



Change and persistence in discriminatory social norms and practices affecting adolescent girls in rural Uganda

Intersections between marriage and education

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Key messages

- Despite progress in reducing poverty, significant numbers of adolescent girls in Uganda are still poor, propelled into child marriage or early pregnancy and deprived of full educational attainment.
- Girls' education now has greater social value and the universal primary education (UPE) policy has greatly expanded access; however, many girls drop out due to poverty or early pregnancy, while secondary education remains a distant dream for most.
- While the average age at marriage does not seem to be rising, marriage forms and practices are changing, with more fluid and individual arrangements emerging; however, these leave girls vulnerable and with limited social support.
- Lack of access to reproductive health information and services leaves adolescent girls vulnerable to early or unwanted pregnancies, HIV and other sexually transmitted illnesses, while sexual and gender-based violence remains widespread.
- Some social norms and practices are shifting, but others persist as part of deep-rooted value systems that continue to subordinate girls and women, reducing them to reproductive roles, and limiting their opportunities for voice and empowerment.
- Integrated approaches are required to tackle discriminatory social norms through community dialogue while enhancing education, health and legal service provision and promoting economic opportunities. Traditional cultural and religious leaders and

1 Investigating social norms and their impact on adolescent girls

Uganda has made significant progress over recent decades in reducing poverty, expanding education and improving gender equality. Nevertheless, analysis of national and regional-level survey data reveals that a significant proportion of adolescents are still living in poverty, deprived of full educational attainment (see Box 1). Girls are impelled into child marriage or early pregnancy, leaving them highly vulnerable to sexual and reproductive health problems. Economic discrimination against girls and women persists, and the limited data available indicate continued high levels of gender-based violence. Meanwhile, current national debates about law reform to regulate marriage and divorce reveal deep resistance to any change in discriminatory practices at the household and family level.

Two of the three top policy recommendations of a recent analysis of adolescent girls' vulnerability in Uganda include: increasing educational attainment and keeping girls in school; and reshaping social values and cultural norms that promote child marriage and early childbearing (Kyomuhendo Bantebya et al., 2013).

Box 1: National statistics

Only two-thirds (68%) of girls in Uganda complete primary school; fewer than half (46.6%) enrol in secondary school, and only a third (34%) of those actually complete secondary education. These percentages are all lower than the rates for boys (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2012).

At national level, over a third (35%) of the girls who drop out of school do so because of marriage, and a quarter (23%) because of pregnancy (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2012).

Teenagers from the poorest households have rates of pregnancy (34%) that are more than double the rates for their counterparts from the wealthiest households (16%) (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2012).

Over a fifth of girls aged 15-19 in Uganda have been married (Amin et al., 2013) while over a third (39%) of women aged 20-49 had given birth by the age 18 (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2012).

Over a quarter of young women (29.1%) have reported experiencing physical and sexual violence (UNICEF, 2013).

Poised at the intersection between childhood and adulthood, adolescent girls face unique challenges to the full development and exercise of their capabilities. And yet they may also hold the key to effecting positive development outcomes that could reverberate across future generations. Investments to empower adolescent girls are increasingly recognised as critical to breaking the intergenerational transmission of poverty. For such investments to have maximum impact, more evidence is needed to make adolescent girls more visible in policy and planning processes and to identify the specific multiple social and cultural forces that shape their experiences and conditions of life.

This policy brief presents the findings of qualitative research in Uganda designed to explore the complex ways in which adolescent girls' capabilities are shaped and/or constrained by gender discriminatory social norms, attitudes and practices, and how other overlapping and intersecting experiences of poverty, deprivation and exclusion serve to intensify and perpetuate vulnerabilities. It is part of a multi-year, multi-country qualitative study (also covering Ethiopia, Nepal and Viet Nam) conducted by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) in partnership with national research teams, commissioned by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) as part of its flagship programme on Transforming the Lives of Girls and Young Women.

Box 2: Profile of the study district

Mayuge is a district in the Eastern central region of Uganda. The population is largely rural, traditionally growing food crops though cash crops (coffee and cotton) are also grown, and sugarcane has been expanding rapidly.

While religiously and ethnically diverse, the predominant group is Basoga, whose cultural leader – Kyabazinga – exerts significant influence and authority. Traditional culture also governs gender roles and expectations: *'What a man says, the woman also says'* is a common Basoga saying.

District literacy rates are low, particularly among women, and school dropout rates remain high. Health services have extremely limited coverage; just over a quarter of childbirth deliveries take place in district health facilities, and family planning is limited by both supply constraints and prevailing social norms.

Among the most urgent development priorities identified by local government are investment in basic services infrastructure and delivery, job creation, appropriate technology development, and youth activities.

(Mayuge District Local Government, 2011, 2012)

In Uganda, the study has focused on rural communities in the Eastern central district of Mayuge (see Box 2), selected as an area where poverty indicators are high and social indicators poor. Year 1 research (2012) provided an overview of the complex interplay of the different domains that shape adolescent girls' wellbeing. The study highlighted challenges to the fulfilment of adolescent girls' capabilities in: education, household and family relations; economic empowerment/access to resources; physical safety and health; psychosocial wellbeing; and political/civic participation.

Year 2 research (2013) has aimed to provide a more in-depth understanding of if, how and why discriminatory gendered social norms are changing so as to better inform relevant policies and programmes. The focus is on norms and practices around early marriage, pregnancy and education, which are seen as pivotal in shaping girls' opportunities and capabilities, now and throughout their life course.

In both years, the study has built on a literature review and employed a number of qualitative methodologies involving community members (women, men, girls and boys) as well as a variety of key informants. These include district planners and authorities, teachers, health service workers, non-governmental and civil society representatives, and cultural and religious leaders.

This policy brief summarises findings from the second year of research. Drawing on a newly developed broad-based conceptual framework on social norm change, field research confirms that norms and practices around marriage and girls' education in the two study communities are both 'sticky' (i.e. resistant to change) and changing in response to broader socioeconomic and cultural transformations occurring within an overall setting of generalised poverty. Policy priorities and recommendations arising from the findings suggest that coordinated action on a variety of fronts is needed by multiple actors in order to address the underlying discriminatory social norms and their manifestations in limiting adolescent girls' capabilities.

'We are what we are because of our culture, and it's in the communities where cultural norms are embedded.'

(Key informant, Kampala)

2 Key findings

2.1 Change and continuity in marriage practices and trends

Despite national law stipulating that the minimum legal age for marriage is 18, with infringement punishable under the category of ‘defilement’, early marriage persists, with some girls reported to be marrying as young as 12 or 13. This trend continues to be fuelled in part by parental pressure for daughters to marry early in order to bring in bridewealth. However, a major contributing factor stems from a rise in the establishment of ‘informal’ marriages or cohabitation arrangements (*through the window*) which young people enter into through choice – although this is often to escape unfavourable home environments. On the one hand, this implies more individual choice of partner than in the past when arranged marriages were the norm; but on the other hand, cohabitation offers limited stability or protection for adolescent girls. While parents may be against such arrangements, some tacitly consent and claim a new form of bridewealth in the form of ‘compensation’ from the young man or his parents.

Transactional sex encounters – outside of any kind of marriage arrangement – are also reported to occur; some girls, facing poverty at home and with limited economic opportunities, are entering into relationships *‘for the price of a chapatti’*. Polygamy remains a strong cultural norm in some communities, backed up by both religious and ethnic precepts. A common practice of ‘informal polygamy’, by which men have relationships with multiple women, is also reported to be on the rise, termed *‘modern polygamy’*.

Traditional gender norms and expectations within marriage remain strong, with the husband considered the head of household and main decision-maker and the wife valued primarily for her reproductive role and tasks. However, both women and men find it increasingly difficult to adhere to such ideals as marriages grow more fragile, women take on new roles, and men are seen to ‘abandon’ household responsibilities. Male power within marriage has, in a sense, ‘fractured’, creating a sense of hopelessness or alienation among men, who complain of feeling like *‘empty trousers’*; this is also said to contribute to continuing high levels of domestic violence in the study communities. Sources of support for girls within marriage remain largely family-based. While local government and religious leaders offer some services and/or counselling in cases of marital conflict, such services are often out of reach of adolescent girls.



Picture 1. Girls and women continue to perform the bulk of household chores

2.2 Early pregnancy and childbearing in the absence of appropriate reproductive health information and services

The role of the ‘senga’ – or paternal aunt – in preparing girls for marriage is diminishing and new sources of information and support are only slowly developing. Adolescent girls currently have extremely limited access to

appropriate reproductive health information and services, including family planning. This contributes to early pregnancies and childbirth both inside and outside of marriage, with the latter increasingly common – becoming, in a sense, a ‘descriptive’ norm in the study communities. However, pregnancy and childbirth outside marriage, when the adolescent girl is living with her parents, is still viewed negatively and surrounded by stigma and ‘injunctive’ social norms, adding social burdens to the economic burden of single motherhood.

2.3 Expanded opportunities in primary school, but continued dropouts and limited secondary education

A clear trend emerging from our research is the greater opportunity for schooling that Ugandan girls have today in comparison to their mothers’ and grandmothers’ generations, and the greater social value placed on education for girls. This is largely attributed to national policies designed to expand education and, in particular, universal primary education (UPE). This, in turn, has fuelled girls’ aspirations for education, which is seen as important both in and of itself and as a means to pave the way for a better life for themselves and their families.

‘I fear marrying a girl who is more educated than me because she might not respect me.’

(Focus group, unmarried boys)

However, girls face many gendered risks during their schooling, including dropout due to pregnancy or early marriage, poor-quality teaching, sexual harassment in schools, or parents preferring to invest in schooling for boys, particularly at secondary level. In spite of universal secondary education (USE) policies, girls in the study communities still lacked full opportunities for secondary education; the long distances to schools increased the opportunity costs and risks to girls and their families.

Most study participants agreed that education added to a girl’s social value as reflected in higher bridewealth payments and also made her a better wife and mother because of the higher capabilities it conferred on her. Some, however, cautioned that education would not automatically make a woman more caring of children or loving of in-laws; education could, in fact, make girls ‘lazy’ at home or impel them into work outside the home, causing them to neglect family duties. Some made distinctions between the beneficial effects of a woman’s education on her children versus more mitigated effects on relations with in-laws. Education of boys, meanwhile, was seen as generally positive insofar as it increased their income-earning capacity, thus making them better providers for household needs.

2.4 Combined effects on adolescent girls’ capabilities

While national educational policies and promotion of gender equality have delivered expanded educational opportunities for girls, those who become mothers or are married at an early age cannot take full advantage of these opportunities and so find their educational trajectories truncated. Early marriage, cohabitation and pregnancy continue to limit girls’ ability to develop their full capabilities through education, which they could do if they were supported to remain in and complete both primary and secondary schooling.

Girls who marry young or enter into unstable cohabitation relationships may find themselves in a position of relative powerlessness within the newly formed couple, as they have not yet completed their education or developed the confidence they need to assert themselves in household decision-making and contribute to the economic wellbeing of the family. This hereafter reinforces traditional social norms around the ‘proper’ behaviour of a wife, who is expected to be subordinate to the husband, as she is not in a position to contest such norms. Those girls who also give birth at an early age are soon preoccupied with their care-giving functions and may no longer have the time or opportunity to develop new skills, cultivate relationships with peers, or indeed continue with schooling. Given that many of the cohabitation arrangements arising are characterised by



Picture 2. Girls’ education is often cut short by early motherhood

instability, girls may often find themselves abandoned by partners, with no legal recourse to demand economic support.

'Giving birth before marriage is seen badly in the community. You are referred to as "second hand", "scrap". It has always been like this.'

(Focus group, married girls)

Lacking access to appropriate sexual and reproductive health information or services, adolescent girls are unable to protect themselves against unwanted pregnancies or sexually transmitted illnesses, including HIV, as well as gender-based violence and sexual abuse. The physical consequences of early pregnancy are clear; because they are not yet physically mature, girls risk dying during delivery, or need to deliver by Caesarean section, after which they may be rejected by their partner as *'sexually weak'*. With abortion illegal, those who seek recourse to *'silent'* abortions face significant health risks, as well as legal risks and social censure. Once they are pregnant, girls fail to get the proper care.

The combination of early marriage or pregnancy leading to school dropout has a significant impact on an adolescent girl's potential to develop the skills needed to engage in productive activities beyond those involved in farming or petty trade. Additionally, taking on the early burden of childcare and other reproductive activities limits the time available to engage in economic activities outside of the home. This strengthens the likelihood that the girl and her child or children will be caught up in a spiral of poverty.

Girls' experiences of marriage within the changing socioeconomic context described above were both positive and negative. Some relish the independence from their own families that early marriage or cohabitation brings. They find satisfaction through being recognised as *'social adults'*, appreciate the economic support provided by husbands, and are happy about the protection married life affords them from abusive natal families or promiscuous behaviour. Others, however, recognise that early marriage and motherhood stunt their opportunities to develop further skills that can lead to good jobs, and also soon realise that marriage cannot solve all of their problems – whether economic or psychosocial. Pressure to conform to ideals of good *'wifely'* behaviour remains strong; dismay and disappointment when those ideals cannot be fulfilled is all the stronger.

A number of girls – particularly those in informal marriage arrangements they have contracted themselves – face economic difficulties in the new household, as young husbands themselves struggle to support the family; these informal unions are, in turn, reported to be highly unstable, with little formal protection for girls who may be abandoned with their children in the event of a break-up. Some girls maintain strong relationships with their natal families, but social norms tended to restrict the number or length of visits; outside of the family network, there were limited sources of support that girls could turn to in case of difficulties in their marriage.



Picture 3. Adolescent girls lack access to reproductive health care and services

3 Change, continuity, and mediating institutions

Drawing on the research programme's overall conceptual framework, our study suggests that key drivers have differential effects on both change processes and stasis around particular sets of norms. Most study participants identified multiple drivers of change and continuity in social norms and practices around education and marriage for adolescent girls and set these within the broader context of overall socioeconomic, political and cultural transformation, against a backdrop of persistent poverty. The transformations in this broader context are explored below.

3.1 Key drivers of change and forces of continuity

3.1.1 Socioeconomic transformation

The rural study sites are characterised by broad-based processes of socioeconomic transformation from rural subsistence to cash-based economies, but livelihoods remain extremely insecure and household poverty levels are high. These conditions affect marriage forms and processes in a number of ways. Among other things, they contribute to: (1) the rise in informal marriages or cohabitation arrangements among young people as girls seek young men engaged in the cash economy who can provide for their needs better than their own parents; (2) transactional sex encounters for the same reasons, which in turn fuel premarital pregnancies; (3) a persistent tendency, among some parents at least, to consider their daughters as sources of bridewealth – or at least demand compensation in the case of informal marriage. Socioeconomic transformation is also contributing to the heightened value placed on girls' education, which is seen as one of the few paths available to secure livelihoods and jobs. In the absence of adequate opportunities for secondary education or technical training, however, neither girls nor boys are always able to realise the full transformative potential of education in such a changing socioeconomic context.

'The issues around are many, and however much you try to enforce the laws on early marriage, what comes around is poverty: people are pushed to the wall by poverty.'

(Key informant,
Kampala)

3.1.2 Legal and policy environment

Laws and policies can produce forces for positive change, but can also produce a backlash, leading to a considerably uncertain terrain. National education policies promoting UPE have proved to be a particularly positive force for change, opening up opportunities for both girls and boys and contributing to greater social value being placed on girls' education. But inadequate protection for girls against gender-based discrimination or harassment in school, and lack of policy attention to the needs of pregnant girls and young mothers, continue to deprive many girls of their right to education. At the same time, weak implementation of universal secondary education policies coupled with neglect of vocational training has left a void at these levels of education, which, if filled, could be most transformative for girls.

The promotion of women and children's rights can also be seen as a positive step forward in terms of greater respect for the rights of boys and girls and overall gender justice. However, many study participants pointed to the perceived negative effects in terms of its contribution to the breakdown in family structures and authority – a clear backlash among parents in general and fathers in particular was apparent. So too, the constitutional

guarantee of 18 as the minimum legal age of marriage, and efforts to enforce the law on ‘defilement’ prohibiting relations between under-age children, can be seen as strong reinforcement of the rights of adolescent girls to remain unmarried; however, some evidence suggests that these measures merely seemed to drive early marriage underground, contributing to the rise of early informal ‘cohabitation’ arrangements, which afford no legal or material protection for the rights of married girls and their children.

3.1.2 Socio-cultural transformation: A complex nexus of socio-cultural transformation brought about by what many study participants labelled as the forces of ‘Westernisation’ or ‘modernisation’ are seen to be driving out traditional socio-cultural norms and values. Many participants expressed a general sense of cultural unravelling – ‘a sense of chaos’ – whereby old values are breaking down and younger generations are adopting behaviours considered to be ‘immoral’, influenced by what many regard as the most negative aspects of Western culture. Study participants point to the rise of trading centres, video halls and discos – even smart phones – conveying ‘inappropriate’ images as responsible for a general breakdown in morals and a laxity in relations between young men and women.

3.2 Sites and institutions that mediate gendered social norms

The study identified key mediating sites and institutions through which gendered social norms are either reinforced or questioned and subject to change. These include the family and the household, schools, health centres, local government structures and legal services, ethnic and religious institutions and ideologies, and non-governmental or civil society projects and activities.

Box 3: The positive influence of family support

Hajara (pseudonym) is one of three girl graduates in her community. She is the 13th child in a polygamous family with 19 children. Her parents are both small-scale farmers, with cash crops providing some but not all of the school fees for children in the family. Even with her grandmother chipping in, most of her brothers and sisters did not complete school. She, however, managed to go to university.

‘I attribute my staying in school till university level to the support and advice I got from my mother and father. When I was in senior 1, my mother used to sit me down and tell me how to keep myself together. If I spent time at the trading centre or in seminars late, she would tell me that it is bad to stay away from home in late hours. She used to ask me about my performance, and our dad used to surprise us with gifts when one performs well in class. He would also take us to graduation parties to motivate us...’

I faced challenges of boys trying to lure me with gifts, but I refused and would tell my mother about it... My future plans are to get a job and support my mother who is sickly. My advice to mothers who have girl children is to support them and take them to school and provide for their basic needs. I advise the other children to have patience because it pays.’

Case study, Mayuge

As with the overall drivers of change, such sites seem to be able to serve as either forces that support existing norms or as drivers of change. This is the case, for example, for families, which generally serve as sites of socialisation into traditional gender norms but which can sometimes offer support structures as springboards for positive change (see Box 3). This is also the case with schools, which, while offering avenues and opportunities for girls’ empowerment, including through the positive role models offered by female teachers, can also serve as sites for gender discrimination and present risks for girls. Health centres have the potential to promote adolescent-friendly health information and services; however, ambiguities in adolescent health policy, combined with limited resources, severely restrict such potential.

Local government structures and the legal system are key purveyors and enforcers of government laws and policies on universal education, women and children’s rights, and protection from early marriage, and these are indeed making significant inroads on these issues. Nevertheless, public trust and confidence in these institutions is being eroded, partly due to the sheer weight of the caseload in the face of severe capacity gaps; but also

because of a community backlash against some of these policies and widespread collusion – in the case of arrests for early marriage – between police and parents for ‘compensation’ money paid by the parents of the boy.

Cultural and religious leaders remain the guardians of ethnic and religious values in the ideational sphere, which they urge community members to apply in practice. Many, however, seem to be struggling in the face of the larger forces of socioeconomic and cultural change described above.

A number of non-governmental and community-based organisations are active in the district of Mayuge. While their overall reach is limited and both documentation and evaluation materials on their activities are rare, discussions with key informants indicate that their interventions can have a potentially transformative impact on the women and girls reached by their projects. They have a presence in the field and are often able to reach communities that stretched government services cannot cover, and/or to strengthen available services.

4 Policy and programme recommendations

‘The emphasis must be on the girl child – she is our future, the future of us all.’
(Key informant, Mayuge)

‘We can’t bury our heads in the sand while our girls are dying.’
(Key informant, Kampala)

Study participants at all levels identified a number of key priorities and recommendations for addressing gender discriminatory norms related to early marriage and practices that negatively affect adolescent girls’ capabilities, as well as addressing specific obstacles to girls being able to continue their education.

- **Promote community dialogue, awareness and change processes around discriminatory social norms.** Community dialogue processes are considered by many to be a productive approach to ‘research/action’, useful both in uncovering underlying potentially discriminatory gender norms and stereotypes and raising awareness of the need to change these. A number of non-governmental and community actors are already engaged in such processes on the ground and others are intending to embark on them. Such efforts should be strengthened and expanded. Cultural and faith-based leaders are critical actors with whom engagement needs to be deepened. Continuous outreach to and sensitisation of parents is also needed to support them in their parenting roles and their ability to communicate with their children while protecting them and promoting their best interests. Affirmative action for girls and women is still a priority; however, men and boys need to be enlisted as allies in the promotion of gender justice.
- **Enhance girls’ self-esteem by cultivating positive role models.** Our research has highlighted the important positive influence that can be exerted by ‘success stories’ of girls who have ‘made it’ – sisters or friends who have graduated from school, women from the community who have taken on a profession or risen to positions of political leadership, successfully balancing their role with family commitments. Such examples should be celebrated, shared and made more visible. It is equally important to cultivate role models from outside the community so that girls can gain an expanded vision of their own possibilities.
- **Strengthen legal provisions, enforce implementation and broaden awareness of protective legislation.** Uganda has well-developed policies on young people, gender equality and girls’ education, which are often backed up by laws. However, there are certain gaps in focus, coordination and clarity, while significant problems remain in implementation and enforcement capacity. It is important to enhance the effectiveness of legal redress mechanisms and child protection systems (including police, probation officers and local councils) in addressing child marriage and defilement, and to enact district-level ordinances to back up and pave the way for implementation of national laws. Further advocacy is still needed around development of additional positive legislation, including around key themes, issues and clauses in proposed laws such as the marriage and divorce bill. And continuing efforts are needed to strengthen awareness and understanding of laws around defilement, early marriage, and obligatory primary education.

- **Invest in expanded access to quality educational service provision at all levels, with complementary measures to strengthen demand.** It is critical to improve the school learning environment, ranging from strengthened codes of conduct for teachers as a means of combating sexual harassment of pupils to the reintroduction of school lunch programmes and health initiatives as a means of strengthening the ‘pull factor’ of schools. Promoting the important roles and status of senior female teachers would be instrumental to creating a favourable environment for girls at school. Specific back-to-school programmes for pregnant girls/young mothers are a key priority, accompanied by community sensitisation. Meanwhile, improved facilities and infrastructure at all levels, accompanied by increased investment in secondary schools in particular, are clear priorities to expand equitable access to quality education at all levels.



Picture 4. Education is essential for full development of girls' capabilities

The Ministry of Education and Sports has designed a series of community dialogues to sensitise stakeholders on the key barriers to girls' education, including ‘deep-rooted socio-cultural norms’ around early marriage, the gender division of labour in the household and lingering parental preference for education of sons. These initiatives should be further supported through media campaigns on the importance of education. Financial support for poor students would help address barriers arising from household poverty and the opportunity costs of sending girls to school and keeping them there, while it is equally important to strengthen sanctions on parents who do not ensure that their children go to school.

- **Urgently clarify policies and strengthen services for adolescent sexual and reproductive health.** Despite Uganda having a national adolescent health policy with guidelines on implementation, there is considerable uncertainty at community level about whether reproductive health information and services can legally be provided to adolescents under the age of 18, particularly in view of the law on defilement, which defines all sexual acts involving under-18s (consensual or not) as a crime. Such ambiguity is negatively impacting the reproductive health rights and protection needs of adolescent girls. Lack of clarity at policy level is coupled with strong social and religious norms and taboos about imparting sexual information and services to girls and, in particular, providing access to methods of contraception. As abortion is also illegal, the result is continuing high levels of teenage pregnancy; some girls resort to unsafe abortion, which can have severe repercussions for their physical and mental health and wellbeing. It should be an urgent priority, therefore, to clarify the legal and policy framework around provision of adolescent sexual and reproductive health services; the provision of sexual and reproductive health information should be massively upscaled, ensuring that services are available and provided by adolescent-friendly health workers.
- **Promote intersectoral coordination and integrated approaches at national and sub-national levels.** It is clear that discriminatory gender norms and the specific vulnerabilities they produce for adolescent girls span multiple sectors. Integrated approaches and service provision is therefore needed to engage multiple actors and address multiple needs. This is to ensure that the benefits of service provision in one area are not blocked and/or contradicted by the lack of service provision in another, and that positive synergies are created. Strengthened reproductive health information services in schools, for example, would require stronger coordination between the health and education sectors. The problem of school dropouts needs support from community development officers and local authorities. Community mobilisation and outreach around HIV and AIDS can be harnessed for mobilisation around other issues of sexual and reproductive health, including the gender discriminatory practices that render women and girls more vulnerable.

Addressing sexual and gender-based violence – including early marriage – also requires collaboration between gender activists, the police and justice systems, and others. Girls’ access to justice is currently severely limited and counselling services – for example, to help with the repercussions of ‘defilement’ or with problems within marriage – are rare. Religious leaders, community workers, and the justice system need to work together on such issues and to ensure that appropriate services for young people (including counselling) are in place. Overall, there is a need for greater resources for capacity-building and mobilisation of partnerships at district level to expand and improve service delivery across different sectors.

- **Expand economic opportunities and empowerment for girls in the context of overall poverty reduction efforts.** Socioeconomic conditions setting the context for high levels of household poverty have been identified as a key force supporting both persistence and change in social norms and practices. Household poverty is driving child labour (specifically sugarcane cutting for boys, and petty trade for girls) and early marriage, which together contribute to a high rate of school dropouts. The specific economic vulnerabilities of women and girls have also been highlighted, with teenage mothers who are struggling on their own facing particularly severe economic constraints. Priorities are therefore twofold: overall socioeconomic development as a driver of positive change in the district, and specific measures for the economic empowerment of girls and women, along with financial support for young couples to start up small businesses, and expanded access to savings and loan schemes. Greater investment in technical training and employment promotion for young people – boys and girls alike – is critical. Priorities include: bringing skills-training back into schools; establishing skills-training programmes for school dropouts; and developing appropriate vocational training opportunities for adolescent mothers, linked to the provision of childcare facilities to enable take-up.
- **Deepen the knowledge and information base for evidence-based policy and programme development.** Further research and studies are needed to better understand the workings and configurations of gender-discriminatory social norms operating at different levels in different contexts. Regional- or community-specific vulnerabilities also need to be better understood as a basis for context-specific design of interventions. In all such efforts it will be important to listen to adolescent girls themselves to understand their own perspectives and learn more about their lived experiences. A nationwide study on early marriage and teenage pregnancy could generate valuable insights and recommendations for action.



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