

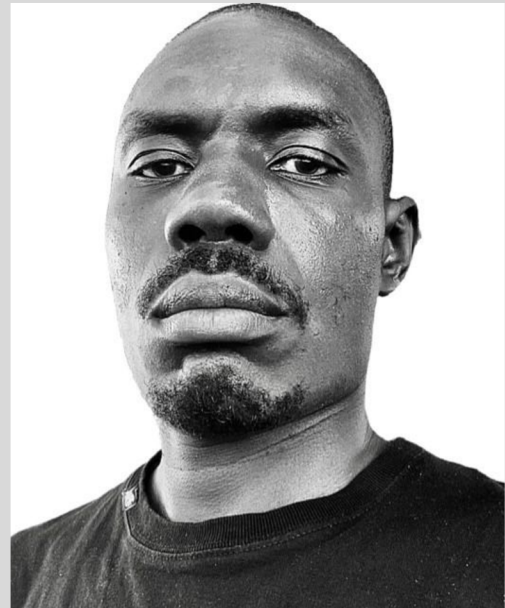
HYPOCRISY SURROUNDING TEENAGE-PREGNANCY AND CHILD-MARRIAGE IN UGANDA

Introduction

The *modus-operandi* in which the menace of teenage-pregnancy and child-marriage are dealt with in Uganda may tempt one to think that the perpetrators of these heinous crimes are a species of unknown aliens from a faraway planet, impossible to trace. Yet, the creatures who are defiling, molesting, raping, and abusing underage-girls in Uganda are from the human species, known, not only to their victims, but in the communities where the victims live, and sometimes to the authorities in those communities. So then, why does it seem difficult to bring all these non-alien perpetrators of teenage pregnancy and child marriage in Uganda to full-justice?

The 2025 Sustainable Development Report ranks Uganda 142nd out of 167 countries with a score of 55.8 (with South Sudan having the lowest score of 41.6). The report indicates stagnation towards the achievement of gender equality in Uganda due to “significant challenges”. The 2024 report by the UN Secretary General on the progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals indicates that progress towards gender equality is clearly off track. Gender parity, especially in women's safety and participation in decision making roles, remains distant, adding that at the current rate, achieving gender parity is projected to take 176 years. Many girls and women still lack control over their sexual and reproductive health, and violence (in all its forms) against girls and women persists.

I contextualize some of the existing facts, figures, norms, practices, beliefs, superstitions, biases, documented opinions, and fallacies on teenage pregnancy and child-marriage in Uganda. I present the general global outlook on teenage pregnancy and child marriage, the legal context and Uganda's strategies against teenage pregnancy and child-marriage. I discuss the nature and price of the obscene-hypocrisy surrounding perpetration, victimhood, and enforcement, as well as perspectives on why teenage pregnancy and child-marriage have persisted, while offering some structural recommendations in conclusion. I refer to child-marriage, or early-marriage, as any formal or informal union between a child, usually a girl, under the age of 18 and an adult or another child, while to teenage pregnancy as pregnancy in girls aged 10–19 years.



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Outlook on Teenage Pregnancy and Child Marriage

Globally, over 650 million women alive today were married as children. Yearly, 12 million girls become child brides. In 2022, the WHO estimated that 13% of adolescent girls and young women give birth before the age of 18, with an additional 2.5 million girls at risk of child marriage between 2022 and 2027, while by 2030 an estimated 150 million girls will lose their childhoods due to child marriage. Over 230 million girls and women worldwide are estimated to have undergone female genital mutilation as of 2024, an increase of 30 million compared to 2016. Approximately, 26% of countries globally have comprehensive systems to track and make public allocations for gender equality, 59% have some features of a system, and 15% do not have minimum elements of these systems, according to SDGs data from 105 countries from 2018- 2021.

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Further, the 2024 UN Secretary General's report indicated that, based on data collected in 2022 in 120 countries, 55% of countries lacked non-discrimination laws to prohibit direct and indirect discrimination against women and half of the countries lacked quotas for women in national parliaments. The world is already trapped in the reality of millions of children giving birth to children, and their children giving birth to more children. More frightening, UN projections indicate that, at the current rate, it may take approximately 300 years to end teenage pregnancy and child marriage globally.

BMC Women's Health 2023 report indicated that, approximately, 21 million girls between the ages of 15 and 19 become pregnant each year in developing regions of the world, particularly Sub-Saharan Africa, East Asia, and Latin America. Africa saw its population increase from 312 million in 1994 to 633 million in 2021, among others, leading to an increase in the demand for sexual reproductive health services, especially for the majority young population of teenagers. Even if there is global improvement in maternal health, teenage pregnancy is still a common public health problem in most African countries.

Consequently, an estimated over one million babies born to teenage girls die before their first birth day, and each year approximately 70,000 teenage girls die during pregnancy and child birth, with teenage pregnancy considered to be the leading cause of newborn and maternal mortality.



Sub-Saharan Africa recorded the highest prevalence of teenage pregnancy in the world in 2023, which accounted for more than half of all births in the region. West, East, and Central Africa were home to six of the top 10 countries with the highest prevalence of child marriage in the world, with an average prevalence rate of 41% in 2022. Teenage pregnancy in East Africa was higher than the global average of 15%, with Uganda and Tanzania having a rate of 25%, while Kenya has an 18% rate. An estimated 49 million sexually active women in East Africa do not have access to modern contraception or family planning services.

One out of five women in Uganda engage in sexual activity before age 15, 64% have sex before age 18 while 34% of women aged 25-49 are married before the age of 18 and 7.3% before the age of 15, according to the 2016 Uganda Demographic and Health Survey (UDHS) report and a UNICEF 2020 report. Globally, Uganda is ranked 16th among 25 countries with the highest rates of child marriage, with 7% of women aged 20-49 years having had their first babies at the age of 15, while 33.3% of them having had their first babies at the age of 18 years.

March-September 2020, over 645,000 teenage pregnancies were recorded in Uganda, especially among girls aged 10-14 years. A Ministry of Education report indicated that 30% of the girls who were in school before the pandemic did not return when schools reopened, most of them due to teenage pregnancy. Over 354,000 teenage pregnancies were registered in 2020 and over 290,000 registered between January and September 2021. Buganda registered the highest number of teenage pregnancies (31,690), followed by Busoga (12,740), Rwenzori (11,660), Lango (11,146) and 8,678 from West Nile. Teenage pregnancy is responsible for nearly one-fifth (18%) of the annual births in Uganda. Nearly half (46%) of the births by teenagers were unwanted pregnancies, contributing 20% of the infant deaths and 28% of the maternal deaths.

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Legal context and strategies against teenage pregnancy and child-marriage

The 1990 Uganda Penal Code Act defines defilement, punishable by death, as sexual intercourse with someone under the age of 18. The law stipulates that only males can commit defilement, and the victims are always female. Specifically, it states that defilement is “unlawful sexual intercourse with a girl under the age of eighteen years” and makes the offense punishable by death (para. 129(1)). Further, the 1995 Uganda Constitution, the Children’s Act (as amended) 2016, and the National Child Policy (2020) are, also, in place to safeguard children in Uganda. Despite these legal provisions, teenage pregnancy and child marriage persist.

In June 2015, Uganda passed the first National Strategy to End Child Marriages and Teenage Pregnancy (NSCM&TP 2014/2015 – 2019/2020). The strategy envisioned creating a society free of Child Marriage and Teenage Pregnancy (CM&TP) through strengthening child protection mechanisms and enforcement of relevant legislation including social and cultural norm change. The NSCM&TP 2014/15 -2019/2020, which was aligned to the National Development Plan, provided the overall strategic direction for the national response to end child marriage and teenage pregnancy in Uganda. During the NSCM&TP period 2014/15-2019/2020 the Government created opportunities for girls’ education and skilling, strengthened reporting and response to cases of child marriage and teenage pregnancy, awareness on the dangers of CM&TP and strengthened the legal, policy and regulatory framework in addressing child marriage and teenage pregnancy.

However, the review of the NSCM&TP revealed progress in the implementation but also brought to the fore financial, strategic and policy gaps coupled with implementation challenges. It was against this that the second strategy (NSCM&TP 2022/2023 – 2026/2027) was drafted to “*End child marriage and teenage pregnancy in Uganda for inclusive growth and socio-economic transformation*”, and line with Sustainable Development Goal 5, to end all forms of discrimination and violence against women and girls by 2030; and ensuring protection of children’s rights.

Why has teenage pregnancy and child-marriage persisted?

Yearly, reports are presented on the scale and repercussions of teenage pregnancy and child marriage. During these presentations, presiding officers often pledge to enforce laws, and affluent organizations pledge to allocate millions of shillings towards interventions. Nevertheless, the challenges persist. While civil society activists, self-proclaimed moralists, village leaders, politicians, law enforcers, lawyers, journalists, feminists, and self-serving populists condemn teenage pregnancy and child marriage, their condemnation rarely translates into substantial action against perpetrators. Men continue to defile, rape, molest, and abuse girls. Why do the perpetrators of defilement not fear committing an offense punishable by death?

From a causality viewpoint, teenage pregnancy and child marriage are the ‘effects’ whose ‘causers’ have not been adequately addressed. Instead, civil society activists, self-proclaimed moralists, public leaders, politicians, law enforcers, lawyers, journalists, feminists, and self-serving populists continue to concentrate on instructing girls on how to avoid defilement, rape, and other forms of sexual abuse, with less actual law enforcement against perpetrators. When was the last time a man was put to death in Uganda for defilement? During the COVID19 lockdowns the Uganda media was awash with reports of the proliferation of teenage pregnancy and child marriage. One would have expected, at least, Uganda’s prisons to overflow with convicted perpetrators. How will men start to fear defiling children if they do not see deadly consequences against previous convicted perpetrators?

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Anecdotes of Incest

During and after COVID19 lockdowns, Uganda media was awash with report of defilement (and supposed incest) in different parts of the country. In 2020, at the height of COVID19 lockdowns, there was an over 60% increase in teenage pregnancy in 67 out of the 136 districts in Uganda, according to a 2021 UNFPA report, with highest numbers in Wakiso (10,439), Kampala (8,460), Kasese (7,319), Kamuli (6,535), Oyam (6,449) and 6,205 Mayuge. Indeed, a survey conducted by Save the Children in 2021 revealed that some regions in Uganda had up to 300% increases in teenage pregnancy. In just 6 districts, in a couple of months, over 45,000 girls got pregnant during the lockdown period. How did so many girls get pregnant in such a short period when their movements were restricted during lockdowns?

Interviews with some of the girls who, actually, got pregnant revealed that, while some were able to sneak out of homes to meet men, some got pregnant from within the very houses where they were locked down. It is highly plausible that some men in the houses where these girls lived, made them pregnant. It is also highly plausible that many of such men were not strangers, but fathers, uncles, brothers, cousins, etc. to the girls. The plausibility is not based only on the fact the girls got pregnant under the “protection” of their family members during lockdowns, but on the fact that some girls, indeed, revealed that the men who forced them into sex and made them pregnant were related to them. Some girls went on to indicate that they were cautioned not to report, or else they faced dire consequences.

The fact that teenage pregnancy skyrocketed during lockdowns means that the perpetrators were not only known to the girls, but to the parents, guardians, and villagers, including local leaders in the respective village where teenagers got pregnant. According to a 2023 report from Uganda's Police, 12,771 cases of defilement were reported to police in 2023, compared to 12,580 in 2022. There was a 1.5% increase in cases reported. The report also indicated that 300 of those defiled were infected with HIV in 2023, adding that 131 of the victims were disabled.

Political Pressure

If a leader champions or is simply suspected to champion the arrest and/or imprisonment of perpetrators of teenage pregnancy and child-marriage they risk losing popularity. This is because the pursuit of perpetrators means sending many men to court and/or prison - the very men who are politicians' esteemed voters. Thus, politicians, across political parties and hierarchies, are highly tempted to look away, as men sexually abuse teenage girls into pregnancy and child-marriage, than risk losing their constituents' support.

Social Dynamics

Some individuals, families and communities consider anyone who reports a case of teenage pregnancy or child-marriage as a ‘betrayal’. Pregnant girls conceal their pregnancies not because they are, necessarily, naive but because they know the price of ‘betrayal’. Those that report cases of teenage pregnancy or child-marriage are most likely marked for revenge or isolation in their villages. There exists a sort of unwritten communal solidarity where community members are expected to “shield” each other from facing the law in the event of a teenage pregnancy or child-marriage. It is a form of unofficial “invisible currency” exchanged between and among individuals, families, and villages. For instance, a man whose son impregnated a teenage girl and was not reported, is expected to not report a son from another family who impregnates his daughter. And vice-versa, a man who betrayed the village by reporting someone who impregnated a teenage girl may not be “shielded” in the event that he or anyone in his family impregnates a teenage girl. It is a complex-deep-seated form of communal hypocrisy difficult to penetrate by activists and law enforcers.

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Matters become intricate when the man who is alleged to have impregnated a teenage girl is a local leader; priest, councillor, pastor, sheikh, teacher, police officer, or even an “uncle”. These kinds of people receive an even higher level of “shielding”, provided they, too, have previously expressed indifference about previous incidences of teenage pregnancy and child-marriage.

In some cases, village leaders have numerously been reported to accept bribes from perpetrators, in exchange for “protection”. Even when the family of the victim pregnant teenage girl is not interested in reporting the matter to the authorities, some local leaders still go on to extort money or other benefits from suspected offenders, without involving the victims or families of victims. There are families who insist that, while they may not report incidences of teenage pregnancy or child marriage, they demand to be compensated through locally arranged mediation.

Increasingly, responses to teenage pregnancy and child marriage has been commercialised with parents or guardians demanding obscene sums, animals, or even land in compensation. Such families are considered to be in the category of the families who understand the law and would easily pursue charges but prefer compensation out of court. In some cases, some families that are “not educated” handle the issues of compensation differently. They often demand that the perpetrator takes the pregnant girl as his wife, and start the process of paying bride price.

There have been reported cases where perpetrators of teenage pregnancy are arrested, and released the same day. While this is not a highly prevalent practice, it continues to discourage some villagers from reporting perpetrators, especially if such perpetrators are “powerful” or are from “powerful” families or have “powerful” connections.

Cultural Influence

Many people, especially in rural Uganda see teenage pregnancy and child-marriage as normal, however much they may pretend not to. When a girl gets pregnant and gives birth parents celebrate grandparenthood, something seen as a blessing. Teenage mothers are encouraged to believe that motherhood (at any age) is “intended by the ancestors”. They believe that every child, regardless of the circumstances under which they are born, are blessings that must be welcomed, celebrated. They celebrate fertility of their girls. They celebrate heirs and perpetuation of their lineage, regardless of timing, or social economic circumstances under which the teenage girl gives birth. They do not see distorted career paths for their girls. Indeed, the perception of teenage pregnancy and child-marriage as normal partly fuels communal-connivance to shield perpetrators of teenage pregnancy and child-marriage from legal consequences. Plus, some families consider sending the father of the unborn baby to prison as a form of curse.

The cultural perception of acceptance of teenage pregnancy and child marriage today has shifted from earlier perceptions and beliefs in African Traditional Society. Back then, teenage pregnancy was acceptable, as long the teenage girl got pregnant in marriage – which also means child marriage was acceptable. What was not acceptance, and in some cases punishable by painful death, was for a girl getting pregnant before marriage. What has remained the same from back then up to today is that the girls or women were blamed and punished for getting pregnant, while the men who made them pregnant walked away scot-free. Indeed, in some cultures, girls were thrown over river cliffs to their death for getting pregnant before marriage, while the boys who made them pregnant were merely cautioned.

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Manifestations of cross-generational and transactional sex are not a recent phenomenon, as most literature indicates. Forms that fit the definition were evident in African Traditional Society, however veiled it might have been. Men married for, among other things, sex, and they often married girls who were a decade-plus younger than them. If sex was a motivation for marriage and men married girls who were a decade-plus younger than them, then that fits into part of a broader essence of cross-generational-sex. The payment of bride price, no matter the amount of sugarcoating put on it, is a form of transaction. It is a transaction made for, among other things, a guarantee of sex. The difference between then and now is that cross-generational and transactional sex back then were communally organized with direct involvement of families, and it was a part of a whole package, while today cross-generational and transactional sex are sought individually and for their short-term sakes. Cross-generational and transactional sex back then were communal means to, largely, well-intentioned ends, while today they are individualistic, selfish ends in themselves. The unfortunate similarity between back then and today is that cross-generational and transactional sex involved, and still involve the exploitation of girls.

Women Emancipation

There has been progress as far as women emancipation is concerned in Uganda. This can be observed in improvements in access to health, education, employment, ownership of assets, etc. among women. More women have become assertive, especially middle aged and older educated, employed women in urban areas of the country. The more women are getting emancipated, the more men are failing to accept this reality, and are increasingly uncomfortable to deal with emancipated, confident, and assertive women. Men are increasingly getting challenged by women's intellect, skills, knowledge, and material-wealth. Men are increasingly finding it harder to sexually exploit emancipated women, let alone, keep up with their financial expectations. It is becoming harder for men to sway middle aged and older educated, employed women in urban areas into sexual exploitation.

Consequently, men, including well educated employed men in urban areas, have turned their prowess to the innocent, gullible, adolescent and teenage girls who, according feedback from some men, are not only “easy” but are “affordable”, and they “don’t disturb”. With 50,000 Uganda Shillings a grown man in Uganda is able to thump his chest into sex with a teenage girl; pay for a lodge, food, and her transport (and remain with some change – for his next teenage girl). In comparison, the same 50,000 Uganda Shillings may not be enough to fuel a middle-aged educated woman's car to the man's location. Thus, teenage girls have become the (proverbial) sacrificial lambs for men who cannot afford the standards of assertive, educated, and emancipated women of their age in Uganda.

“Some Girls are Really Provocative”!

There are adult men in Uganda who have failed (or for convenience pretend not) to understand the legal definition of a child: someone below the age of 18 years. While the age below which someone is considered a child differs in different parts of the world, the essence remains the same: this is the age below which a human being is considered not able to make well informed choices and decisions, and therefore needs protection and guidance from adults. Sensible adults are expected to behave around children in a way that is mindful of the fact that they are not capable of making well informed choices and decisions. Instead, it is common to hear grown men (in their defence of defilement) say things like, “today's children dress provocatively”, or, “they are inviting sexual harassment by the way they dress”. Children have the right to be children, and that may be manifested in their dress choices. Adults have the responsibility to act in self-restraint, in the midst of the alleged “provocation”. No short cuts. No excuses. That's the law.

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The Menace of Men in their 40s

Globally, the saying “life begins at 40” suggests that this age marks a significant period of personal growth, new opportunities, and a shift in perspective. While life begins at birth, 40 can be a time when individuals feel more established in their careers, more confident in their life choices, and more focused on personal fulfilment. It’s a time when many feel freer to pursue their passions and interests, often with less external pressure than they may have experienced earlier in life.

In Uganda, there might not be any other age category of men that “enjoys” young girls than men in their forties. There’s an observable sense of “arrivalism” among many men in their 40s, regardless of their occupation. After years of hard work, and living on shoestring budgets, these men finally experience financial stability, enter managerial positions, own startups, can afford cars and fuel, and gain “respect” among peers. All of this comes with a sense of worthiness and freedom to finally “afford the girls,” usually in the midst of a neglected prematurely aging wife back home, someone they met while they were still broke, and “unattractive”. Teenager girls impregnated and abandoned by these men end up working in various places, such as saloons, restaurants, filling stations, roadside kiosks, mobile-money stalls, tills at malls, gyms, saunas, street parking ticketing, etc. where they are, again, met by other men in their 40s.

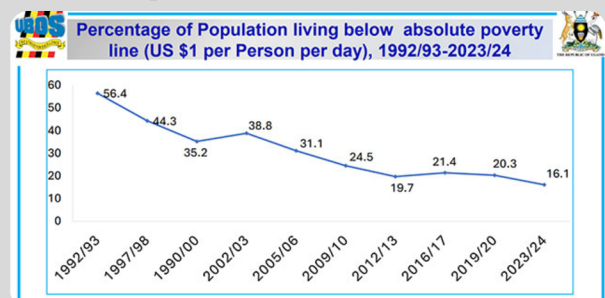
Micro-Poverty

Just because a girl is born into poverty should not be an excuse for getting pregnant in her teens or getting married before she is of age. There are countless examples of girls born into poverty and their motivation for avoiding teenage pregnancy and child marriage was because they understood how limited their choice were. Indeed, in African Traditional Society, the poorer a family was, the more careful, disciplined, and hard working they were expected to live. There are countless successful Ugandan women who rose from poverty to prosperity just because they, and their poor families, understood that the only option they had was to not fail.

That said, it must be acknowledged that not every girl born in a poor family has the support structure to live carefully, disciplined, and work harder. Some girls grow up without a parent, or a parent figure. Some grow up with a parent or parent figure that does not offer the necessary support, or is overwhelmed by responsibility. Sometimes the scarcity of material necessities; shelter, food, clothing, etc. is extremely unbearable for both the girl and the parent or parent figure. Unbearable scarcity of material necessities has been researched to have powerful correlations with compromised moral/behavioral standards, no matter ones age. A girl who has not had a proper meal in days, or has never had sanitary towels for her menstruation, or has never owned “good knickers” will most likely find it hard to resist a man’s seductive material promises compared to a girl who lives in material-abundance. There is evidence also that, despite living in abundance, some girls are easily lured off my men, but the prevalence of teenage pregnancy and child marriage is highest among those from poorer families and communities where family support structures have been observed to be weakest.

Macro-Poverty

Observation of Bank of Uganda and Oxfam data indicates that, approximately, 85% of households in Uganda earn less than 50,000 UGX per month, and less than 4% earn more than 200,000 UGX. The richest 10% of Uganda's population receive 35.7% of the country's income, while the poorest 10% receive 2.5% and the poorest 20% receive 5.8%.



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According to the latest data, Uganda's Gender Inequality Index (GII) is 0.535, ranking 131 out of 172 countries, a slight decline from 0.530 in 2021/2022. The GII assesses gender disparities in reproductive health, empowerment, and labor market participation. In the 2023 Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI), Uganda scored 0.717 and ranked 65th out of 146 countries, down from 61st in 2022. Uganda performs better in health and survival, however, it ranks poorly in educational attainment (129th) and economic participation (82nd), with ongoing challenges in access and inclusion. Uganda ranks 35th in political empowerment, showing moderate progress. Overall, Uganda shows mixed progress in gender equality.

To claim to eliminate teenage pregnancy and child marriage but remain inert to some of its structural root-causes, particularly the inadequate access to affordable quality education and sensible economic opportunities by women is not strategic. The National Survey on Violence in Uganda 2020, reported that women who had never attended school (56%) or attained primary education (55%) were more likely to agree to one or more justifications for women beating than those who had attained secondary (43%), tertiary (32%) or University (12%). Where there is social economic and cultural inequality there is likely to be domestic violence, sexual violence, and where there is sexual violence there is likely to be (unintended) pregnancy, especially when girls and women who are economically dependent and unable to make independent choices and decisions are involved.

What way forward?

The most sensible way forward is for men in Uganda to stop having sex with children, and that will surely bring about a complete end to teenage pregnancy. The other way forward is for men in Uganda to stop marrying children. But because Ugandan men are not about to do that, let me go into the conventional way of stating the way forward.

To end teenage pregnancy and child marriage in Uganda, a multi-sectoral and sustained approach rooted in legal enforcement, education, health, and socio-economic empowerment is critical. The National Strategy to End Child Marriage and Teenage Pregnancy (2020/2021–2024/2025) provides a robust framework that must be fully financed and localized. Government agencies must enforce the Children (Amendment) Act, 2016, which criminalizes child marriage, and strengthen birth registration systems to prevent falsification of age. The Education (Pre-Primary, Primary and Post-Primary) Act must be enforced to ensure pregnant learners and young mothers can return to school, in line with the Ministry of Education's guidelines on school re-entry.

Non-governmental organizations, faith-based institutions, and cultural leaders must drive behavior change through community sensitization, life skills training, and promotion of adolescent-friendly health services. Empowering adolescents economically—especially girls—through vocational training and cash transfer programs can reduce vulnerability to early marriage. Development partners should increase investment in adolescent sexual and reproductive health programs, while parents and guardians must be engaged as allies in protecting children's rights. With collective will and accountability, Uganda can achieve the Sustainable Development Goal target of eliminating (teenage pregnancy) and child marriage by 2030.



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Conclusions

Uganda, with its economic dynamism and rapidly growing youth population, is well-positioned to achieve its Vision 2040 targets due to the demographic dividends it presents. The country's population is experiencing a rising youth bulge. While this demographic shift offers opportunities for economic growth, it also poses challenges. The youth bulge puts pressure on formal job creation, increasing the burden on working-age individuals and necessitating the provision of adequate and quality social services by the government.

To convert Uganda's demographic opportunity into a demographic dividend, strategic policies and good governance are crucial. Uganda must adapt its public investment patterns to reflect the demographic changes. To capitalize on the benefits of the demographic dividend, Uganda must invest and implement appropriate policies to initiate the demographic transition. This involves creating an environment that fosters the development of a skilled and healthy labor force, ensuring that the country's workforce is equipped to meet the demands of the future.

Structural interventions to address teenage pregnancy and child marriage, as highlighted by Girls Not Brides, UNFPA, and UNICEF, could focus on marginalized girls. This would involve advancing their rights and providing them with opportunities to organize and sustain their lives, as well as **fully enforcing the existing laws against all forms of child abuse**. Engaging families, communities, including boys and men, religious and traditional leaders, teachers, and health workers, as well as relevant government ministries, departments, and agencies, is crucial to operationalize laws, promote positive masculinities, and transform social norms – all under the guidance of the NSCM&TP 2022/2023 – 2026/2027.



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