

# What drives the high rates of early Child Marriages in Uganda?

## Executive Statement

*Child marriage remains a very serious challenge in Uganda due to biased gender norms, limited schooling opportunities coupled with a poor school environment and high levels of poverty. About one out of every five girls aged 15-19 years in Uganda are in a marital union. Early child marriage has adverse impacts on both the individual and society. It undermines maternal and infant health thus exacerbating maternal mortality rates as a result of increased teenage pregnancies. It also limits income earning potential of the affected girls and the productivity in adulthood—by influencing the nature of jobs females engage in. Ending child marriage is therefore of paramount importance at the individual and economy level. Measures such as strict enforcement of laws protecting the children as well as expanding education opportunities and ensuring a conducive learning environment, advocacy and community sensitisation need to be scaled up.*

## Introduction

Child marriage in Uganda remains high in spite of numerous efforts by government and activists to curtail it. According to the 2017 State of the World's Children report, Uganda was ranked 16<sup>th</sup> in the world, with regard to child marriages (UNICEF, 2017). While both boys and girls experience child marriage, girls are ten times more likely to end in child marriage than boys. Specifically, the 2016 Uganda Demographic and Health Survey (UDHS) show that 19.9 percent of the girls aged 15-19 years were in union compared to only 1.9 percent for boys in the same age cohort (UBOS and ICF, 2018). The same report shows that 43 percent of women aged 25-49 years were married before age 18, compared to only 10 percent of men in the same age category. Relatedly, the median age at first sexual intercourse for women is lower than that for men. In particular, the median age at first sexual intercourse for women aged 25-49 years was estimated at 16.9 years compared to 18.7 years for men in the same age cohort (UBOS and ICF, 2018). This suggests that many women engage in sex before marriage which exposes them to the risk of pregnancy and childbearing at an earlier age.

This brief therefore provides insights on the root causes and consequences of child marriage in Uganda. The brief heavily relied on desk review with major documents being Uganda Demographic and Health Survey reports and reports on child marriage by various organization such as Save the Child, UNICEF and UNFPA.

## Extent of child marriage by region

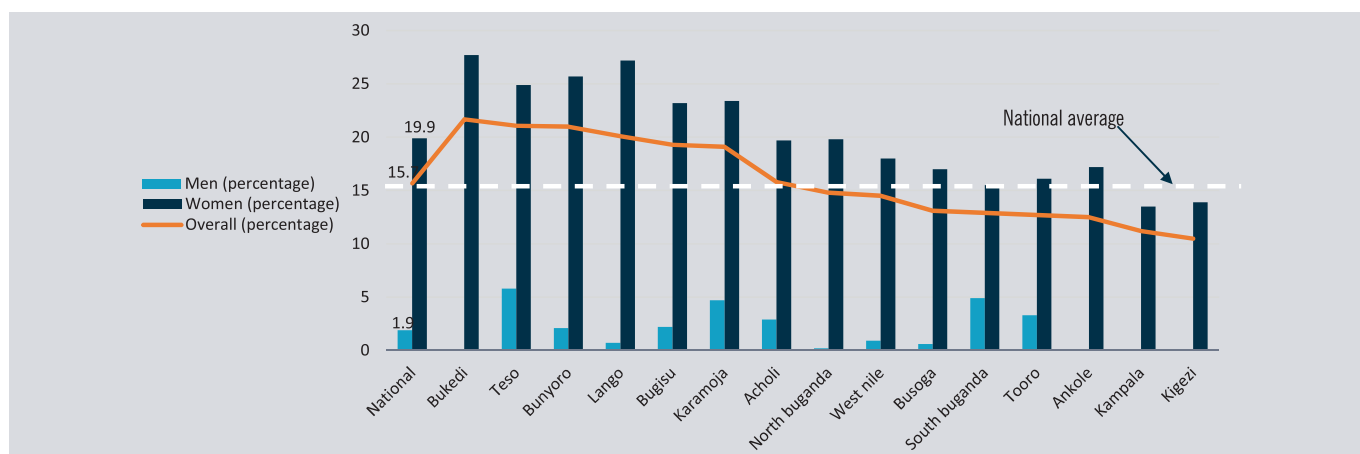
Figure 1, which provides the regional snapshot of the prevalence of child marriages in Uganda show that vice is highest in Bukedi at 22%, followed by Teso (21%), and least in Kigezi (10.5%) and Kampala (11.2%). Noteworthy, is the fact that prevalence among men is significantly lower compared to women across all the regions. Prevalence among women is higher than the national average in all regions except Kampala and Kigezi.

In the bid to curtail child marriage, a number interventions have been undertaken. For instance Uganda adopted National Strategy to End Child Marriage and Teenage Pregnancy (2014/2015–2019/2020) aimed at strengthening child protection mechanisms and enforcement of relevant legislation and influencing changes in social and cultural norms; Gender in Education Policy (2009), intended to facilitate re-entry of girls who drop out of school as a result of child marriage; The National Population Policy (2008), which also acknowledges the harmful cultural practices driving child marriage. Notwithstanding these and many other interventions, child marriage continues to persist with higher incidence on the girl child.

## What are the root causes of child marriage?

**Limited access to education opportunities and unfavorable schooling environment exposes girls to a risk of child marriage.**

**Figure 1: Percentage of women aged 15-19 currently in union by sub region**



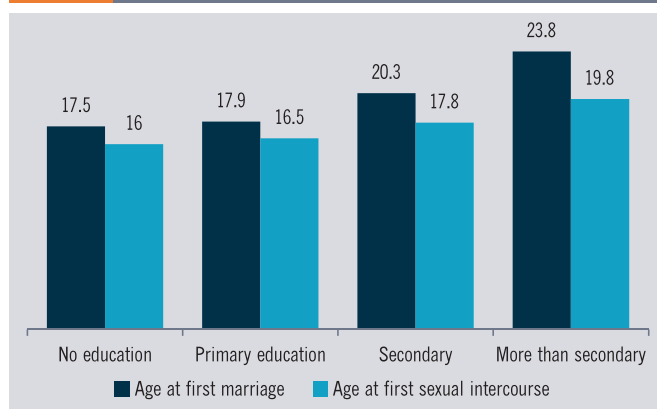
Source: 2016 UDHS

Evidence from the 2016 UDHS shows that educated women marry much later. There is a 6.3-year difference in the median age at first marriage between women with no education and those with more than a secondary education. Similarly, educated women wait longer before having sex which reduces the risk of earlier marriages. There is a 3.8-year difference in median age at first sex between those with no education and those with more than a secondary education (see Figure 2).

Therefore, limited access to education opportunities exacerbates child marriage. Poor school environment corroborates the limited access to schools in hindering children from attending schools and thus increasing the chance of early marriage. For instance, lack of sanitary facilities such as sanitary pads, separate latrines for boys and girls undermine retention of girl child in school thus increasing child marriage (Perezniето *et al.*, 2011).

**High poverty levels increase the risk of child marriage in Uganda.** Girls from poor households engage in sex and marry much earlier.

**Figure 2 Median age at first marriage and first intercourse for women aged 25-49, 2016**



Source: 2016 UDHS

The 2016 UDHS report shows that among women age 25-49, age at first marriage is significantly lower for households categorized in lowest wealth quintile (18.0 years) compared to those in the highest quintile (20.9 years). Similarly, age at first sexual intercourse is lowest in poorest households (at 16.4 years) compared to 17.9 years for the richest (highest quintile). Statistics also show that teenagers from poorest households tend to begin child bearing at an early age compared to those from wealthier households. Evidence from 2016 UDHS shows that 33.5 percent of the children aged 15-19 from poorest households have begun childbearing compared to 15 percent from the richest households (see figure 2). Poverty leads to high prevalence of child marriage because poor families have fewer resources and incentives to invest in alternative options for girls. In addition, child marriage is perceived as a source of income from bride price. In some poor families, getting rid of the young girl is one way of reducing household consumption burden. Poverty also drives young girls to engage in sexual activities in exchange of gifts and money to meet basic needs, such acts eventually result in pregnancy and early marriage.

**Long distances to public utilities such as water sources exposes girls to a risk of child marriage.** In the rural communities, water is obtained from village boreholes or wells which are usually congested and thus take significant amount of time for one to obtain water. Evidence from the 2016/17 UNHS shows that the average time to and from the source of drinking water is 24 minutes, and the average waiting is estimated at 23 minutes. In rural areas, the average time to and from the water source, and the average waiting are significantly higher, estimated at 27 and 24 minutes compared to urban areas, estimated at 16 and 21 minutes respectively. Our analysis of the UNHS data shows that about 8 in every 10 girls (76 percent) in rural areas and 6 in every 10 girls (65 percent) in urban areas engages in fetching water. The high involvement of girls in water collection amidst long delays gives an opportunity to men to lure them into activities that lead to marriage.

**Social norms and practice continue to breed child marriage.** An earlier study shows that in some communities in Uganda, getting married and bearing children are often valued as the only means for young girls to secure identity and status in families and as adults in society (Rubin, *et al.*, 2009).<sup>1</sup> Girls that fail to conform to certain norms and practices are often despised and undermined by the families and the society. Cultural practices such as female genital Mutilation are a form of early initiation to marriage for some communities. Also, some traditional communities view child marriage as one way of ensuring social protection of the young girl by putting her under male control (UNICEF, 2001).<sup>2</sup> In some regions and communities, child marriage is triggered by the belief that late marriage for girls (16 and above years) brings a curse to the family (Sekiwungu and Whyte, 2009).<sup>3</sup>

The other cause of child marriage include early pregnancy. There is a lot of social stigma that surrounds getting pregnant while still at the parents' home (Bantebya *et al.*, 2014).<sup>4</sup> In some communities, a girl who gets pregnant is not allowed to share utensils (such as plates and basins) with the parents (Bantebya *et al.*, 2014). The stigma also extends to school environment where girls who become pregnant are discontinued thus opening the door for marriage (UNICEF, 2015)<sup>5</sup>. Orphan status is another factor behind child marriage in Uganda. Death of father often deprives the household the key source of livelihood, leading to lack of basic necessities and push to reduce overall household expenditures through reduction of the size of the household.

Limited birth registration and identification also undermines efforts to fight child marriage. According to the 2016 UDHS report, only 32 percent of the children under the age of 5 years had their births registered, and only 19 percent have a birth certificate. The lack of registration and identification of births makes it difficult to determine the age at which the girl was exposed to marriage thus undermining enforcement of child marriage laws.

## What then are the consequences of Girl Child Marriages?

Child marriage is a human rights abuse and has long term consequences for child brides and grooms. It constitutes a grave threat to young girls' lives, health and future prospects.

**Child marriage adversely affects maternal health and exacerbates maternal mortality.** Girls who give birth at an early age have a high risk of suffering from obstetric fistula. Evidence shows that women aged 15-19 residing in rural areas (where child marriage is high) are more likely to report experiencing obstetric fistula than urban women (UBOS and ICF, 2018). In addition, girls below the age 18 are more likely to face difficulties in childbirth that result into deaths. Although the maternal mortality rate has reduced, Uganda still has one of the highest maternal mortality rates on the continent estimated at 336 per 100,000 live births (UBOS and ICF, 2018). According to UDHS 2016, maternal deaths represent 17 percent of all deaths among women age 15-19 and 25 percent of all deaths among women age 20-24 years.

**Child marriage undermines infant health and worsens infant mortality.** Babies born to teen are 60 percent more likely to die in the first 28 days of life than babies of mothers aged 20-29 (UNICEF, 2018)<sup>6</sup>. If they survive, their health tends to be generally poor with greater risk of stunting due to poor nutrition.

**Child marriage increases vulnerability to domestic violence.** Studies have shown that women who marry young are more prone to gender based violence and abuse (UBOS and ICF International Inc, 2012).<sup>7</sup> The increased vulnerability of the young married girls to domestic violence is explained by limited autonomy due to significant age and power differentials within the relationship (Schlecht, Rowley, & Babirye, 2013).<sup>8</sup>

**Economically, child marriage undermines the productivity and income earning potential in adulthood.** Child marriage forces children out of education which reduces the likelihood of entering the labor market and adversely affects the type of jobs they engage in.

**Figure 1: Proportion of women aged 15-19 who have begun childbearing, 2016**



Source: 2016 UDHS

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The high fertility associated with child marriage may influence women’s roles in the labor market and the number of hours they are able to work. Frequent interruptions to employment due to childbirth and the time burden of care responsibilities can also affect the types of jobs that women can engage in, forcing them into lower-paying jobs and more unstable work situations (Wodon, et al, 2017).<sup>9</sup> Child marriage can also reduce women’s decision making powers, particularly with regards to entering the labor force. The Wodon *et al.*, (2014) study shows that delaying a girl’s marriage can increase her earning by 14.4 percent as an adult. Reducing child marriage would also have economy wide effects. According to the World Bank, it could boost the economy by US \$2.4 billion a year and bring higher living standards to all citizens (Save the Children, 2018).

## Conclusion and Recommendations

Child Marriage continues to manifest in the country with various adverse effects on individual, household and the society at large. Ending child marriage is therefore of paramount importance and will play an important role in alleviating poverty and promoting economic development through; improved health at the individual and population levels, reduced birth rates, and increased productivity and empowerment. Much as ending child marriage is one of the targets under the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), a lot has to be done in practice to achieve this target. Among the strategies that need to be emphasised include;

**Expanding education opportunities;** there is

need not only to increase accessibility to schools but also ensure the school environment is conducive to retain the girl child in school. School facilities such as toilets need to be in a desirable state. Provision of sanitary pads in schools needs to be considered to avoid embarrassment of the girl child in the menstrual periods. Teachers also need to be properly remunerated and incentivised to mentor and encourage children to stay in school. The Save the Children (2018) indicated that at least one million child marriages in Uganda could be saved from child marriage by 2030 if all girls finished secondary school.<sup>10</sup> Relatedly, there is need to increase access to public utilities especially water sources to minimise exposure of girls to risks of child marriage in the course of accessing water.

**Community sensitisation;** much as there has been sensitisation campaigns against child marriage, a lot still needs to be done to sensitize families and communities especially in remote areas to change their mind-set about the girl child and their attitudes and behaviours related to child marriage. This is in addition to advocacy against practices such as FGM that in way initiate the girls to child marriages.

**Strict enforcement of existing laws;** much as there are laws and legislations protecting the girl child against child marriage, there is a lot of laxity in their enforcement. The perpetrators of acts that lead to child marriage (such as rape and defilement) have in some incidences gone unpunished partly because they can afford pay bribes to compromise the justice system or the parents of the victim. To aid enforcement of the laws, there is also need for sensitisation about birth registration.

## Endnotes

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