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Overcoming the reproductive health challenges to young women's employment prospects in Uganda

Executive statement

Despite the existence of a fairly strong legal framework, young women in Uganda continue to face a number of challenges as they make the crucial transition into adulthood. In particular, girls are pushed into early marriages and pregnancies and are often deprived of full education attainment. Such experiences have lasting impacts on their future economic opportunities. Research findings show that discriminatory social norms and practices still exist – particularly in rural areas – and they affect the ability of girls and young women to realise their educational and economic capabilities. Young people with more education are likely to transit to better jobs as and when employment opportunities arise. Moreover, early fertility and marriage experiences often result in increased caring responsibilities and restricted mobility in search of employment opportunities.

The transition from school to work

The choices that young people – particularly women – make regarding when to leave school shape their subsequent life experiences and may have long lasting effects on their future economic opportunities. Like many developing countries in sub Saharan Africa (SSA), Uganda still struggles with high school drop-out rates, child marriages and teenage pregnancies. According to the 2015 School to Work Transition Survey (SWTS), more than 50 percent of young Ugandans aged 15–24 years reported having no formal schooling or only acquired education below primary level.¹ The same survey shows that when compared to boys, girls are more likely to leave school before completion (41 percent versus 51 percent).

Early exit from school can influence young women's decisions and push them to enter the labour market prematurely with devastating consequences. In Uganda, the average age at which young women start looking for a job or age of first employment experience is about 15 years. At this age, these adolescents should still be attending school. Furthermore, young women tend to remain in labour transition for quite long (68.8 percent against 66.8 for boys). The SWTS also

shows that young people (both girls and boys) who leave school without completing at least secondary school are less likely to transit to stable employment (employment that is based on a contract of at least 12 months) or satisfactory temporary or self-employment. In 2015, 60 percent of young people who did not go beyond primary school were still in transition – implying that they are yet to find stable or satisfactory employment compared with 47 percent for those with tertiary and vocational education. Related evidence based on the Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) indicates that, women who got married or gave birth before 20 years are less likely to be in professional/technical and managerial positions.² The DHS survey also shows that a higher proportion of women experiencing early child bearing are self-employed in the agricultural sector (55 percent against 40 percent for those who married later).

A survey of labour market transitions in 4 districts

This brief identifies possible ways in which to enhance the employment prospects of young people in Uganda. It is based on a qualitative survey conducted in four districts of Uganda—Masaka, Namayingo, Yumbe and Kampala. It is based on a

research report titled ***Education, marriage, fertility and labour market experiences of young women in Uganda: Evidence from a qualitative assessment***. The survey supplemented the 2016 Assessment of Early Labour Market Transitions of Women in Uganda—that quantitatively explored the links between educational attainment, age of marriage and child-birth and labour market outcomes for young people.³

The qualitative survey sought to understand adolescents' life experiences and how these affected their future family and economic capabilities. In particular, the survey made attempts to identify some of the underlying norms, attitudes and practices that either perpetuate vulnerabilities or offer opportunities for the development of capabilities among 15-24-year-olds.

In each district, about 27 young people were selected to participate in the study through focus group discussions (FDGs). In addition, two key informant interviews were conducted in each district to provide expert insights on the thematic areas of education, marriage, teenage pregnancy and labour markets as well as actions that have been taken to curb school dropouts, early pregnancies and marriages. Finally, ethnographic life history interviews were conducted with three female and one male youth who had dropped out of school.

Why do young people continue in school?

Based on the discussions from the four communities, they all seemed to value education (for both girls and boys) and the positive benefits that it can bring to the individuals, their households and the community at large. In particular, the youth pointed out the link between educational attainment and employment. Young women in Yumbe district explained their motivation for staying in school as:

“The reason I am still in school is to enable me to speak good English. I also want to be well off in the future. I do not want to suffer like people who drop out of school.”

Another female participant added,

“Being in school helps to avoid early pregnancies and marriages which are very common in this village.”

However, given the limited employment opportunities available in the country, some youth think education is no longer a worthwhile investment. Some respondents felt that students with low educational attainment seemed to be better off in terms of income

when compared to those who went to school. A young man expressed his discontent with continuing school because:

“You leave your friends in the villages fishing or trading, and you go to school. After completing senior four or six you come back to the village without a job. Only to be employed by the illiterates to clean and arrange their fishing gears. Why did I go to school? one wonders. This is frustrating and as a result many youth in this village shun education and look at it as a useless venture.”

Drivers of school dropout

Early pregnancies amongst girls were cited as significant contributors to the observed school dropouts. Girls tend to start school late and mature quickly while at school; this is partly explained by long distances to schools. However, in the recent past there has been improvement in terms of access to primary schools within 3km radius. FGD participants in Namayingo noted that:

“By the time girls reach P.6 they look mature and they become sexually active at a tender age leading to early pregnancies.”

For most girls, pregnancy and motherhood mark the end of their education, as there is not much support for pregnant girls wishing to remain in school, let alone for new mothers wishing to return to school. Participants noted that:

“Going back to school after giving birth is completely unheard of, parents think it is a wastage of money, teachers think teenage mothers will spoil other pupils in school, and there is generally a lot of stigma around teenage mothers from fellow students and teachers.”

Moreover the girls develop an inferiority complex and feel that they no longer fit in school after giving birth. On the other hand, boys who become teenage parents are given a chance to choose between quitting and staying in school. Participants from Yumbe reiterated that:

“When a girl gets pregnant, the next thing is to find the man responsible and he marries her, she is not even asked about the possibility of continuing with school but for a boy it is different, there is a discussion as to whether he wishes to continue schooling as his parents take on the responsibility of looking after the pregnant girl.”

Indeed, the fear of teenage pregnancies through exposure to boys while at school was highlighted as one of the reasons why some parents withdraw their daughters from school. There is a perception that girls are likely to be impregnated by fellow students, community members and in some cases teachers. A female participant in Masaka noted that

“Girls who join secondary school are more likely to be exposed and end up getting pregnant.”

Apart from early pregnancy, other factors mentioned causing premature departure of young people from school included: peer influence—especially social distractions e.g. cinemas, nightclubs and karaoke clubs. Also, the involvement of young people in employment while still schooling can precipitate an early school exit. Finally, the long distances to schools—especially secondary schools, is also a factor influencing school dropout, and shortage of nearby government secondary schools affects the girls more than it does boys. While the boys may ride bicycles and still attend school, this is not always possible for girls. For girls, the only options are either to enrol in the boarding section or consider renting a room near the school—both options are far more expensive compared to the bicycle alternative available to boys. A participant in Namayingo noted that:

“There is no government school in the entire sub county, the nearest government aided secondary school is 15 km from the village.”

Child marriages and consequences

Child marriages (below the constitutional age of 18 years) were noted to be a significant contributor to the high levels of teenage pregnancy among young people. When a girl is married off before the age of 18, she is henceforth perceived to be woman rather than a child. Hence, child marriages automatically result in early motherhood. In addition, there are very weak sanctions for men who defile young girls, and the stigmatization of pre-marital pregnancy often triggers marriages. A participant noted that:

“If a girl gets pregnant, the parents will push her to go and marry the man who is responsible for the pregnancy.”

At the same time, in some defilement cases, out of court settlement are reached in order for families to maintain a harmony in the community. Child marriages persist despite the existence of laws that forbid such practices and the subsequent 2015 national

strategy on ending child marriages. According to the respondents, the leaders rarely enforce the existing law against child marriages and defilement. An FGD participant in Yumbe noted

“As far as I can remember I have not heard of a case against child marriage in this sub-county. Once the parents of the girls get the dowry, that’s the end of the story.”

Although customary, civil and religious marriages are by law the recognized forms of marriage, informal marriages/cohabitation are on the rise and have surpassed the recognized formal marriages — at least in our study sites. The rise of these informal unions has contributed to failure to implement the available laws since such unions taken place in loose setting—where the parents of the girl secretly agree to the terms of the informal union.

The links between limited education, early child bearing and employment prospects

The timing of first birth is believed to interfere with education and labour market participation as the early burden of childcare limits the time available for engagement in productive activities outside of the home. For young women that give birth before entering the labour market, their employment chances beyond household based activities decline. An FGD participant in Namayingo noted that:

“Employers in the informal sector are hesitant to offer jobs to girls with children – it’s considered as a distraction and extra baggage. Even those that are already employed and require a break to nurse and take care of their children rarely return to their job as they are easily and quickly replaced.”

Another FGD participant in Masaka highlighted a similar situation for those who are self-employed

“Even for those in self-employment, building a customer base again after a long maternity break is not always easy.”

It was noted that early fertility affects the male youths as well:

“For the male youth, the new responsibility comes at a heavy cost, its worse if children are giving birth to children, their education and labour opportunities are ruined.”

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Marriage at a young age was reported to significantly affect labour market participation among females—at least- in the short run. It was noted that once a young girl is married, it becomes harder to access decent job opportunities. It is cited that some husbands restrain their wives from taking on work outside the home. Some men worry and believe that their wives will be sexually exploited at their work places while others think independent women are hard to control. A young woman in Masaka described her current situation as:

"My husband dictates the kind of work I can engage in, he even restricts me on the number of hours I can work."

Ways to protect young women

Keep girls in school: There is a need to put in place measures to address the constraints that hamper the continued schooling of young girls. Issues of social and cultural norms that contribute to girls' early exit from school should be addressed through media campaigns on the importance of education, targeting the young girls, parents and other community members; community leaders (parish chiefs, cultural leaders and religious leaders). The re-admission of teenage mothers back to school as opposed to forcing them into marriage should be taken on seriously through formulating a clear policy on school re-entry for young mothers. Also, skills enhancement for these young mothers would be critical in improving their capabilities and future labour market opportunities.

Enhance young women's capabilities: To take advantage of potential employment opportunities and/or create their own jobs through self-employment, young women need the requisite education and skills. Where employment opportunities are available, higher levels of education are associated with easier transitions to better paid jobs and occupational mobility. Hence there is a need to not only focus on enrolment but rather on retention, completion and quality of education. Furthermore, expanding access to quality vocational and technical training is central to enhancing economic capabilities.

Strengthen enforcement and awareness of legal sanctions: Whereas the study confirmed the existence of legal sanctions aimed at protecting girls, the enforcement of the available legal regime remains weak. For example, the enforcement of the law on defilement and minimum age for marriage is inadequate. Going forward, there is a need to enhance effectiveness of the sanctions regime and child protection systems. The police, probation officers, local leaders and community leaders need to work together to address this issue. The relevant stakeholders should continuously sensitize parents against marrying off young girls. Relatedly, other policies such as UPE should be strictly enforced and monitored so that all children who enrol in school are supported and encouraged to complete.

Endnotes

- 1 Uganda Bureau of Statistics (2016b). Labour market transition of young people in Uganda Highlights of the School-to-work Transition Survey 2015. Kampala: Government of Uganda.
- 2 Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS) and ICF International Inc. (2012). Uganda Demographic and Health Survey 2011. Kampala, Uganda: UBOS and Calverton, Maryland: ICF International Inc.

- 3 Ahaibwe, G., S. Ssewanyana and I. Kasirye (2016) An Assessment of Early Labour Market Transitions of Women in Uganda: A Descriptive Approach

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