

Contextualizing High Teenage Pregnancies and Its Effects on Education in Mt. Elgon Area, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

The obstacles to the developmental milestones of young girls in Mount Elgon Sub-County can be seen from the rate at which the girls are dropping out of school due to early pregnancies, early marriages, sexually transmitted diseases, and the stigma associated with them. This study sought to understand the status of, causes, and effects of teenage pregnancy on education in the Mt. Elgon area, Kenya. This was an exploratory qualitative study based on snow bawling and a sample saturation approach. It involved in-depth interviews among twelve (12) affected households including interviews with eight (8) teenage mothers, three (3) teachers, two (2) school principals, and nine (9) local community gatekeepers/leaders. Findings indicate that teenage pregnancy is a rampant and common problem in Mt. Elgon. However, it is more acute in areas that bore the brunt of ethnic conflicts in the region. Teenage pregnancy and early marriages are partly responsible for the low enrolment of girls in schools across Mt. Elgon. According to the respondents, it all started in 1992 with the tribal clashes and subsequent cyclic conflicts with the most notable being the 2006/8 conflict in Mt. Elgon. The conflicts disintegrated and dislocated many families, a factor that compromised the ability of many households to get means of subsistence. After the conflict, the Government responded by constructing settlements for the returnees whose sizes turned out to be very small and non-conducive dwelling units for parents and their adolescent children. Several parents are forced to send their adolescent children to spend the night at neighbours, a factor that exposes such young girls to sexual abuse and early pregnancies. Teenage pregnancy has greatly affected girl child education as those pregnant are often married off early by their parents. The study recommends that efforts be made to address the impacts of the conflicts in Mt. Elgon. Poor parents should be supported by the government to build simple but spacious houses to provide ample sleeping space for their children. Advocacy campaigns promoting the education of girls should be launched. Rescue centres should be established to support teenage mothers in with technical skills and those willing to continue with their formal education are supported to do so.

Keywords: Young Girls, Adolescent Pregnancy, Education, Mt. Elgon Region

INTRODUCTION

According to the Gender Report of the Global Education Monitoring Report (GEM) in the past 25 years, 180 million more girls have enrolled for basic education since the Beijing Declaration, a landmark commitment to advance the rights of girls and women made in 1995 by 189 countries. Girls' education as a human right provides economic and social benefits and is an international objective (Birdsall, Levine, & Ibrahim, 2005). However, 72 million school-age children are out of school by 2005 and a majority of them are girls (UNESCO, 2007). Out of these school-age girls, not enrolled in school, 70% are from socially excluded groups (Lewis & Lockheed, 2006). The number of girls out of school has risen to 129 million, including 32 million primary and 97 million primary and secondary school-age girls respectively (UNESCO, 2021).

Access to education for girls in countries of conflict or post-conflict is limited by factors such as gender issues, girls’ workloads, sibling care, poverty, early marriage, accessibility of schools, and safety and security. The distance to and from school may place girls at undesirable risk of attack, abduction, and sexual violence in areas where fighting forces are present. According to UNESCO & UNHCR, (2007), early marriages and motherhood in most cases mean the end of educational opportunities for girls. Early pregnancy and marriage are higher in insecure environments, due to gender-based violence. Early marriages could be the desire for parents to secure protection and economic survival. Conflicts exacerbate inequalities in education for women and girls and increase vulnerabilities (WB, 2021; World Vision, 2001). Conflict represents a major impediment to the realization of the EFA and Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), especially for the universal completion of primary education and gender equality in primary and secondary education (Buckland 2005). According to Nicolai 2008, over half of the world’s primary-aged children out of school are estimated to live in conflict-affected fragile countries.

Regional, ethnic, or religious group inequalities in educational attainment can be further widened as a result of armed conflict, as is the case for ethnic groups living in Northern Uganda, indigenous peoples in Guatemala, or women in Afghanistan. UNESCO (1999c) reported that in the 1980s the combination of an economic crisis, floods, and drought, as well as the ongoing civil war, negatively affected enrolment levels and educational attainment. The civil war was also highly destructive to physical educational infrastructure:

Primary school enrolment has improved steadily to near parity in most counties in Kenya (UNICEF and UNESCO, 2021). The report which drew heavily from the National Education Management Information System (NEMIS) and the 2019 Kenya Population and Housing Census pointed out that the majority of learners 1.13 million and 658,730 who were expected to be in primary and secondary schools respectively were not attending school. Figure 1. Shows the number of adolescents in Kenya Health Information System (KHIS) presenting with pregnancies at health facilities across Kenya in 2019 and 2020.

Adolescents (age 10 - 19) Presenting with Pregnancy at Health Facilities												
	2019						2020					
	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Total	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Total
Nairobi	2,412	1,813	2,630	2,262	2,293	11,410	3,651	3,090	2,088	1,494	1,472	11,795
Kakamega	1,904	1,379	1,670	1,531	1,625	8,109	1,560	1,186	1,232	1,275	1,433	6,686
Homa Bay	1,300	924	1,170	1,226	1,313	5,933	1,219	1,232	1,159	1,178	1,173	5,961
Kajiado	1,045	1,066	992	1,059	1,166	5,328	1,214	1,157	1,091	1,248	1,131	5,841
Nakuru	1,274	1,321	1,245	1,179	1,773	6,792	1,339	1,050	1,211	1,094	1,142	5,836
Narok	1,266	1,213	1,409	1,160	1,432	6,480	1,296	1,231	1,084	847	1,127	5,585
Bungoma	1,667	1,449	1,639	1,293	1,291	7,339	1,230	1,014	1,073	1,026	1,234	5,577
Meru	1,403	1,354	1,396	1,201	1,466	6,820	1,149	996	1,012	994	1,084	5,235
Trans Nzoia	1,071	532	1,140	1,189	1,088	5,020	1,056	910	974	939	1,050	4,929
Kiambu	1,190	1,226	1,241	1,157	1,239	6,053	1,027	991	1,027	836	953	4,834
Migori	1,047	823	978	1,037	1,075	4,960	942	893	819	852	905	4,411
Kisii	1,040	720	894	980	1,073	4,707	954	736	1,005	673	933	4,301
Kwale	1,119	1,040	1,102	1,012	928	5,201	955	885	900	695	617	4,052
Machakos	951	929	930	874	1,026	4,710	805	783	817	789	772	3,966
Turkana	758	844	799	737	717	3,855	695	784	854	713	818	3,864
West Pokot	854	295	612	676	641	3,078	941	587	689	810	811	3,838
Kericho	818	1,274	780	923	915	4,710	856	848	697	693	735	3,829
Bomet	1,002	733	956	863	910	4,464	765	722	693	712	730	3,622
Siaya	1,114	893	984	973	1,165	5,129	796	681	662	756	701	3,596
Kilifi	1,119	964	914	969	755	4,721	859	738	672	608	534	3,411
Nandi	758	653	654	711	732	3,508	667	676	650	669	639	3,301
Kisumu	805	437	646	685	680	3,253	760	589	598	582	660	3,189
Kitui	800	654	849	772	820	3,895	700	581	542	492	731	3,046
Vihiga	701	563	512	570	646	2,992	679	433	664	572	560	2,908
Nyamira	666	617	653	772	682	3,390	695	538	478	520	510	2,741
Busia	828	613	570	630	536	3,177	599	485	534	513	454	2,585
Makueni	696	548	623	624	693	3,184	510	454	518	533	514	2,529
Muranga	631	564	586	585	530	2,896	548	542	437	396	496	2,419

Figure 1: Adolescents (age 10 – 19) Presenting with Pregnancy at Health Facilities

Source: KHIS, 2020.

Bungoma County, Kenya has experienced several episodes of insecurity and conflicts. The most recent was the land conflict pitting the Soy and the Mosop sub-clans of the Sabaot Community between 2005 and 2008 in Mt. Elgon Sub-county. The conflict led to a breakdown of the cultural, social, and economic fabric of the community and it utterly disenfranchised the normal way of life, and its effects are still felt today. The government intervention through the “Okoa Maisha” military operation to quell the conflict and root out the Sabaot Land Defense Force (SLDF) militia further exacerbated the problem to date as more atrocities were reportedly committed by the troops during the military operation. Social life was disrupted as the majority of the households were displaced and a number were left homeless. To resettle, most households have found themselves in small grass-thatched huts with insufficient space for the entire family. The challenge of small huts, coupled with the local Sabaot cultural practice that prohibits children/adolescents from sleeping together with their parents could contend a real challenge as the young girls are often sent to sleep in neighboring homes. Along the way and in the neighboring homes, girls become susceptible to sexual predators and other vices that endanger their lives.

Household status determines the well-being of children, more so the girl child. The majority of households in the Mt. Elgon area live under severe poverty conditions and as a result, most young girls engage in economic activities such as firewood collection from the forest, engaging in manual chores for pay among others to support their families. The girl child becomes more vulnerable to sexual exploitation from the buyers of their wares and employers under such conditions. Other factors include; long distance to schools, lack or inadequate parental and school guidance and counseling on sexual and reproductive issues, cultural tolerance towards early pregnancy in the society, parents leaving children unattended as they engage in economic activities such as trade and brewing of indigenous alcohol, peer influence, female genital mutilation (FGM), rampant cases of alcoholism and drug abuse, absentee parents among others. Such conditions predispose girls to teenage pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections, and early marriages.

Teenage pregnancy has led to a remarkable increase in cases of school drop-outs. In 2014 the Standard Newspaper reported 140 cases of teenage pregnancies in Mt. Elgon Sub-County. In 2015 the figures reportedly increased to over 200 cases with the most recent case being at Chelebei Secondary School in Kopsiro Division where 20 girls were reported pregnant. This trend was reflected in enrolment levels, for instance in 2010, 10,966 girls were enrolled in primary schools while boys were 19,479 a difference of nearly 50% (MoE, 2014) and this trend has continued to date. The low enrolment rates occasioned by an upward trend in teenage pregnancies in Mt. Elgon are worrying and it is impacting negatively on the efforts by the government and other non-state actors to ensure that gender parity and 100% transition in education are achieved. One of the effects has been on education and particularly on girl child education. The government’s military intervention though managed to bring the conflict to an end, and the effects of the conflict on girls’ education are still being felt today. In 2010 in Cheptais for example, 10,966 girls were enrolled while boys were 19,479 a difference of nearly 50% and this trend has continued to date. The low participation of girls in Cheptais and Mt. Elgon Sub-Counties is an issue of concern for education stakeholders whose responsibility is to ensure that every child of school-going age receives basic education. The study sought to establish the extent of, reasons for and the effects of high teenage pregnancies on education in the Mt. Elgon area.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Girls’ education as a Human Right provides economic and social benefits and is an international objective, (Birdsall, Levine, & Ibrahim, 2005). According to the Gender Report of the Global Education Monitoring Report (GEM), however, in the past 25 years, 180 million more girls have enrolled in primary and secondary education since the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, a landmark commitment to advance the rights of girls and women made in 1995 by 189 countries (UNESCO, 2021). The WB (2021),

citing UNESCO estimates that globally, 129 million girls are out of school. This includes 32 and 97 million of primary and secondary school age respectively. Gender parity in Primary and secondary school enrollment rates are closer to equal for girls (89%) and boys (90%) globally. Globally, two-thirds of all countries have reached gender parity in primary school enrollment rates (WB, 2021). However, in low-income countries, completion rates for girls are lower (63% for girls compared to 67% for boys) in primary schools. In most of these countries, completion rates get worse for girls at the secondary school level with only 28% completing lower secondary school compared to 35% of boys (WB, 2021).

Lewis & Lockheed (2006) identifies social exclusion to account for 70% of girls not enrolled in schools. The World Bank citing UNESCO in a 2021 report, notes that in countries affected by fragility, conflict, violence, learning poverty, child marriage, Covid-19 among others the gaps are even starker. In such countries, girls are 2.5 times more likely to be out of school than boys. Access to education for girls in countries of conflict, post-conflict is limited by factors such as poverty, gender issues, girls' workloads, sibling care, early marriage, accessibility of schools, and safety and security. The distance to and from school may place girls at undesirable risk of attack, abduction, and sexual violence in areas where fighting forces are present. According to UNESCO & UNHCR, (2007), early marriages and motherhood in most cases mean the end of educational opportunities for girls. Early pregnancy and marriage are higher in insecure environments, due to gender-based violence. Early marriages could be the desire for parents to secure protection and economic survival.

Conflicts exacerbate inequalities in education for women and girls and increase vulnerabilities (World Vision, 2001). Conflict represents a major impediment to the realization of the EFA and Sustainable Development Goals (MDGs), especially for the universal completion of primary education and gender equality in primary and secondary education (Buckland 2005). According to Nicolai 2008, over half of the world's primary-aged children out of school are estimated to live in conflict-affected fragile states

Regional, ethnic, or religious group inequalities in educational attainment can be further widened as a result of armed conflict, as is the case for ethnic groups living in Northern Uganda, indigenous peoples in Guatemala, or women in Afghanistan. UNESCO (1999c) reported that in the 1980s the combination of an economic crisis, floods, and drought, as well as the ongoing civil war, negatively affected enrolment levels and educational attainment. The civil war was also highly destructive to physical educational infrastructure: the Mozambique Ministry of Education reported that by

Kenya has been lauded as one of the few countries in Sub-Saharan that has made tremendous efforts towards achieving parity and 100 percent transition in basic education. However, such general statements mask regional/localized disparities in access to education in Kenya. In Kenya, the government launched a National Campaign Against Teenage Pregnancies through the National Commission for Population and Development (NCPD) on 3rd March 2020. This was to galvanize communities to end teenage pregnancies through advocacy and awareness. APHRC (2020) quotes a UNFPA report that indicated that 378,397 teenage pregnancies were recorded between July 2016 and June 2017. The report further revealed that 1 in every 5 girls had children before their 19th birthday. NCPD (2021) cites the Kenya Data and Health Survey of 2014 where it was reported that 13,000 girls drop out of school annually because of pregnancy. Reporting from Kenya Health Information Systems (KHIS).

African Institute of Development Policy (AFIDEP) lists Bungoma County at 7th position among the 28 heavily affected counties in Kenya in 2019 (7,339 cases) and 2020 (5,577 cases) (AFIDEP, 2020). Further, according to the Statistics obtained from the Bungoma County Education Office (2015), enrolment of girls has been on a steady increase in the County. However compared to other sub-counties in Bungoma County, Cheptais and Mt. Elgon Sub-Counties in the Mt. Elgon area recorded a 50% primary school enrolment parity in favour of boys in 2010, a trend that has not changed much to date. The low participation of girls in Cheptais and Mt. Elgon Sub-Counties is an issue of concern for education stakeholders whose responsibility

is to ensure that every child of school-going age receives basic education.

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted in Cheptais and Mt. Elgon Sub-Counties which are part of the eleven (11) sub-counties forming the Bungoma County. The area borders the Republic of Uganda to the North and West, Trans Nzoia County to the East, and Bungoma West and Bungoma North sub-Counties to the South. It lies between latitude 0048' and 10 30'N, and longitudes 340 22' and 350 10' East. Mt. Elgon area has a total land area of 934.74 square kilometres, of which 508.66 square kilometres is gazetted forest. Only 334.7 square kilometres is arable and, therefore, available for agriculture and settlements. Altitude ranges from 1800 – 4320 meters above sea level. It is heavily influenced by Mt. Elgon, the defining topographical feature in the area. The impacts of population dynamics characterized by high population density and trends on the environment and natural resources in the Mt. Elgon area are manifested in among other things; deforestation, unsustainable land practices, and increasing cases of conflict over land and other natural resources.

This was an exploratory study inched on Vulnerability Theory and conducted in Cheptais and Mt. Elgon areas. The study employed snow bowling techniques to identify and in-depth interview twelve (12) affected households, including eight (8) teenage mothers, and three (3) teachers including two (2) school principals in the area. Other respondents purposively selected and in-depth interviewed were local community gatekeepers/leaders including; three (3) church leaders, two (2) local Ministry of Education Officials, three (3) political leaders, and one (1) Community Service Organization. The in-depth interviews were carried out by the two researchers assisted by two community health workers who were recruited as research assistants. Data generated were transcribed while maintaining the context of the responses, summarized, and analyzed thematically using the content analysis method.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Objective I: Extent of teenage pregnancies in Mt. Elgon area

The majority of respondents stated that teenage pregnancy is a rampant and common phenomenon in Mt. Elgon. However, they were quick to point out that it is more acute in certain areas than in others. For instance, the area around the Chebiuk settlement scheme was reportedly more affected than the other parts of the Mt. Elgon area due to prolonged land-related conflicts. According to Ministry officials, in 2014, 18 girls were found pregnant at Chepkurkur Primary School while in Chelebei Secondary School, 20 girls fell pregnant in 2015. The World Bank (2021) and UNESCO (2012) pointed out that areas heavily affected by the conflicts were likely to experience pregnancy-related cases of school dropout. Together with early marriages, the two were, therefore, unanimously identified as the key factors responsible for the low enrolment of girls in schools and across the Mt. Elgon area.

Objective II: Causes of High Teenage Pregnancies in Mt. Elgon area

Incidentally, it was largely agreed that during 1992 and the subsequent civil conflicts in the Mt. Elgon area, several settlements were destroyed. Households and their livelihoods were reportedly affected as demographic, socio-economic, and cultural life was disrupted by the civil war. In a study in Sri Lanka, Kumari identified social factors such as sexual violence, extreme poverty, the impact of war, lack of social opportunities, and family conflicts as the main factors associated with teenage pregnancies (Kumari, T., 2022). As UNESCO reported, in countries affected by fragility, conflict, and violence (FCV), girls were 2.5 times more likely to be out of school (UNESCO, 2021). The persistent civil conflicts in the study area have reportedly compromised the ability of many households to get means of subsistence, leading to high cases of

school dropout as many children were sent out by the family to search for menial farm labour to earn some income for the family. According to UNESCO, 2021, girls aged 12-17 are at particular risk of dropping out of school in low and lower-income countries. In the Mt. Elgon area orphaned children whose parents bore the brunt of the conflict were worst affected. This is in agreement with UNESCO (2012) which reported that areas heavily affected by conflicts were likely to experience more cases of school dropout.

Reportedly, after the conflict, the people of Mt. Elgon did not receive sufficient support from the government to properly resettle. The houses constructed for the conflict returnees were very small huts which most families found a challenge to spend the nights together with their adolescent children. It is a taboo among the local Sabaot community. In response to this situation, it was a common practice to find parents/guardians sending their adolescent children to spend the night in neighbouring homes. Away from the watchful eye of the parents, adolescents, particularly girls were often sexually abused by unknown assailants on their way and/or by known members of the host homes. Many adolescent girls sleeping away were more likely to attend community night parties, especially during male circumcision and the FGM period where they met older assailants. Such community cultural practices made things worse as many such sexual abuse cases were unprotected, and only a few were reported.

Lack of adequate provision for personal needs particularly for girls. These include but are not limited to sanitary towels, panties, lotions, soap, and pocket money. Girls from poor families who often lack such items then become vulnerable to young men who prey on them promising to provide these critical items in their lives. In some cases, parents also did not pay school fees as expected; hence students were frequently sent home, a fact that made the girls lose hope in school and begin to engage in vices due to hopelessness. Though the teenage pregnancy problem was not new in the area, the levels had suddenly gone up with the emergence of motorcycle taxi riders and the Covid-19 pandemic-related school closures. The riders confused the vulnerable young girls with money, gifts, and free rides to and from school in exchange for sex. In a study in Pakistan, Goonewardene, M. et al., (2005) found that teenagers from lower socioeconomic strata and younger teenagers were significantly affected by teenage pregnancies. African Population and Health Research Centre (APHRC) had also warned that there is a high risk of transactional sex among girls from poor families (APHRC, 2020). Girls who come from poor families located in remote areas were reportedly the most affected by teenage pregnancies in the study area. A principal in one of the selected secondary schools in the study area reported:

“... in my school we have a total of 15 breastfeeding teenage girls and they reportedly told our counselling department that they lacked the necessary personal needs that the culprits had promised to sort out for them ...”

The inability or ignorance of the guardians or parents to manage adolescence among girls was reported to have largely pushed some girls into deviant behaviour. Most parents did not understand the physiological changes that happen in adolescent girls and did not advise them properly on the expected physiological and psychological changes and how to manage this critical stage of self-discovery. Parents also feared engaging in talks about sex with their girls, probably because they did not know the implications of such talks. According to the Sabaot culture, sex is sacred any discussions especially with girls would raise eyebrows. A comment by one of the community service organizations (CSOs) representatives who came intervened with an advocacy programme during the COVID-19 period put this fear into perspective:

“... in this community, it is considered obscene or taboo to mention sex or sexual organs by name in the presence of teenagers and we have to tread carefully...”

Lack or inadequate access to youth-friendly SRH information has been blamed for the rampant teenage pregnancies in Mt. Elgon. Conflicts and civil strife like that experienced in Mt. Elgon disrupt SRH information and services for young people (NCPD, 2020). The information gap reportedly widened further

as one moved towards the interior parts of Mt. Elgon. The poor road and communication infrastructure was identified by the majority of respondents to have contributed immensely to the information gap in the study area.



Plate 1: Friends Church Peace Team (FCPT) <https://www.friendsunitedmeeting.org/news/covid-related-pregnancies-on-mt-elgon>

Parents also lacked information on their role in raising the girls, especially managing expectant or breastfeeding teenagers. Most parents/guardians stopped paying school fees for girls the moment they learned that they were pregnant and this forced the girls to lose hope and drop out of school. Some parents were known to push their expectant or breastfeeding children to get married to benefit financially from the bride price or in rare cases compel the men who impregnated them to shoulder the responsibility of paying fees for them. Elsewhere, a lack of parental psychological and material support has been cited for high teenage pregnancies (Njau and Wamahia, 1998).

Teenage girls also reportedly engaged in sex at a very early age. Most of them join secondary school (form one) when they had had their first sexual experience. Peer pressure and lack of sexual and reproductive information played a major role in exposing young girls to engage in premature sexual activities. It was reported that when girls report back to school after holidays, they often shared a lot of their sexual experiences with their peers and this encouraged younger/inexperienced girls to also want to explore and have a story to tell during their subsequent discussions.

Most parents due to stigma, lack of information, and fear of litigation costs did not take action against the culprits who impregnated their girls. The majority of the parents were very poor and tended to prioritize other pressing needs than taking legal action against those accused of impregnating their girls, hence culprits went scot-free. A study by APHRC pointed out that several teenage pregnancies could be a result of sexual violence (APHRC, 2020). In Mt. Elgon, some families were feared because they were involved in the Sabaot Land Defence Forces (SLDF) activities during the 2006/8 and subsequent civil conflicts. They were believed to be practicing witchcraft while some were suspected to have firearms. One interviewee put this into perspective:

“...when the sons of these feared families impregnate a girl, people whisper it in low tones, and no action is taken against them for fear of being bewitched or being killed”

Polygamy-related child abandonment is a common practice in Mt. Elgon where polygamous husbands tend to favour children of the young wife. Such men commonly abandoned their elder wives to fend for themselves and their children as they moved to the young wives' houses. In the context of polygamous marriages, those involved (men) end up with more children than they can support. Therefore, many teenagers in polygamous marriages are raised by their mothers, but girls raised in such circumstances tend to be rebellious to their mothers because of the absence of father figures in the homes.

Objective III: Effect of Teenage Pregnancies on Education in Mt. Elgon area

Teenage Pregnancy leads to early marriage and was found to be a major cause of school dropout in Mt. Elgon. One key informant had this to say about the phenomenon:

“... teenage pregnancies are depleting girls from our schools, the upper primary is just boys. It is compromising the 100 percent transition policy by the government”

Teenage pregnancy prevents girls from pursuing their education due to extra responsibility. This increases the rate of illiteracy in society. The teenage mother has to fend for her baby because in many instances the parents and guardians are not supportive. In a study in Nigeria, Nsikak-Abasi, U. et al. (2021) found that pregnant teenage girls have low educational attainment unless the parents decide to help. Expectant teens and teenage mothers bear negative discourses from their peers and the community in general about their pregnancy and the baby. In such cases, teenage mothers decide to focus on the baby or plan to get married rather than pursue education. Young parents have to face huge humiliation and negative remarks from other people. It is a source of social stigma and teen parents have to bear a bad reputation as society treats them as social outcasts.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

The study established that teenage pregnancy and early marriages were rampant and common phenomena in Mt. Elgon. However, it is more acute in places that bore the brunt of the civil strife and in more remote than other areas.

The challenges of teenage pregnancies and their aftermath can be traced to the civil conflicts that have affected the Mt. Elgon area since 1992. It affected the socioeconomic, demographic, and cultural fabric of the local community leading to poverty, landlessness, and disease. This has compromised education in terms of eroding parents' ability to pay school fees and provide adequately for the personal needs of their children in schools. Together with inadequate access to sexual and reproductive health (SRH) information in the area due to its remoteness, inability or ignorance of the guardians or parents to manage adolescence, child abandonment, peer pressure, and maintenance of some retrogressive cultural practices played a major role in exposing young girls to premature sexual activities with untold consequences to education particularly of girls in Mt. Elgon area.

Recommendations

Parents should be sensitized on their cardinal roles of raising children and shun retrogressive cultural practices and at the same time asked to provide the needed personal items, particularly for the girls.

In cases of young girls from poor backgrounds, the NG-CDF, Ward Bursary, and Scholarships should prioritize such to enable them to meet their education needs. In addition, a program for donating free

sanitary towels in schools should be initiated across all schools in Mt. Elgon.

Guidance and counseling structures and programs should be strengthened in schools. The Ministry of Education should also constantly monitor such programs and enable a feedback mechanism for improved performance. Training seminars should be organized to engage the girls during the holidays. Sex education should be prioritized both in primary and secondary schools.

Legal action should be taken on those who sexually prey on young girls, and legal support given to those who need it to enable them to prosecute the culprits. Parents who collude with the culprits should be punished using the local government structures. At the same time, there is a need to prosecute those who engage young girls in child labour such as coffee picking, and farm weeding among others.

Breastfeeding teenage mothers should be allowed time to attend to their children and come back to school. For those teenage mothers who may not want to continue with formal education after birth, vocational training would be provided to equip them with the necessary technical and life skills. There would be a need to establish rescue centres for teenage mothers in the region for better retention of teenage mothers. In the centres, moral and material support would be provided as well as constant guidance and counseling to build the self-esteem of the young mothers. Such programmes would work better by strengthening the school feeding program, particularly for primary school girls who have to walk several miles to and from school. In secondary schools in particular, more dormitory facilities should be constructed to accommodate and keep all the girls in school.

Efforts should be made to address the impacts of the previous conflicts in Mt. Elgon. Recovery efforts have not been sufficient and IDPs from Mt. Elgon were not adequately supported or compensated for losses due to the conflicts.

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