

# UGANDA: CHILD MARRIAGE

## WHAT IS CHILD MARRIAGE?

Child marriage is the formal or informal union, including religious or customary marriage, of anyone younger than 18 years. The incidence of child marriage has been shown to increase as societal instability increases, making girls living in conflict or crisis settings particularly vulnerable to the practice<sup>1</sup>. According to the World Bank, ending child marriage could generate \$3 billion (about Shs10.714 trillion) per year for Uganda by 2030<sup>2</sup>.

### KEY FACTS ON CHILD MARRIAGE IN UGANDA

- If present trends continue, more than 140 million girls will be married before the age of 18 in the next decade<sup>3</sup>.
- Globally, almost 400 million women now aged 20-49 were married before the age of 18.
- According to UNICEF (2016), 10% of girls are married by 15 years of age in Uganda, while 40% of girls are married by the age of 18<sup>4</sup>.
- The median age at first marriage for women living in Northern Uganda is lower (16.9) as compared to Western and South Western Uganda (18.1 and 19.9 respectively)<sup>5</sup>.
- The rate of child marriage is highest in northern Uganda, estimated at 59%, followed by Western region (58%), Eastern region (52%), East Central (52%), West Nile (50%), Central (41%), South West (37%), and lowest in Kampala (21%).<sup>6</sup>

### KEY DRIVERS

Child marriage continues to be a reality for many girls because of the following key factors:

- A lack of implementation of policies and laws that seek to protect children;
- Poverty exacerbates child marriage in that families see child marriage as an opportunity to benefit financially from the bride price they receive for their daughter. Any economic or social policies and programs/services that create or sustain gaps between groups of people are likely to facilitate child marriage.
- Traditional and religious practices and beliefs, the low social status assigned to women and girls, and initiation ceremonies for girls who reach puberty that prepare them for marriage and gender-based responsibilities as defined by culture.

- Young girls married off to older men who are respected in their communities<sup>7</sup>.
- Lack of access to education contributes to the likelihood of child marriage.
- In some communities, child marriage is associated with parental need for protection of their daughters against early pregnancy so as to keep the dignity of the family.
- Personal influences that are created by the environment in which girls live and their personal circumstances.

### CONSEQUENCES OF CHILD MARRIAGES

- Girls who marry young are more likely to experience pregnancy complications that can lead to death, obstructed labor and obstetric fistula.

1 <https://iwhc.org/resources/facts-child-marriage/>

2 World Bank (2017) World Bank Press release on child marriage in Uganda. Press release no:2018/058/AFR

3 <https://iwhc.org/resources/facts-child-marriage/>

4 UNICEF (2016). The State of the World's Children. Available at <https://www.unicef.org/sowc2016/>

5 Government of Uganda (2015) The National Strategy to End Child Marriage and Teenage Pregnancy 2014/2015 – 2019/2020

6 UNFPA (2013) Child marriage profile

7 <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/child-marriage/zambia/>

- Adolescent mothers are twice as likely to die from pregnancy and delivery complications compared to older mothers.
- Child marriage puts girls at increased risk of sexual, physical, and emotional gender-based violence.
- Child brides are more likely to get sexually transmitted infections including HIV.
- The demands of early motherhood affect the social wellbeing of girls and deny them their right to enjoy their childhood.
- Child brides miss out on education and economic opportunities that have potential to lift them and their families out of poverty; hence child marriage perpetuates a vicious cycle of intergenerational poverty.
- Child brides are likely to drop out of school, curtailing opportunities and the realization of their full potential. Their economic capabilities and opportunities are significantly limited.
- Child marriage and teenage pregnancy expose girls to early childbearing and greater risks of lifelong fertility with significantly higher incidence of maternal and infant morbidity and mortality.

### NATIONAL POLICIES, STRATEGIES AND FRAMEWORKS TO END CHILD MARRIAGES

The national Constitution of Uganda (1995) provides that the age of consent (the minimum legal age for marriage) is set at 18 years for both males and females. Unfortunately, customary practice is widely practiced in some communities and takes precedence over the constitution.

The National Strategy on Ending Child Marriage and Teenage Pregnancy 2014/2015 – 2019/2020 is a holistic, comprehensive framework that reflects the commitment of the Uganda Government to end the practice of child marriage and other forms of violence against girls including teenage pregnancy as a consequence of child marriage. The goal of the strategy is to end child marriage in Uganda and ensure prosperity and social economic transformation, anchored within the overall vision of the National Development Plan<sup>8</sup>.

In addition, the Government of Uganda is implementing the following national strategies: National Strategy on Girls' Education (2014 – 2019); and the National Strategic Plan on the Elimination of Violence against Children in Schools (2015 – 2020).

### WHAT CAN BE DONE TO END CHILD MARRIAGE

- Greater investment in girls' education, providing economic opportunities for out of school girls is needed.
- Information and communication strategy should be aimed at reaching the local communities and should be implemented continuously. Local people should be engaged in spreading clear messages informing people that child marriage is illegal stating also the consequences for anyone found breaking the law.
- Sexually reproductive health and rights outreach through sensitization programmes is needed to prevent teen pregnancies and explain the impacts of early marriage.
- Access to appropriate services and education on reproductive health and rights to prevent teenage pregnancies and HIV must be promoted.
- Awareness-raising at community levels involving traditional and religious leadership.
- Keeping girls in school and implementing education re-entry policy for pregnant girls and child mothers.
- Strengthening statutory laws to reduce gaps through legal analysis and use of the media to highlight problematic areas.
- Safe spaces and children's clubs to develop life skills and create awareness of the risks associated with child marriage.
- Harmonization of statutory and customary laws concerning child marriage.
- Enforcing the laws by prosecuting perpetrators and rescuing children.
- Engaging boys and men as partners or agents of change in ending child marriage.

8 Government of Uganda (2015). The National Strategy to End Child Marriage and Teenage Pregnancy 2014/2015 – 2019/2020