOs and reported that:

> *These NGOs/CSOs do a lot of work in our communities. Recently, especially after the Covid-19 lockdown, they were everywhere sensitizing youth and community members about preventing teenage pregnancy and school dropout and returning children to school. This was because many children, both boys and girls, dropped out of school. For girls they got pregnant and some of them got married.*

- Advocate for policy reforms on the reentry and retention of pregnant and teenage mothers in school. A successful intervention for returning teenage mothers to school is implemented by SCF and WTI in West Nile. The NGOs implements what it refers to as the "Accelerated Education Program" (AEP) among refugees and host communities in West Nile, Uganda. The AEP is "A flexible, age-appropriate program, run in an accelerated time frame, which aims to provide access to education for disadvantaged, over-age, out-of-school children and youth." One of the participants in the AEP programs stated that:

> *I became pregnant during covid-19 lockdown. After giving birth I wanted to go back to school and joined the school under the SCF programme. The school and teachers treat us well and teach us. I want to become a teacher and teach others.*

6.7 Conclusion

Objective three assessed the state of the implementation of school reentry and retention policies and guidelines for learners who dropped out of school for any reason. Uganda's MoE&S, in 2020, passed guidelines that aim to prevent pregnancy among learners, manage pregnancy in school settings and manage the return and retention of teenage mothers in school. The study found that although some of the guidelines are not implemented due to questions about mandates and the capacity to implement them by schools, a number of the guidelines are being implemented in various degrees by schools, education officials, communities and education sector NGOs/CSOs. The implementation of the guidelines has returned and maintained earners who previously dropped out of school including pregnant/teenage mothers.

However, in the implementation of the guidelines, schools and learners experience some challenges which must be addressed to ensure the objective of the guidelines are achieved. These include addressing the health impacts of pregnancy/motherhood on teenage girls, actual and perceived discrimination and stigmatization of pregnant/teenage mothers in school settings and enhancing the self-esteem and attitudes of teenage mothers for continuation of education. Other challenges that need to be addressed are the financial and material burden of childcare and combating the cultural disapproval of teenage mothers' return to school in preference for marriage.

CHAPTER SEVEN

7.0 Objective 4

Identify Innovative and Promising Practices that Promote School Reentry and Retention for Girls in Primary and Secondary Schools

7.1 Introduction

Uganda's constitution prohibits discrimination of persons regardless of their circumstances including age, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic situation, and health or disability status. The relevant article of the constitution has been operationalized by the Equal Opportunities Act and other laws and policies. In addition to national laws and policies, Uganda has ratified international conventions and protocols on the rights of children and youth to health and education which could be affected by teenage pregnancy and school dropout. These include the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Child (UNCRC); the World Programme of Action for Youth (WPAY); and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) specifically SDGs 3 which focus on Ensuring healthy lives and promoting well-being for all at all ages; SDG 4 that focuses on ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promotion of life-long learning opportunities for all; and SDG 5 that focuses on Achieving gender equality and empowerment of all women and girls (UNDP, 2015).

Uganda does not have an explicit policy that promotes the retention of pregnant girls in school or reentry and retention to completion of education by teenage mothers. The need for a guideline to accommodate teenage mothers in school became urgent during school closures occasioned by the Covid-19 pandemic. In this regard, in 2021 the Ministry of Education and Sports provided guidelines for schools and parents on how pregnant girls and teenage mothers could continue their education. This was a response to the concern for the education future of the large number of teenage girls who became pregnant during the Covid-19 pandemic. The main purpose of the guidelines is to prevent and manage teenage pregnancy among schoolgirls. The guideline specifically outlined three domains: 1) delivery of services that prevent and manage teenage pregnancy within school settings; 2) proposed linkages for a minimum care package for prevention and management of teenage pregnancy in school settings; and 3) services that should be provided in schools to enable the reentry of teenage mothers into learning institutions.

However, the implementation of the guideline has been hampered by several factors, including the strong opposition by some religious leaders, stigmatizing attitudes and behaviours of learners and teachers, and self-stigmatization by teenage mothers, which increases negative self-perception. The burden of looking after children, the lack of childcare alternatives, and community and family disapproval are also factors influencing the implementation of the guidelines. Other factors are negative stereotyping, lack of awareness, and lack of school facilities for teenage mothers.

7.2 Identified Innovative and Promising Practices

To identify innovative and promising interventions for returning and retaining pregnant and teenage mothers in school, the perspectives of education stakeholders were sought during the study. Box 7.1 summarizes practices that can be strengthened to ensure the reentry, retention and transition of girls in education.

Box 7.1: Innovative Practices for the Reentry, Retention and Transition of Girls

a. **Provide Childcare Facilities in Schools**: Most teenage mothers cannot pay for childcare services. Providing childcare facilities in schools is a promising intervention for teenage mothers to reenter and remain in school until a level of education is completed.
b. **Financial Support for Teenage Mothers**: The cost of uniforms, scholastic materials and sanitary materials met by individual learners is prohibitive. Government and other education stakeholders' support in providing conditional cash transfers for teenage mothers for the above materials and childcare has promise for the reentry and retention of teenage mothers in school.
c. **Alternative Learning Pathways**: Primary and secondary education in Uganda are purely academic, take a long time to complete and are expensive. Skilling education models as an alternative education model can build the knowledge and skills of teenage mothers to navigate socioeconomic conditions.
d. **Alternative Learning Environments**: Stigma from peers and teachers is a major barrier to returning teenage mothers to the same school. Enrolling teenage mothers in a different school could protect them from stigmatization by peers and teachers.
e. **Provide Flexible Education Opportunities**: These include remote learning opportunities, online learning and accelerated education models. This will enable them to continue learning at their own pace and, to catch up with other learners and complete a level of education in a reduced time.
f. **Family Planning Services**: Introduce and confidentially manage basic family planning services in schools. Providing contraceptive services and commodities will prevent pregnancy and repeat pregnancies among sexually active girls and teenage mothers, respectively.
g. **Counseling Services for Teenage Parents**: Provide appropriate guidance and counseling for teenage parents. Counseling has the potential to address not only stigmatizing attitudes by teachers and fellow learners but also enhance self-esteem and prevent negative perceptions of self-worth among teenage mothers.
h. **Life Skills Education**: Life skills is a learning process in which learners are taught knowledge and skills to manage their lives positively. This will enable them to understand and manage the physiological, psychological and emotional changes girls experience as they transition through the turbulent years of adolescence.
i. **Community and Parent Sensitization:** Community and parent sensitization is important for achieving a change of attitudes. It is also crucial for removing barriers to the reentry and retention of teenage mothers in education.
j. Holistic Support Systems: There is a need to simultaneously support teenage mothers not only to return to school, but also provide health, financial, community integration and legal support. This addresses all challenges faced by teenage mothers and will ensure reentry and retention in education.

The study found that some of the proposed interventions are part of the guidelines of the MoE&S and are already being implemented in schools. The extent to which they have or can achieve their objective is discussed, indicating some of the successful experiences in Uganda and elsewhere.

7.2.1 Provide Childcare Facilities in Schools

Although facing challenges of funding, Uganda's labour law encourages the establishment of childcare centers at the workplace to support working mothers' care for their children. The service is now available in several government agencies, private corporate Organizations and some Higher Education Institutions. The MoE&S should enforce the establishment of childcare centers in all educational institutions in line with the National Development Plan III (NDP) requirements. The childcare centers established in schools for school workers should be extended to care for children of learners. This would help learners balance their education needs with childcare responsibilities, increasing the number of teenage mothers returning and remaining at school. Uganda can benefit from the experiences of some public schools in the USA and Canada that have established child day care centers for children of learners.

7.2.2 Child Support Grants

Financial support for teenage mothers is crucial to alleviate their financial challenges and enable them to return to school. Potential sources of financial support can be obtained through government assistance programs and child support grants (CSG) as part of the Social Assistance Programme (SAP). These are grants that provide direct support in the form of cash for fees, scholastic materials, food and clothing. A successful SAP was introduced by the post-apartheid government of South Africa in 1998. Since its inception, the CSG has provided financial protection for over 13 million children.

In Uganda, some education sector NGOs/CSOs have already started implementing some aspects of financial support for vulnerable learners. For example, the study found that in the refugee hosting districts in West Nile and Acholi sub-regions the JRS, WTI, and War Child Canada (WCC) are providing financial and material support for vulnerable children in refugee settlements and host communities, including teenage mothers to access education and remain at school. This support is provided in the form of school fees, scholastic materials and some personal needs. In addition, the Partner for Resource and Community Connect (PARC) operating in the Ruwenzori region provides fees in the form of fee waivers for vulnerable children in schools it has established. Including teenage mothers as a beneficiary target group for all CSG programs of NGOs/CSOs could be a game changer for returning and maintaining them in school. In addition, addressing financial barriers using the CSG approach can relieve parents/guardians and teenage mothers in ways that can allow them to return and remain in school.

7.2.3 Alternative Education Pathways

Alternative education is a way of learning that is different from the traditional model of learning but designed to achieve the same educational goals as the traditional model. Education pathways that are effective for ensuring the education of teenage mothers can have two forms. First, models that ensure the continuation of academic education and second models that divert learning to skills education.

- Academic education remains a promising model of learning for teenage mothers. This can be done by using remote commonly known as distance learning in which

educational materials are delivered to teenage mothers so that they can learn at their own pace. The materials can be recorded as learning video lessons and preloaded on devices. This approach allows teenage mothers to study on their own time and pace without disrupting their motherhood roles. Kabale University has successfully tested a similar innovation called a blended decentralized eLearning solution for training in-service primary school teachers in its Bachelor of Primary Education (BPE) program.

- Another promising alternative education pathway is introducing and promoting the **"**Accelerated Education Programme." This education model allows learners to take a shorter time to accomplish a required level of education. It is designed to enable learners who previously dropped out of school to catch up with their counterparts in the normal school programs. The AEP model is currently used in refugee settlements and refugee hosting communities by WTI to help learners who dropped out of school at the secondary level renter and complete their secondary education. The AEP was effective in enabling learners who drop out of primary school to catch up and complete primary and transition to secondary education in Kenya (Ngware et al., 2018).

- The third model is online learning which can be used to deliver individualized or group learning but at the convenient spaces of each learner. This model is feasible in urban areas with internet facilities. However, because of the high cost of establishing community-level internet facilities, it may be difficult to implement in rural areas.

- Skills education model is another alternative pathway of learning that aims at providing skills-based education. Key among these is the promotion of experiential learning which is learning through experience by placing teenage mothers in internship and apprenticeship learning and promoting vocational education which inculcates practical skills that can ensure teenage mothers reach their full potential and live a financially secure life. This model of education is already part of the education structure of Uganda. There are polytechnics and vocational institutions run by the MoE&S that can absorb primary and secondary education leavers. There are also several NGOs/CSOs providing similar programs such as the Mengo Technical and Vocational Institute (MTVI), Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) and Buganda Royal Institute of Business and Technical Education (BRIBTE) (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2019).

7.2.4 Family Planning Services

Introduce and confidentially manage basic family planning services in schools with an emphasis on abstinence among learners, especially for sexually active teenage girls and teenage mothers. Providing contraceptive services and commodities could prevent pregnancy and repeat pregnancies among sexually active girls and teenage mothers, respectively. In Uganda, although family planning commodities are not provided in schools, it is available in youth-friendly SRHS centers. Data on uptake shows an increase in the uptake of contraceptive methods by adolescents since 2021 (Makumbi et al., 2021). This suggests that with greater access and positive community response, especially in rural areas, it is possible to reduce the prevalence of teenage pregnancy among learners. In South Africa, the Children's Act of 2007 allowed the provision of extensive SRHS including the provision of condoms in schools. Although providing condoms in schools was resisted by some groups, they were

recommended and supplied in schools mainly to combat HIV infection and pregnancy among learners (Junck & George, 2022).

7.2.5 Counseling Services for Teenage Parents

Teenage pregnancy is associated with significant emotional and psychological challenges. It is a source of shame that imposes a negative perception of self-worth. The high level of community and school-level disapproval and stigmatization of teenage pregnancy and motherhood compounds the self-stigma faced by teenage mothers and prevents them from returning to school. Providing counseling to teenage mothers has the potential to reverse the negative perception of self-worth, and manage community and school-based stigma. In Uganda, some NGOs have successfully counseled teenage mothers and supported their reentry back to school. The Friaries Aid Care Uganda (FACU), located in Entebbe, provides psychological and educational support among other support systems for teenage mothers. In Kenya, Teen Seed Africa (TSA), a CBO in Kiambu, Buruburu in Nairobi provides counseling services for pregnant and teenage mothers. Through counseling and other support services, the organization has returned many girls who dropped out of school due to pregnancy back to school.

7.2.6 Life Skills Education

Life skills is a learning process in which learners are taught knowledge and skills to manage their lives positively. It should be designed to enhance overall wellbeing and success in education by acquiring capabilities that enhance logical decision-making in challenging circumstances. It should specifically help enhance learners' self-esteem and manage their emotions and relationships. It should also make learners assess the consequences of their actions to make informed decisions and choices. This will enable them to understand and manage the physiological, psychological and emotional changes girls experience as they transition through the turbulent years of adolescence. Previous research has revealed that a well-structured and systematic life skills education is critical in empowering children in self-awareness, decision-making, emotional control and problem-solving among other benefits (Nasheeda et al., 2019).

7.2.7 Community and Parent Sensitization

Community and parent sensitization through community dialogues is crucial for the reentry of teenage mothers into school. Such dialogues are important for reducing the stigma against teenage mothers and providing support for teenage mothers to return to school. An effective dialogue should involve community members and cultural and religious leaders who wield immense influence on their communities. The MoE&S of Uganda has recommended the use of community sensitizations in the management of teenage pregnancy and the reentry of teenage mothers back to school (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2020). In Kenya, community and parent dialogues to support the reentry of teenage mothers into school have been held and provided financial and material support for teenage mothers under the “Back to School” program.

7.2.8 Holistic Support System

A holistic support system involving the simultaneous implementation of several programs including education, health, financial, social and community support, and legal support, is required to address the challenges of teenage motherhood in education. Testimonies from participants to illustrate some of the components of the holistic support systems have already been mentioned and will not be repeated here. However, the interventions recommended in the holistic support system for teenage mothers are discussed below:

- Educational support is critical for the success of teenage mothers in education. This should include significant support such as a flexible learning program that takes account of their unique roles as mothers and learners, strong teacher support for personalized learning and school-based childcare services that enables proximity between mothers and their children while in school. In the event of failure to continue with formal academic education, there is a need to have an alternative skills-based education for affected teenage mothers.

- Teenage mothers are financially dependent on parents who are often unable to meet their needs. To reenter and remain at school, teenage mothers must be financially supported. This support can come in the forms of scholarships and cash handouts to support childcare, health expenses and nutrition.

- Community engagement is a critical need to ensure inclusivity in communities and reintegration into their parent families and receive systematic and enduring support. This can only be done by continuous family and community sensitization aimed at preventing and mitigating stigma against teenage motherhood. This will enhance their chances of returning and remaining in education.

- Legal support would include providing pro bono services in legal matters involving child support and custody rights and influencing policy development that supports and protects teenage mothers' rights to education.

7.3 Conclusion

The simultaneous implementation of the identified promising interventions by addressing all barriers to the reentry and retention of teenage mothers in education is required. This approach should prioritize the provision of school-based childcare services, childcare support, financial support and availing opportunities for flexible and alternative education models. The other critical areas that need attention are counseling services to deal with self-esteem, negative perception of self-worth by teenage mothers, and prevention of school and community-level stigma and stereotyping of teenage mothers. Providing a structured and systematic life skills education also has promise for empowering teenage learners for responsible life. By implementing these promising interventions, there are opportunities to significantly ensure that teenage mothers’ reenter and complete their education.

CHAPTER EIGHT

8.0 Discussion of Key Findings, Conclusions and Recommendations

8.1 Introduction

The focus of the study was fourfold. 1) to assess the status of girls' retention and transition from primary to secondary level of education. 2) To determine the factors that exacerbate the dropout of girls in upper primary and secondary education. 3) to establish the adoption and status of implementation of school reentry policy and/or guidelines. 4) to identify innovative and promising practices that promote school reentry and retention for girls at primary and secondary schools. A review of previous research and official documents in Uganda revealed that school dropout of teenage girls is high and it is highest at the primary level of education. The national average estimated the girls' primary school completion rate at 54% in 2017, implying that the most recent available national data for primary education puts the girls' dropout rate at 46% (World Bank, n.d.). This study assessed the level of school dropout in selected districts in West Nile, Acholi, Lango, Bukedi, Bugisu and Busoga sub-regions of Uganda, where participation of girls in education is low, teenage pregnancy has been traditionally high fuelled by poverty and traditions that are tolerant to child marriage, and school drop out rates for girls is high.

8.2 Discussion of Findings

The finding of this study corroborates previous research and official reports that indicate that the retention and transition rates from primary to secondary education are low for both boys and girls due to a high dropout rate, especially among girls (UNICEF, 2022). In selected schools in the study districts for which data was obtained, the proportion of girls enrolled in P7 was substantially lower than those enrolled in P1 by more than 80%. This suggests that the intergrade transition from P1 to P7 decreases monotonically, an indicator of a high intergrade dropout rate and low retention rate.

The pervasive school dropout of girls is taking place when Uganda has a progressive education policy featuring the UPE and USE programs that have expanded access to education for boys and girls. There is also the Equal Opportunity Act that aims to ensure no discrimination on any ground including gender, suggesting that girls' education is as important as that of boys. Uganda has also ratified international rights conventions that champion equity and equality of the male and female gender in all aspects of society including education. Below, some of the factors impeding the participation of girls in education are discussed.

8.2.1 Factors Influencing School Dropout

Poverty is one of the factors influencing school dropout among teenage girls. It reduces retention and transition in education due to the inability to pay fees and other mandatory school requirements. The cost to provide educational materials and other basic needs, even under the no tuition fees regime, becomes prohibitive for poor families. Children in poor families are forced to combine work with schooling and are easily influenced to participate in risky behaviors and illicit activities, making them drop out of school. Additionally, the desperate

need for money has made parents “sell or exchange” their daughters for money or easily convertible items such as livestock (Giacobino et al., 2024; Ashraf et al., 2020). The cultural norms that define the roles of women and girls as wives and mothers, cause the withdrawal of girls from education to get married. As a result, marrying girls who become pregnant is not only expected but also enforced (Onyango et al., 2015; Casey Foundation, 2021; UNFPA, 2020). Poverty is also an important factor in preventing teenage mothers from returning to school or transitioning to the next level of education. The inability to provide fees, scholastic materials, and child care are major barriers to school reentry, retention and transition for pregnant and teenage mothers, which is consistent with the findings of another study (John Odyek (2024)

The study found that teenage pregnancy while at school is a major determinant of dropping out of school. The finding corroborates previous studies in sub-Saharan Africa (Tushabe et al., 2024; Manzi et al., 2018; Sobngwi-Tambekou et al., 2022). Teenage pregnancy could result from the failure to effectively manage the physiological, psychological and emotional challenges faced by girls who have achieved menarche or due to the socioeconomic circumstances of girls. These two conditions increase the susceptibility of teenage girls to pregnancy if they are not appropriately assisted through effective counseling services and SRHS&C and education. Because of the current rigidities of school policies and the community-level disapproval of pregnant learners in schools, teenage learners who become pregnant are forced to drop out of school and be prevented from reentry.

Poverty is another factor that greatly contributes to the dropout of girls from education. Poverty is a double-edged sword because it is both a contributor to early pregnancy as well as a consequence of early pregnancy. Girls from poor households are more likely to initiate sexual activity at an early age leading to pregnancy. The findings are consistent with those of other studies that found that learners facing significant financial stress are likely to lack access to SRHS and engage in risky sexual behaviours leading to pregnancy (Fentie et al., 2023; Gupta, 2021; Lambani, 2015). Poverty is manifested in the failure of families to provide school fees, basic school requirements such as scholastic materials, and basic personal needs such as clothing, cosmetics, and sanitary materials for girls. These inabilities are exploited by perpetrators to seduce girls into relationships, ending in pregnancy. Becoming pregnant at teenage also increases the risk of poverty because of its effect on denying opportunities for education and future employability (Morgan et al., 2022; Lambani, 2015).

The study also found that teenage pregnancy among learners rose dramatically during the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic which contributed greatly to the increase in the number of school dropouts of teenage girls (Emma Batha, 2022; Alunyo et al., 2023). The finding suggests that teenage pregnancy and school dropout are related and the majority of the girls who got pregnant dropped out of school. This was in part due to 1) school policies do not allow the retention of pregnant learners in schools. Even when the MoE&S provided guidelines instructing schools to keep pregnant girls in schools for a limited period, most schools under the guidance of their foundation bodies and communities did not comply because pregnant learners were viewed as a bad example to other learners. 2) Parents of pregnant learners and teenage mothers disapprove of the continuation of education for pregnant learners. Most parents considered the pregnant teenagers an embarrassment and preferred to quickly marry them off. 3) Fear of stigmatization by other learners and teachers was a barrier to the return

to school for many girls. 4) Negative perceptions of self-worth by pregnant learners and teenage mothers have also exacerbated the dropout of school among teenage mothers.

Furthermore, the findings of the study found that a large number of learners who became pregnant got married. This finding is consistent with previous research which found that girls are married off as soon as they become pregnant or are banished forcing them to get married (Alunyo et al., 2023). In most cultures in the study areas, the age at marriage is traditionally low. As such the practice of child marriage, determined by the onset of menarche, is highly promoted (Casey Foundation, 2021). This is despite having in place legislation (the Marriage Act and the Anti-Defilement Act of Uganda) that prohibits the marriage of persons under the age of 18 or having sexual intercourse with a person under the age of 18. The persistence of this tradition is motivated by two related factors. 1)Teenage girls who have reached the age of menarche voluntarily drop out of school to get married or are withdrawn from school by parents to get married under the guise of providing social and economic protection for the girls.2) The likelihood that a teenage girl could become pregnant at home which is considered a dishonor to the family, leading to the loss of value in terms of bride price. 3) Teenage girls who become pregnant while schooling, are automatically made to get married to the perpetrator of the pregnancy, arguing that doing so will protect the family from disgrace as well as the teenage girl from shame as premarital pregnancy is considered a taboo. In these circumstances, families and communities are unwilling to contribute to the enforcement of legislation on age at marriage and the defilement of teenage girls (Ninsiima et al., 2020; Corno & Voena, 2021). Our finding is consistent with that of another study in nine high-fertility countries in sub-Saharan Africa which found that marriage soon after menarche is prevalent, especially in rural areas (Belachew et al., 2022; Nabugoomu, 2019).

8.2.2 Factors Influencing Teenage Pregnancy

The study also investigated the factors exacerbating teenage pregnancy among learners. The findings suggest that one of the factors leading to the high prevalence of teenage pregnancies in the study areas is the inability to manage the physiological and psychological changes girls experience as they transition from childhood to adulthood, which has been observed by previous studies elsewhere (Benoit, 1997); Rodriguez, 2021;(Paredes & Santa-Cruz-Espinoza, 2021). The process of graduating from childhood to adulthood that takes place during adolescence exerts a lot of pressure on learners characterized by ignorance and a desire to adventure and explore life. These desires expose adolescents to unprotected sexual activities, most of the time under the influence of intoxicating substances or coercion by boys and men. Illicit sexual activities leading to teenage pregnancy and marriage are common and concern in the study communities which is exacerbated by the lack of knowledge of sexual and reproductive health information, services and commodities (RHS&C), a major factor causing unwanted pregnancy among teenagers including teenage learners. A previous study found that the lack of pregnancy prevention measures such as SRHS&C that can support teenage girls in navigating the transition to adulthood increases their vulnerability to pregnancy (Sserwanja et al., 2021).

The study also found that negative peer pressure plays a major role in the prevalence of teenage learner pregnancy (Isuku, 2015; Otegbayo et al., 2023). The need for material things and entertainment are the two major desires that expose teenage learners to perpetrators who

provide material needs such as phones and entertainment items including alcohol and nighttime activities that lead to unprotected sexual activities. These behaviours are exacerbated by ignorance about sexuality mainly due to either poor guidance or the total lack of it. Previous studies found that ignorance about sexuality is a contributing factor to teenage pregnancy (Anayochukwu, 2022; Janighorban et al., 2022). The unwillingness of parents to talk about sex with children, negative religious and cultural attitudes about discussing sexual matters, the influence of social media that presents unrealistic expectations of sex, and the lack of structured school-based sexual education are to blame for the high prevalence of teenage pregnancy among learners.

Finally, the study found that a large number of the learners became pregnant during consensual sex commonly referred to as defilement because of their lack of capacity for informed consent. Previous studies and reports have identified defilement as a leading cause of teenage pregnancy in Uganda (Batiibwe et al., 2023; Ministry of Labour, Gender and Social Development, 2022).

8.2.3 Barriers to School Reentry and Retention

Having dropped out of school due to pregnancy and motherhood the intent should be to bring back to school girls who dropped out of school. The finding of this study shows that only 25% of the girls who dropped out of school ever returned to school. Given the large number of girls who drop out of schools annually, this proportion is low if Uganda is to achieve the goal of gender equity and equality in education. The study identified three main barriers preventing teenage mothers from returning to school: 1) Lack of money for fees and other scholastic materials because of lack of support from parents and spouses due to poverty. This finding corroborates the findings of previous studies (Mukabana et al., 2024) that blamed income shocks and poverty are the main barriers to school reentry by teenage mothers. 2) Marriage is a barrier to school reentry due to its role in imposing domestic responsibilities that take away the time available for schooling. 3) Childcare that does not only require time but also financial resources, thereby taking away time and money needed for schooling (Corno & Voena, 2021). 4) Social and cultural values that do not prioritize schooling for married women mainly because of the negative gender perceptions of female education. 4) The fear of negative attitudes, labeling and judgment at school by peers and teachers (Ellis-Sloan, 2014) is an important reason for not returning to school and, therefore, requires school-based interventions that prevent the stigmatization of teenage mothers and promote positive and tolerant attitudes among learners irrespective of their circumstances.

8.2.4 Adoption of Guidelines for School Reentry and Retention

The study found that in 2020, the MoE&S provided guidelines for the management of learner pregnancy and the reentry of teenage mothers to school within school settings (MoE&S, 2020). However, the conditions for pregnant girls to remain at school are limited to only three (3) months and teenage mothers can only rejoin school six (6) months after giving birth. These two guidelines mean that learners who get pregnant at school will be required to leave schooling for more than one year, which is too long and could increase the number of learners dropping out of school permanently. This is because teenage mothers staying out of school for a long time would most likely end up married (Lloyd & Mensch, 2008). Additionally, no

support frameworks to facilitate those willing to return to school such as provision of scholastic materials, uniforms and baby care support, have been provided in the guidelines. The government has left the responsibility of providing support for teenage mothers who want to return to school to families and communities who do not only have the financial resources, but whose values and norms do not support the return of teenage mothers to school.

However, there is evidence that some of the guidelines have been adopted. Key among these are: 1) allowing pregnant learners in candidate classes to return to school to sit for their final examinations (Haarløv, 2024); 2) teenage mothers encouraged by teachers and with the support from some families and NGOs/CSOs have started to return to school and this number is expected to grow in the coming years (Vervoort, 2024; (Leerlooijer et al., 2013)(Namutebi et al., 2022); 3) psychosocial support and material support are being provided by NGOs/CBOs for teenage mothers who have returned to school (Masaba & Oola, 2022). Attempts to provide alternative education pathways in the form of the AEP model and skills-based education model are being implemented by some NGOs/CBOs (Windle International Uganda, 2023). However, the scale of the adoption of the guidelines is still low as the most important barriers such as lack of financial support for schooling, lack of childcare support within and out of school settings and the negative family and community attitudes against reentry of teenage mothers to school remain prevalent.

8.3 Conclusion

Uganda has achieved parity in access to and enrolment in education at the primary level. Uganda has significantly increased access to education for both boys and girls, consistent with the country's HCD program. This has been achieved by the UPE and USE programs which increased investments in school infrastructure and educational materials and attracted many learners who would otherwise have remained at home due to the high cost of education. The UPE program increased the number of primary school enrolments from 8.4 million learners in 2013 to 8.8 million in 2017. However, the increased access to primary education did not achieve equity and equality between boys and girls due to a high cumulative dropout rate causing a low completion rate in primary education and low transition from primary to secondary education. This is indicated by the progressive decline in retention and transition between grades P1 to P7 which showed a decline in the number of children reaching P7, especially among girls.

The high dropout rate and low retention and transition from primary to secondary and higher education have been influenced by several factors. These factors include teenage pregnancy, child marriage, negative peer influence and poverty at the household level which has greatly affected the retention and transition of girls from primary to secondary education. Although the effects of these factors on the dropout rate have been a historical problem, the prevalence of school dropout increased dramatically during the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic and in the post-pandemic period due to the increased susceptibility of teenage girls to teenage pregnancy and child marriage perpetrated by their male peers, businessmen, motorcycle taxi riders, relatives and teachers.

Despite the high dropout rate, there is hope as teenage mothers who drop out of school are starting to return to school. This trend is expected to increase with innovative practices that

support the education of girls, while intentional efforts to stamp out teenage learner pregnancy and ensure retention in school are achieved. There is also evidence that some of the teenage mothers completed primary education and transitioned to secondary or alternative education. However, barriers to the reentry, retention and transition of girls through primary and secondary education persist. These include failure to pay school fees, low self-esteem among teenage mothers, stigmatization of teenage mothers within school settings and family and community disapproval of school reentry for teenage mothers.

Achieving a higher completion rate in primary education and transitioning to secondary education for teenage mothers and girls who drop out of school for other reasons require urgent measures that can reduce girls' dropout rates from primary schools. This can be achieved by targeting factors that contribute to girls' dropping out of school including teenage pregnancy, teenage motherhood and child marriage; poverty at the household level; and family, community and civil society action to return dropout girls to school. The government, which has the overall responsibility for the education of citizens, should enforce policies and guidelines that directly encourage the return of teenage mothers to school. The following recommendations are suggested for different actions in the education ecosystem to ensure teenage mothers return to school and complete their education.

8.4 Recommendations

The study provides recommendations that are expected to increase the number of girls who drop out of school due to motherhood and other reasons to return, return to school, and transition through primary and secondary education. These recommendations are intended to target responses from the four main stakeholders of the basic education sector and apply to all four objectives of the study.

8.4.1 Government level

a. Effectively and without discrimination enforce the laws that protect teenage girls from sexual exploitation and other gender-based abuses.
b. Provide an appropriate learning environment for teenage mothers and their children by providing spaces for young children and a framework for the health care of schooling mothers and their children within school settings.
c. Create a conducive school environment that ensures no tolerance of stigma against teenage mothers by other learners, peers and teachers.
d. Establish appropriate and affordable alternative learning pathways that are flexible and attractive for teenage mothers and other teenage girls and boys who drop out of school for any reason.
e. Develop and enforce policies providing access to youth-led SRHS&C to sexually active learners irrespective of gender.
f. Institute a deliberate action to provide SRHS&C to vulnerable population groups including rural youth, persons with disabilities, the poor, refugees and refugee hosting communities where the majority of teenage mothers originate.
g. Strengthen and enforce laws and policies that aim to prevent child marriage, and teenage pregnancy.

h. Provide alternative education pathways for pregnant and teenage mothers to ensure that they can participate in education with the view of making them employable and achieve economic independence.

8.4.2 Civil Society Organizations

a. Advocate for reentry and completion of education by teenage mothers and family counseling and raising awareness of communities about equal and inclusive education, regardless of the circumstances of learners, including teenage pregnancy and motherhood.
b. Implement behavior change activities including information and communication activities targeting families, communities and schools to embrace initiative for the reentry and retention of pregnant learners and teenage mothers in school.
c. Provide the basic essential needs of teenage mothers including scholastic materials and personal effects needed to effectively participate in learning.
d. Engage influential members of societies including cultural, religious and political leaders to urge families and communities to embrace initiatives for the reentry of teenage mothers back to school.

8.4.3 Family and Community Actions

a. Advocate for family and community support for the reentry, retention and transition of teenage mothers through different levels of education.
b. Encourage teenage mothers to rejoin schooling in a different school to protect them from potential shunning and shaming by their peers.
c. Empower families and communities to provide the basic needs of pregnant and teenage mothers to return to school and continue their education.

8.4.5 School Actions

a. School administrations shall ensure zero tolerance for sexual harassment and exploitation by fellow learners and teachers by developing anti-sexual harassment policies and redress mechanisms.
b. Schools should implement age-appropriate sexual education programs, link learners to sexual health services within the school or community health institutions and encourage positive relationships among learners. Participation in sexual health programs has the potential to delay the initiation of sexual activities among learners and have fewer sexual partners.
c. Provide learners with life skills to effectively address sexuality matters to enhance their capacity to resist influences that increase their vulnerability to pregnancy, marriage and school dropout.

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