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The Complexity of Re-admission of Pregnant Schoolgirls in Uganda: A Critical Exploration of Religious Education Teachers' Perceptions and Attitudes

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The study investigated RE teachers' perceptions and attitudes towards the new policy to admit pregnant learners to complete schools. Uganda experiences high rates of teenage pregnancy that often result in young girls dropping out of school and never achieving from education. Teenage pregnancy was exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic when schools were closed for almost two years. Consequently, the Ministry of Education introduced a new policy, the 'Pregnant Girls' School Policy' (PGSP), which mandates the re-enrollment of pregnant and breastfeeding teenagers in primary and secondary schools. This policy is based on the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) Article 4, which recognises the right to education for everyone without discrimination. Although the PGSP is meant to protect and support teenage girls who become pregnant, it contradicts the content of Religious Education (RE), which teaches against premarital sex and teenage pregnancy and goes against traditional cultural values that emphasise virginity until marriage. In Uganda, teenage pregnancy is viewed as a negative thing for school-going girls. Therefore, this investigation sought to understand the perspectives of teachers regarding the new school policy of keeping pregnant teenagers and mothers in school. The study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design and purposively selected RE teachers from schools that participated in a CBC monitoring program by the Ministry of Education. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, and a constructivist grounded theory approach was used for data coding and analysis. RE teachers expressed concerns that the PGSP is inconsistent with the content of RE, creates a moral dilemma, interferes with the power dynamics between learners and teachers, makes class control and management difficult, adds more workload to teachers, and disrupts normal school and classroom settings.

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INTRODUCTION

The article examines RE teachers' perception and attitudes toward readmitting pregnant teens in schools in Uganda, where cultural and religious moral values take precedence over human rights, especially women's rights. The issue of readmission of pregnant girls is critical as it is believed to contravene the socio-cultural and religious norms that consider teenage pregnancy as immoral, sinful and irresponsible. Yet, based on the children's rights to education, Uganda's Ministry of Education enacted a policy that guarantees pregnant teenagers to remain in school and whoever does so contrary is punishable by law. RE teachers are perceived to be custodians of moral values in schools, the RE subject is a moral values subject that is expected to instil morals such as abstinence from sex until marriage, uphold virginity, and fornication and adultery are immoral and sinful. Against this background, the study examined the perceptions and attitudes of RE teachers towards the policy that arguably contradicts the moral values and RE teachings that condemn teenage pregnancy. The study uncovers teachers' perceptions, attitudes, and their positionality in the implementation of the pregnant girls' teenage policy, interpretation and potential implications to the success of the policy.

Objective of the Investigation

The study explored RE teachers' perceptions and attitudes towards the policy to readmit pregnant

teenage girls to school and examine the implications towards the implementation of the policy in secondary schools. The objective of the study was to investigate how RE teachers understood and interpreted the policy vis-a-vis the RE content that teaches against and condemns premarital sex, adultery and fornication; to analyse how RE teachers attitudes influenced their interactions with the pregnant learners in front of the ordinary ones and to identify potential challenges of the pregnant girls policy. The investigation answered by the following research questions: (i) In which ways do RE teachers understand and interpret the Pregnant Girls policy to retain pregnant girls in school to complete their studies? (ii) How do the perceptions and attitudes of RE teachers towards the pregnant girls' policy influence their interactions towards pregnant learners? (iii) What are potential challenges in the implementation of the pregnant girls' policy?

THE RIGHT OF EDUCATION FOR PREGNANT SCHOOL TEENAGERS

Educational policies concerning pregnant teens have been made elsewhere but have been received differently. N-yelbi (2024) revealed that in many cases, teachers and school administrators make it psychologically painful for pregnant girls to attend school with other students. The UDHR Article 4 is reinforced by subsequent human rights instruments such as the 1989 United Nations Convention on the

Rights of the Child (UNCRC) Article 28, the 1981 African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) Article 17, and the 1990 African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC) Article 11. Sustainable Development Goal No. 4 further emphasises the importance of ensuring that everyone has access to education by 2030.

Laws and policies to readmit teenage pregnant girls and mothers are marred with complex dynamics in different contexts. Whilst teenage pregnancy and schooling are controversial issues, the problem of pregnant school-going teenagers is not restricted to African countries. America is one of the countries that grapple with teenage pregnancy (Kantor, et.al, 2020). To ensure equal education opportunities, America enacted the federal civil rights law referred to as 'Title IX' of the Education Amendments of 1972. 'Title IX' was designed to 'protect people from discrimination in education programs and activities'. In its preambular statements, Title IX states that 'No person in the United States shall, based on sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity'. In the struggle to protect the right to education of pregnant teens and teen mothers, the following guidelines were outlined in 'Title IX'; (i) schools are prohibited from assuming that pregnant students cannot attend school or participate in school activities; (ii) schools must provide equal access to school and extracurricular activities for students who are pregnant, who have been pregnant, or who have a child; (iii) absences due to pregnancy or childbirth must be excused for as long as is deemed medically necessary by the student's doctor and (iv) separate programs or schools for pregnant and parenting students must be completely voluntary and must offer opportunities equal to those offered for non-pregnant students (Hepler, 2013). In the UK, the Teenage Pregnancy Strategy (TPS) was rolled out in 1999 and was geared toward reducing the number of teenage pregnancies as well as enabling pregnant teens and mothers to complete school (Skinner & Marino, 2016). N-yelbi (2024)

argued that it is unavoidable for school personnel to be involved in issues of pregnant teenage girls. Therefore, it is crucial to comprehend teachers' feelings and opinions regarding teaching pregnant girls, as it affects the sustainability of the policy.

TEENAGE PREGNANCY IN AFRICAN SCHOOL CONTEXTS

In Africa, some countries such as Benin, Lesotho, and Nigeria have national laws and policies intended to protect the right to education of pregnant teens. However, in other countries such as Tanzania, Sierra Leone, and Equatorial Guinea, pregnant teens are outright expelled from school without any plan to cater for their education. Somalia, Ethiopia, and the Republic of Congo have no laws or policies to regulate the education of pregnant teens (Maharaj, 2022). On the African continent, South Africa is one of the exceptional countries that enacted a law against discriminating against pregnant girls and teen mothers from accessing education, referred to as the South African Schools Act (SASA) of 1996. Therefore, in South Africa, it is a constitutional right for all children under the age of 18 years, including pregnant or breastfeeding to be admitted to schools. However, even in South Africa, the law to readmit pregnant girls still faces resistance from several stakeholders, including school administrators. In a study carried out in Kwazulu province (South Africa), Mpanza, & Nzima (2010) reported that several teachers were not agreeable to the policy because of several reasons including; (i) the policy turns schools into maternity centers; (ii) teachers do not feel that they are dealing with young innocent children anymore and; (iii) lack of training to meet the health needs of pregnant learners (Mohlabi, et. al, 2010). Consequently, some schools have continued to turn a blind eye to the law (Majavu, 2009; Majangaza, 2011). Indeed, Ramulumo, & Pitsoe (2013) reported that in one school in South Africa, school administrators turned pregnant girls away from school and instructed them never to come back.

Uganda is one of the countries in East Africa that registers high rates of premarital pregnancy and births. According to statistics, by 2016, one in 4 teenage girls was pregnant or had a child (Nakisanze, 2020). Plan International (2021) reported that in some countries, including Uganda, inclusive, girls were already affected by poor living conditions that exposed them to premarital sex and pregnancy even before COVID-19. Therefore, the COVID-19 pandemic triggered a predicament on top of a predicament. In Uganda, premarital pregnancy is the leading cause of school dropouts (Muhanguzi & Kyomuhendo, 2021; Anena et al, 2020; Byonanebye et al, 2020). The phenomenon of premarital pregnancies was escalated by the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, when schools were closed for a long time (Taremwa, 2020; Nakisanze, 2020). Young girls indulged in premarital sex due to several factors, including poverty, lack of sex education, domestic violence, and weak legal systems in Uganda. Arguably, with schools' closures, increased poverty and the breakdown of economic structures at community and family levels, the COVID-19 pandemic made teenage girls more vulnerable to premarital sex, pregnancy, and marriage. Yet, before COVID-19, Uganda's education system had no plans for school girls who became pregnant. It was the norm to indefinitely expel pregnant girls from school, and no one cared for their future. The girls who became pregnant before completing their education were considered too immoral to deserve education. Consequently, teenage pregnancy and birth caused many girls to drop out of school and marked the end of their education. Parents who wished for their children's education had to struggle to find out how to help their daughters after giving birth.

Towards the end of 2020, upon easing the lockdown and opening up schools following a staggered program, communities got concerned that several school girls were pregnant and others were breastfeeding. Therefore, such girls were about to lose the opportunity to pursue their education. A concerned education official stated, 'I don't know if

schools will have female students when they resume operations' (Taremwa, 2020). It was reported that by August 2020, the districts of Kitgum, Ngora, Kyegegwa, Kasese, and Lyantonde had registered a total of 2,372 pregnant girls, and 128 school-age girls had been married off (FAWE Uganda Chapter, 2021). Wandera (2020), between March and September 2020, West Nile districts registered the highest numbers of teenage pregnancies with over 7000 cases in Yumbe; 2186 in Zombo; 1011 in Pakwach, and 678 in Arua. A report by UNFPA (2021) stated that within the first five months of the COVID-19 lockdown, 4,062 premarital pregnancies had been recorded in 6 districts of northern Uganda alone, including Lamwo district, which had 1,000 cases, Pader with 920, Agago has 730, Nwoya with 642, Amuru with 620, and Gulu with 150 (Wandera, 2020). The figures above were the only officially reported ones, probably, many others were not reported. It was against this background that the ministry hastened to enact a policy to ensure that girls are not excluded from education.

The pregnant girls' policy was passed and came into force in 2020, and it enforces the readmission of pregnant girls as well as breastfeeding teenagers to complete their education. The Ministry of Education argued that pregnant teenagers are still children and are protected by both national, regional, and international human rights instruments, particularly children's rights and freedoms from discrimination and a right to education (Ministry of Education, 2020). However, the policy was received with ambivalence from different stakeholders, including parents, teachers, and school administrators. The policy was designed to change the negative attitudes of the community towards pregnant learners to enable them to pursue their educational goals irrespective of premarital pregnancies (Bukonya & Ayikoru, 2022; Vervoort, 2024). Arguably, the study indicates that the policy contradicts the norm of dismissing pregnant girls from school in Uganda. It is a belief that premarital pregnancy is a sign of indiscipline, sexual immorality, and vices, including lack of self-control

and self-respect on the part of the girl. Communities believe that once a girl becomes pregnant, even if she is taken back to school, she will get pregnant again (Vervoort, 2024). Therefore, readmitting a pregnant girl is a waste of money and time. The study reveals that Religious Education expressed a moral dilemma of teaching ordinary classes together with pregnant and breastfeeding teenagers. RE teachers consider the policy as a disarrangement of school settings- the policy promotes sexual immorality.

METHODOLOGY

To understand RE teachers' perceptions and methods towards the policy to retain pregnant girls in school, the study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design. The study used qualitative methods, namely individual interviews and focus group discussions, to get in-depth information about how teachers perceive and feel about teaching pregnant girls in schools. The in-depth interviews and focus groups enabled the researcher to understand that teachers are facing the dilemma of compromising their religious beliefs and moral values to implement the policy. The study employed a convenience sampling technique and purposively focused on teachers in schools that were selected to participate in the monitoring of Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) implementation. The study purposely targeted CRE teachers from the schools that were part of the monitoring, and all teachers found in each of those schools participated in the inquiry. In all, 23 teachers from 13 schools (5 schools from Kampala, 2 schools from Luweero District, 4 from Jinja and 2 schools from Gulu District) were selected to participate in the study. Each school has about 2-3 CRE teachers. The primary data collection methods were individual interviews and focus group discussions using open-ended questions that captured a wide range of perceptions and interpretations of the RE CBC content. Teachers who participated in the study were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Participants were

further assured that all ethical considerations would be observed in research, data collection, data analysis, and report writing.

FINDINGS

The findings are presented thematically with verbatim quotes from participants. RE teachers find the policy challenging to their profession as teachers of religious doctrines and practices, which contradicts their moral beliefs and convictions, devalues the RE content and makes them lose credibility among learners.

The Peculiarity of Religious Education Teachers

In Uganda's education system, RE is considered a values subject with the goal of inculcating socially and culturally acceptable moral values and attitudes among learners. As Manea (2014) observed, the central idea and philosophy of Religious Education are to teach religious literacy, provide guidance and direction and develop religious attitudes through cognitive, affective, and behavioural dimensions based on the religious ideologies of right and wrong. Consequently, RE contains specific content that teaches against the immorality of premarital sex, and teachers are in a dilemma on how to handle such content when there are pregnant girls in class. Some of the issues discussed include: (i) the causes of premarital sex; (ii) the detriments of premarital sex and early pregnancies; (iii) the Christian teaching against premarital sex; (iv) children born out of wedlock, among others. Teachers are always emphatic on premarital sex as a socially and culturally immoral issue -it is evil, a sin, and an abomination in the Ugandan context. The subject of RE is based on both Christian and Islamic teachings.

Religious Teachings about Premarital Sex/Fornication and Illegitimate Children

Both Islam and Christianity are the mainstream religious faiths that constitute the RE curriculum and syllabus.

Islam

Islam's teachings are assertive on issues of premarital sex, premarital pregnancy and children born out of wedlock. Men and women who commit premarital sex must be punished, according to the holy Quran 4:15 & 16 and according to the Sharia law, children born out of wedlock are referred to as illegitimate, do not deserve the care of their biological father, have no social value and are stripped from absolutely family connection.

Christianity

Just like Islam, Christianity teaches against premarital sex. Sex is a sacred act preserved for a man and a woman whose reunion is blessed by God through a priest. Premarital sex is a sin caused by evil and punished by God as stated in Heb 13:13-14, I Cor 6:16, Ex 16-17, among others. In the Christian teaching, "No one born out of wedlock or any descendant of such a person, even in the tenth generation, may be included among the Lord's people", (Deut 23:2).

Therefore, RE teachers expressed distinctive challenges of how to articulate content aspects of religious morality and values in a class that has pregnant girls. Arguably, if premarital sex is immoral, then it is also immoral for a teacher to accommodate pregnant girls in class. It is a feeling of double standards on the part of the teachers. Arguably, teaching against vices such as premarital sex and sexual permissiveness and at the same time accommodating pregnant girls, is hypocrisy.

The Policy Makes RE Teachers Hypocritical

The policy portrays teachers as inconsistent and deceitful for teaching one thing and allowing the opposite.

'I will be teaching one thing and practising the opposite, it is like I will be contradicting myself and confusing the students. I will be a pastor or priest who preaches morality but acts immorally, pregnant girls are bad exemplars and make religion lose meaning', Mteacher A.

'In a subject that condemns premarital sex and emphasises abstinence, it is morally wrong to permit girls who are considered to indulge in immoral acts of premarital sex to mix up with others who control their sexual desires', Fteacher F.

Loss of Integrity

The policy makes the RE teacher lose respect among learners for teaching.

As a teacher of RE, I would lose integrity because I will not practice the religious teaching', Fteacher F.

'Learners cannot respect a teacher who teaches against moral values, the teacher may feel hopeless unless the content is changed. I can't have the courage and confidence to teach a class about the ills of premarital sex, yet the learners who engage in the vice are comfortable in my class, I will be a hypocrite', Mteacher T.

'Students may look at me as an unserious teacher. RE teachers are regarded as the custodians of religious moral values. When I teach that "premarital pregnancy is a sin", it means I am joking', Mteacher N.

'Supposing I am a pregnant teacher, teaching a class with pregnant girls, can you imagine how other learners could be thinking about the two of us, they put me at the level of those learners who are pregnant', Mteacher S.

Teachers were emotional as they expressed that the policy will discredit RE teachers, like the policy that discriminates against salaries. Teachers will not be respected at all by learners, and the subject of RE will lose meaning.

Impact on Learners' Faiths

RE teachers fear implementing the policy, they opined that RE content may confuse learners on the concepts of right and wrong.

Religion and religious teachings will lose meaning; learners will lose confidence in religion. The policy will change the mindset of learners against religion', Mteacher R.

'Accepting pregnant learners in school may cause learners to disrespect the religious (Christian/Islamic) teaching against premarital sex, pregnancy, and marriage, and it will make learners abandon religion', Fteacher Y.

The concerns about Religious Education content are critical in the implementation of the Pregnant Girls' School Policy. Contradictions and disruptions of the learning environment are pertinent. N-yelbi (2024) reported that there are teachers who are not comfortable with teaching pregnant learners because they do not feel that they are dealing with young, innocent children anymore. Teachers expressed uneasiness when teaching and dealing with pregnant learners.

The Moral Dilemma of the Pregnant Girls' School Policy

In African cultures and social settings, once a girl indulges in sexual relationships resulting in pregnancy, she ceases to be a child, irrespective of age. Pregnancy turns a teenage girl into an adult. Consequently, a teenage pregnant girl is not considered fit for normal class or schooling. Teachers expressed fears about the implementation of the policy to readmit pregnant girls.

'Schools will be perceived as facilitators of immorality. Based on teachers' ethics and code of conduct, I will already have a bias against such a learner, as being immoral. The policy will force me as a teacher to teach against my code of ethics, Mteacher P.

'After allowing pregnant girls, the next thing will be to allow homosexuals and other LGBT activities in school, next will be drugs and the list will go on and on, we cannot tolerate one evil and deny the rest, they are all evils in equal measures', Fteacher W.

'... I am a Christian, and in my church, we teach young girls to remain virgins until the wedding day. Fornication is a sin, premarital sex is a sin, and in my conscious, teaching pregnant girls is against my conscience', Mteacher B.

'we okaying a generation will live a life of lack of control of sexual desires', Fteacher F.

'Culturally, premarital pregnancy is an abomination, and special taboos are observed, and some practices have to be performed to cleanse a girl who engages in premarital sex. Teaching pregnant girls sets a bad precedent in schools, it directly promotes sexual immorality and permissiveness, the values of sex will lose meaning and purpose', Fteacher D.

'Teaching pregnant girls increases the rate at which morals are disintegrating', Fteacher H.

'Our messages about the values of chastity, virginity, abstinence, controlling sexual desires and emotions, teaching such values and virtues with the presence of pregnant girls may disturb my conscious', Mteacher R.

The policy contravenes Christian and cultural values. These are moral concerns raised by the teenage pregnancy school policy, especially in the African context, where premarital sex is an abomination. For instance, in a study about premarital sex and pregnancy in South Africa, Ramde et.al. (2024) reported that teenage pregnancy is considered immoral, an abomination, and a disgrace. In Uganda, schools are expected to be places where learners acquire discipline, moral values and acceptable social behaviours. Parents entrust their children to teachers to instil discipline. Parents choose to take their children to a school which manifests itself as God-fearing, and they want their children to study in religious environments.

Seeds of Sexual Immorality in Ugandan Schools

The issue of immorality is the greatest fear of the school's pregnancy policy. There is a strong conviction that the policy turns schools into centres of immorality. Participants expressed that the policy has the potential to promote sexual immorality and permissiveness. The policy will cause a paradigm shift, turning schools from institutions of moral development. The policy makes schools an epitome of indiscipline and sexual immorality.

'It is a bad policy that will create a bad image for students and communities. What can schools teach without morals? If a teacher says, premarital sex is bad, how can learners be convinced when it is the same teacher who is teaching pregnant girls in the class? Before the policy, girls would be scared of becoming pregnant, Fteacher T.

'The policy deviates from the Christian teaching against sexual permissiveness and sexual immorality. Instead of readmitting pregnant girls, religious leaders should put more effort into instilling moral values and virtues to restrain girls from indulging in sexual activities, Mteacher S.

'The policy okays premarital sex and early pregnancy, it means defilement and rape are not criminal cases, Fteacher A.

'The policy leaves no incentive for sexual morality among young people, it makes it clear that there is no need to control sexual desires. School-going girls will not seek family planning, pregnant girls should not be allowed in school', Fteacher K.

Teachers also expressed that secondary school children are young and innocent. As Ramde et al. (2024) argued, schools are projected as places of sexual innocence, and the presence of pregnant girls sexualises schools, robs school children of sexual ignorance and makes sexual activities visible and

tolerable in educational institutions. A teacher explained that,

'In adult school centres, it is clear that we teach all sorts of people. But in primary and secondary schools, we presume learners are young and innocent. Even during times of crisis, we don't want innocent children to be hurt, Fteacher R.

'In our African cultures, one thing that rips people of their innocence is engaging in sexual activities. The biblical story of Adam and Eve explains that Adam and Eve lost their innocence after eating the forbidden fruit. We treat school girls with much respect because we suppose they are sexually pure', Fteacher Y.

To emphasise the biblical teaching about sex and sexuality, the Minister of Education introduced the "True Love Waits" campaign in secondary schools to persuade and promote sexual abstinence among school-going youth. The minister stated that 'sexual purity is the main sustainable measure for allowing girls to stay in school and complete their education' (Taremw, 2020). The Minister, Janet Kataha Museveni, who is also the First Lady, has several times called upon young girls to preserve their virginity. Addressing secondary school students at the end of a 2-day Life Skills summit, Janet Museveni stated that engaging in sexual immorality leads to the risk of contracting Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs) such as HIV/AIDS and early pregnancies. A girl who preserves her virginity holds more respect than girls who become pregnant before completing school (Gahene, 2019). Generally, virginity is still valuable in the Ugandan context, and other programs to promote it include the Glory of Virginity Movement (GLOVIMO), which is spearheaded by the National Fellowship of Born Again Churches (NFBAC) and the Abstinence campaigns at institutions of higher learning in Uganda.

Mission-founded Schools

Most schools in Uganda are mission-founded, either Islamic or Christian-based. Such schools follow religious doctrines and integrate religious teachings into all school activities. For instance, they start classes with morning prayers and preaching God's word. In addition, they have religious places of worship constructed in school compounds, and all students are obliged to pray. In some Christian schools, students are made to recite the 10 biblical commands every morning at the assembly. Consequently, such schools cannot allow pregnant girls to attend school.

'My school is catholic founded, no pregnant girl can be allowed to study. It is morally wrong for pregnant girls to sit with other students, Mteacher A.

In Christian schools, the discipline that is followed is based on the Christian doctrine, where premarital sex is a sin, and girls who get pregnant before marriage are not allowed to minister or take part in church activities.

'Premarital sex and sex out of wedlock are grave sins in the Christian perspective, even single teachers are given conditions to marry in order to retain their jobs. It is a contradiction to allow the registration of pregnant students. I am sure the policy cannot be implemented in Muslim- founded schools either, for them, once a girl shows interest in marriage, she must be married off', Fteacher B.

'It is not proper to normalise premarital sex/pregnancy. It paints a bad picture and sets a terrible precedent. IT IS NOT GOOD. Stay home, and have your child', Mteacher H.

To successfully implement the policy, the Ministry of Education needed to consult all stakeholders in the education sector to find other acceptable ways in which pregnant and breastfeeding mothers could be helped. Implementation of the policy may fail because the government designs policies but does

not put them into practice. The most important strategy is to support young girls in all ways to prevent early pregnancies because damage control is costly and has more complications.

'The policy is not sustainable because the Government doesn't follow up to see if these learners have gone back to school. For example, in my school, two pregnant girls failed to turn up for the UNEB Examinations of 2020, yet the school had allowed them. These girls sometimes attended school, but in the end, didn't turn up for exams. No follow-up was made', Fteacher D.

For effective implementation of such a sensitive policy, there is a need for monitoring to ensure that all stakeholders, especially parents, head teachers and teachers. Pregnant girls should be followed from home to see whether they are going to school or not. Parents and caretakers should also be encouraged to provide pregnant girls with the necessary materials to attend school.

'Uganda is reluctant, policies remain on paper, the Government cannot follow up on pregnant girls; the government will just sing about the policy, but nothing much will be done', Mteacher H.

'... I think the policy is not sustainable because of the nature of schools. For example, some schools do not allow such learners to stay in school. Policies are made but sometimes not implemented', Fteacher N.

Besides, the policy has implications, implementation requires motivation because teachers now have more work. Looking after expectant mothers adds another responsibility on the part of teachers.

'... the Government should increase teachers' salaries because of the added responsibilities. We now have more responsibilities. Catering for ordinary students and pregnant girls both in class and outside class', Mteacher D.

Teachers are confronted with new challenges that require new skills, counselling pregnant students, and ensuring good health. In a study, it was observed that schooling pregnant teens needed counselling and guidance from female teachers to provide support against discouragement and insensitive remarks from fellow students and other members of staff (Mulenga & Mukaba, 2018). Pregnant girls confided more in female teachers who helped them to cope with the pregnancy than male teachers who would take advantage and abuse them instead (Mulenga & Mukaba, 2018). Therefore, teachers need more time at school to counsel pregnant girls.

The Policy Cannot Help Girls Attain High Levels of Education.

Some teachers argued that the policy is not sustainable and that it doesn't guarantee that girls will be able to complete their education. Teachers contended that girls who get pregnant are naturally destined to drop out and fail in education.

Pregnancy is an escape from the hustle of having to go to school. A girl who gets pregnant in school will get pregnant again even if she is given another chance- once such a character is readmitted, she will not settle until she gets pregnant again', Fteacher A.

The policy cannot yield results if there is no systematic way of ensuring that teenagers are made to understand the disadvantages of engaging in sexual activities and the importance of education. Chances are high that girls are likely to get back into sexual activities because they are now sexually active. The girls who get pregnant and drop out of school are poor academically; even without pregnancy, they would not achieve educationally, Mteacher F.

These arguments concur with N-yelbi (2024), who argued that teenage girls who became pregnant while at school performed poorly in class. Such girls become pregnant because they are failures at school.

In this case, 'poor academic performance may predispose an adolescent to a youthful pregnancy' (Morgan et al., 2023). In the same vein, Ramde et al. (2024) stated that teenage girls who become pregnant are much more likely to drop out of school than if they had not become pregnant. Consequently, failure to achieve educationally is not entirely caused by teenage pregnancy. In this case, the teenage pregnancy policy cannot help such girls to complete their education.

Other Concerns Facing Implementation of the Pregnant Policy

Generally, teachers in the Ugandan context face multiple challenges that do not favour the pregnant girls' policy.

(i) Restriction on freedom of expression

Teachers feel that the policy threatens freedom of speech during lessons and in the general school context. Any talk about teenage pregnancy or pregnancy in general would be misinterpreted as annoying or discriminatory against pregnant learners. The policy warns school communities not to talk ill of the pregnant girls, as it would be regarded as discriminatory.

'There cannot be a conducive learning environment in a class of ordinary girls, boys, and pregnant girls. Learners and teachers will not freely exchange ideas. The presence of pregnant girls can restrict classroom discussions and freedoms of expression, especially about some topics which may be pertinent to achieving educational goals', Fteacher P.

Talks or any teaching about the topic of pregnancy may cause emotional backlash to pregnant women. This concerns the emotional challenges involved in implementing the policy.

(ii) The policy threatens the emotional safety of all students.

Teachers expressed concern that learners' emotional safety is not guaranteed in the implementation of the PGSP. The emotional safety of learners means that learners have rights and freedoms to express their emotions in class and school, and feel secure to confidently articulate their views. Emotional safety for learners is pertinent in a teaching and learning environment for educational attainment. Teachers explained that pregnant students feel humiliated in the company of boys and girls who are not pregnant. Based on Boateng et al's (2023) findings, pregnant school girls become overwhelmed by the harsh reality they face due to the widespread negative attitudes held by the community.

Pregnant learners feel ashamed and embarrassed, especially when the class is mixed with boys. The feeling that everyone knows they had sexual interactions makes the pregnant girls very uncomfortable. You know our girls want to portray themselves as innocent. The expression resonates with Boateng et al. (2023) explained that pregnant teenagers suffer emotional confusion as they try to deal with an unexpected pregnancy and a change in the way they relate to people who matter in their lives.

'Pregnant learners need privacy because of the body changes [the extension of the belly]. With the shapes of pregnancy, girls cannot feel comfortable among ordinary students', Fteacher W.

Other learners see pregnant learners as mothers (old women), mature people who are unfit to sit in class. They tease the pregnant learners by calling them 'mothers', a title that pregnant teenagers hate because mothers do not look trendy', Fteacher S.

At school, no student wants to associate with the pregnant girl because she is an immoral girl who failed to control herself. She is considered

an outcast because school girls are not expected to become pregnant students, Mteacher N.

(iii) Trauma among pregnant students

Teaching aspects of RE that expound premarital sex as immoral may traumatise pregnant learners.

'Teaching about religious ethics and morals, such as premarital sex and early pregnancy, may cause trauma and stigma to pregnant girls, Fteacher R.

I will not be comfortable teaching that sex outside marriage is immoral, every time I talk about premarital sex, the whole class will turn and look at the pregnant girls, with many unasked questions without answers', Fteacher H.

'Some teachers may just focus on looking at the girl, especially when the stomach gets very big and protrudes; they look funny in class', Mteacher D.

Schools may need to employ more specialised counsellors to counsel both the pregnant and ordinary learners, and this is an added cost.

(iv) Lack of clarity in the policy

RE teachers expressed concerns that the policy is not clear and is silent on several issues. In a study about the PGSP in South Africa, Ramulumo, & Pitsoe (2013) reported that while the law was passed, the law does not guide how schools should deal with pregnant learners.

- **The relationship between the school, the pregnant student, the man, and his kin;** the policy does not explain the way the school should relate to the father of the unborn baby and whether he is allowed to visit the school.
- **Specialised care and monitoring for pregnant teens;** pregnant school girls need easily accessible health care at all stages, even after childbirth. Mohlabi et al. (2010) noted, teachers' concerns over the health care for pregnant school girls were also reported in

South Africa. The Ugandan policy fails to state the guidelines for providing pregnant school teenagers with school health care. The health care of pregnant girls was also raised by the Clerics in Uganda. In a press conference. Religious leaders noted that teenage pregnancy retards the development, growth, future, and health of young girls. Further, the Chair of the clerics, Rev. Kazimba Mugalu, noted that "... schools are not equipped to take care of health challenges that may emerge in the first three months of the pregnancy and yet we have this commitment to reduce maternal mortality," (The East African, 2022).

- **School, class control, and management:** Teachers highlighted the complexity of managing classes with pregnant girls. Ramde et al. (2024) argued that classrooms with pregnant girls may not be easy to manage, and teachers find it complicated to allow expectant girls in their schools. Teachers identified the following challenges concerning classroom management and control: (i) classroom power dynamics; (ii) poor concentration of learners; (iii) divided attention on the side of teachers; (iv) lack of skills to handle pregnant learners in classes. Researchers such as Mpanza, & Nzima (2010) and Ramde et al. (2024) reported that some teachers perceive pregnant learners to be a disturbance to the learning and teaching environment. Some teachers may mistreat them. Teachers condemn pregnant learners; some are intolerant and may slander pregnant students openly (Naidoo, et.al, 2021). In the current study, the researcher interviewed some teachers who were currently teaching pregnant girls. Teachers stated that it is hard to punish pregnant girls when they act out of step.
- **Divided attention on the side of other learners:** Teachers also expressed that ordinary learners may get excited about having pregnant girls in class. The features of pregnancy include nervousness and nausea,

sometimes pregnancy causes ptyalism, unexplained anger, bitterness, grumpiness and gloomy faces. The rest of the class may have to bear with such unpleasant conditions and may hate attending lessons with pregnant students.

- **Sustainability of the pregnant girls' school policy:** Teachers were concerned about the sustainability of the policy. As Saruchera et al. (2024) argued, many times laws and policies to readmit pregnant girls are not successful because they do not provide infant care at the school, and there are no grants or living stipends for the affected girls.

CONCLUSIONS

The study reveals that teachers experience moral and professional discomfort in enforcing the pregnant girls' policy. The policy diverts learners from religion and belief because religion repetitively teaches that premarital sex is against God's will. Readmitting pregnant girls is against the Religious Education content. Teachers perceive the policy as a way of drawing learners away from religious beliefs.

The policy conflicts with the teachers' religious beliefs and convictions, making them feel as though they are betraying their moral and religious conscience. The family faces opposition due to the challenge based on cultural values that stem from the traditional worldview. In some cultures, once a girl becomes pregnant, she is no longer considered a child and cannot benefit from laws that safeguard and protect children. Teachers are also concerned about the potential of the policy to encourage sexual immorality and permissiveness among school children. The policy will inevitably transform schools from institutions of moral values to centres of sexual immorality. The policy disrupts the conducive school and classroom learning environment by infringing upon the freedom of expression of ordinary students and teachers. Furthermore, schools and teachers are not

adequately equipped to care for pregnant students. Besides, literature and data indicate that pregnant girls cannot concentrate in class because of pregnancy-related stress, trauma and discomfort that they experience at school.

Recommendations

The study suggests that it would be appropriate for pregnant girls to take a leave of absence from school until they give birth, fully recover, and then be readmitted to school to continue their education. However, if this is not agreeable at all, other recommendations are;

- Creating awareness through sensitising stakeholders, including head teachers, teachers, schools, parents, and communities, should be aware of the policy, so as not to allow parents to marry off girls because of pregnancy.
- Support structures need to be created to help pregnant teens cope with reality. For example, workshops counselling in groups and at the individual level need to be carried out occasionally to enable the girls to overcome the trauma and stigma they may experience at school.
- Monitoring and making follow-ups to ensure that all people are fulfilling their responsibilities is important. For example, checking on parents to ensure that they are sending the girls to school and providing scholastic materials and any other needs, and ensuring that schools are implementing the policy appropriately and;

(iv) The government should fund programs and projects that are intended to create awareness and provide appropriate sex education to all school-going teenagers to prevent premarital pregnancies among young people.

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