



A pregnant teenager returns from fetching water recently. PHOTO/FILE

# ADRA-Uganda, religious leaders join hands to fight teenage pregnancies in Karamoja

Findings indicate that majority of the schools in Karamoja the numbers of girls dropping out of school drastically from primary four and by the time they reach primary seven is very high.

BY SIMON PETER EMWAMU

Adventist Development and Relief Agency-Uganda (ADRA) in partnership with Inter-Religious Council of



"Karamoja still lags behind in literacy levels, especially for the girl child due to high numbers of teenage pregnancies and early child marriages which force children out of school,"

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Mr George William Kiberu, the regional programmes manager for Karamoja ADRA-Uganda

Uganda (IRCU), not for profit entities have moved out to end teenage pregnancies in Karamoja.

Through faith-based approaches, by rolling out pastoral letters authored by various religious institutions addressing the social cultural problem which has forced girls in Karamoja to become young mothers, exposes them to various risks like poor maternal and child health, being isolated, attempting unsafe abortions, failure to continue with school, early marriages and poverty.

Getting pregnant at early age and early marriage means that majority of the victims are denied right to education.

Mr George William Kiberu, the regional programmes manager for Northern Karamoja ADRA-Uganda, says the social cultural problem of teenage pregnancies is rampant in Abim, Kotido, Kaabong, and Karenga.

"Through ADRA-Uganda engagement with IRCU since 2018, we reached a consensus that there is need to have pastoral letters from various religious denominations addressing the problem rolled out to communities with financial support from ADRA-Uganda," Mr Kiberu says

"Our findings indicate that majority of the schools in Karamoja, the numbers girls dropping out

of school from primary four and by the time they reach primary seven drastically and 75 per cent of them would have been married off or retained at home to look after their young siblings. We condemn this, it is not right," Mr Kiberu says.

He adds that religious institutions have structures on ground which can easily be used to disseminate, communicate and share information about teenage pregnancies and its related effects which are barring the Karimajong young girls from enjoying their rights.

Mr Kiberu says through these structures, many religious leaders have been prompted to communicate messages aimed at controlling this bad while conducting normal prayer sessions on Sundays, Fridays and Saturday.

He acknowledges that Karamoja still lags behind in literacy levels, especially for the girl child due to high numbers of teenage pregnancies and early child marriages which force children out of school.

"We have robust work relations with religious leaders from all denominations, community elders and the local leaders who spread the advocacy messages against teenage pregnancies and early marriages," Mr Kiberu says.

He says more than 60 community based organisations, local NGOs like Karamoja Development Forum (KDF), Karamoja Integrated Development programme (KIDEP), helped them reach out to many parents during the lockdown and as result of intensive gender based violence (GBV) and teenage pregnancies cases surged.

Mr Kiberu says they have distributed letters with information on ending teenage pregnancies, Gender Based Violence (GBV), HIV/Aids, family planning and maternal mortality in Karamoja using religious leaders because they command respect from their followers, and it will be easy to have the messages contained, incorporated into the daily sermons.



ADRA-Uganda staff listen to Pastor Samuel Kizito of Seventh Adventist while addressing the press at the launch of distributing pastoral letters with information decamapigning teenage pregnancies in Kotido District recently. PHOTO/SIMON PETER EMWAMU

Ms Balaba Diana Sande, advocacy and public relations officer for ADRA Uganda, says ADRA-Uganda and IRCU are looking at securing the future of children of Karamoja, majority of whom are victims of teenage pregnancies, early marriages, notwithstanding the boys who are relegated to herding cattle at the expense of being in school.

She acknowledges that these engagements are being made possible with support from ADRA-Denmark funded by DANIDA.

Ms Sande adds that the advocacy to end teenage pregnancies in Karamoja is not only being spearheaded by ADRA-Uganda, but other key actors like Unicef and Save the Children Uganda and these are ought to be appreciated for the tremendous advo-



A newly married off teenager washes utensils in her new home in Rupa Sub county, Moroto District. PHOTO/SIMON PETER EMWAMU

cacy and safeguards they have put in place to keep children in school.

Fr Samuel Lotuk, the administrator of the Good Shepherd Cathedral, Kotido Catholic Diocese, says there is need to reflect on the culture and setup of society in order to find long lasting solutions for teenage pregnancies.

He says cultural mentalities and practices where a girl child is attached to a specific family for marriage still exists.

"When the girl child is deemed mature, according to the cultural standards here, they are married off forcefully. Such practices need to be fought and abolished," he says.

He asserts that poverty levels have amplified the problem as parents yearn for money at the expense of their daughters.

"We appreciate, a number of NGOs are coming in to mitigate this social cultural problem," he adds.

Sheik Ismael Shaban, one of the Muslim leaders in Kotido Town, says they equally condemn the issue of teenage pregnancies and both the girl child and boys must be helped to stay in school.

"Like other religious institutions, we also follow government laws and condemn the vice of teenage pregnancies," Sheik Shaban adds.

Apostle Dr Joseph Serwadda, of the Born Again Faith in Uganda, in one of his letters, dubbed, "Keeping the faith: ending teenage pregnancy," says on a daily basis, they come face to face with the challenge of trying to guide and protect youth as they deal with sex and related issues.

"We acknowledge that our young people must learn to navigate peer pressure and other societal influences that often lead to early sexual activities and result in early pregnancy and parenthood, but this must stop and youth should be encouraged to live responsible lives," Pastor Serwadda says.

He says today they have teenage mothers, who often live in a poverty stricken household, who contribute to having babies they are incapable of raising responsibly.

"This cycle of hardship and poverty is perpetuated because a large percentage of daughters of teenage mothers end up becoming teenage mothers themselves," he says.

Pastor Samuel Kizito, of Seventh Adventist Church, says most social cultural problems in the different societal settings across Uganda continue to impact negatively on child mothers, and the resultant children they make.

According to the United Nations Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA), as per the 2016 statistics, puts teenage pregnancies in Karamoja at 24 per cent.

The major drivers being poverty, early and forced marriages with girls living in rural areas being more vulnerable.

# Karamoja leaders committed to end gender based violence



A couple engaged in a fight. Violence against women and girls has continued to manifest despite interventions. PHOTO/FILE

BY SIMON PETER EMWAMU

Gender based violence (GBV) is defined as violence that is directed against a person based on his or her sex. This can take form of physical assault, mental, sexual harm or deprivation of someone's liberty.

Looking at United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) findings, up to 53 per cent of women in Karamoja have experienced physical and sexual violence in Karamoja since the age of 15.

Ms Balaba Diana Sande ADRA-Uganda, advocacy/public relations officer, says it is against this background that ADRA-Uganda and other stakeholders working in Karamoja have rolled out mechanisms, one among such being the use of pastoral letters from religious leaders to end GBV.

Ms Sande says the vice has dehumanised women in Karamoja with the driving factors being the cultural beliefs which do not give women a right for redress at the clan level.

"Mothers here do the donkey work, but they are less appreciated while men who are beneficiaries of their toil do merrymaking. We need to address this culture for the dignity of mothers," Ms Sande says, adding that religious leaders under their umbrella, the Inter Religious Council of Uganda (IRCU) make community outreaches or blend their daily sermons with messages preaching against gender based violence.

Ms Regina Imuret, the vice chairperson LC5 for Karenga District Local Government, confirms that many women in Karamoja some of them were not born with disabilities, but three out of every possible 10 women with disabil-

ities many were as result of domestic violence inflicted against the women by their spouses.

"Elders know about all this violence inflicted on mothers, but they are shy to act because culture here does not value the rights of women. They are bound to submit to all situations," Ms Imuret says.

She adds that as a political leader she is happy that elders have also been incorporated in the fight by ADRA Uganda in partnership with IRCU to end GBV in the greater Northern Karamoja region.

"Many women have been greatly deformed, others have permanent scars on their bodies. But we are saying, together, we can end this," she says.

Mr Peter Logiro the Resident District Commissioner (RDC), Kotido District, believes with the pacification of Karamoja in general, some of these social cultural problems will slowly be phased out.

"In the past we never had no enforcement from government to end

such irresponsible practices, but as we talk we have presence of Police in every sub-county in Karamoja. These organs will help check on the excessive use of force and battering of women," Mr Logiro says.

To Logiro, magisterial courts have been built, so with Police and courts of law in place the perpetrators of domestic violence will be dealt with accordingly.

Civilisation is also taking root in Karamoja. The culture of beating women and exploiting them is slowly reducing and this can be achieved through stakeholder concerted effort.

Fr Samuel Lotuk, of Kotido Catholic Diocese, says culture here has it that, it is women who toil to fend for the family, while men take priority in herding and merrymaking.

He acknowledges this has had negative impact on the female sex, who by design are not appreciated for the work they do, do not own property, but instead are treated as man's property.

"As church we are preaching against this, calling for equality before all mankind irrespective of one's gender," he adds.

A statement by the church of Uganda contained in its pastoral letters on ending GBV, quoted Galatians 3:26-28, "We are all one before Christ,"

The church also asked its followers to abandon commonly held religious and cultural beliefs which may be used to justify or cover up gender based violence.

53%

Women. From Karamoja have experienced physical and sexual violence in Karamoja since the age of 15 according to the United Nations Population Fund findings. This has mainly been attributed to cultural beliefs in Karamoja which do not give opportunity to women to seek redress.

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