

HIV/AIDS WAS UNHEARD OF IN KARAMOJA BUT IT IS INCREASING BECAUSE OF DEFILEMENT – VIOLA LOTTAKORI

By Paul Watala
and Hope Mafaranga

Most girls who enrol in schools do not complete Primary Seven.

"In 2011, when I enrolled for Primary One, we were 271 but in Primary Seven, we are only 61 girls. Where are the 210 girls? These girls could have been forced into marriage because in Karamoja girls are looked at as a source of income," Caroline Lochoro said.

Lochoro, a Primary Seven pupil at Komukuny Girls' in Kaabong district, said attempts by some girls to resist the marital wishes of their parents are often met with dire consequences such as beatings. Some girls are even chased away from home.

Lochoro referred to parents who force their children into early marriage as a cancer that is eating up the region.

Poetry and music

Lochoro, together with other children from different schools, aired out their message through poems and songs to hundreds of people, including the state minister for primary education, Rosemary Seninde, at Pope Paul II Memorial Secondary School in Kaabong district on Thursday.

On the same day, the *Karamoja Children Education Magazine* was also launched.

The magazine containing issues that affect education was produced by Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) with support from the European Union, World Food Programme and DANIDA.

The children narrated that Karamoja sub-region has a high number of girls dropping out of school because of greedy parents who see them as a source of wealth.

"Parents and older men that defile and force girls into early marriages; you are eating us like cancer. Our bodies should not be abused to solve domestic problems or help parents to get cows from brideprice," she said.

Viola Loitakori from Kaabong Police Primary School asked the Government to protect them from men that lure young girls with small gifts and end up defiling them.

"In the past, HIV/AIDS was unheard of in Karamoja, but it is increasing because of these unkind men who defile and infect us with HIV at a tender age," she said.

Hard labour

Loitakori added that parents and guardians subject girls to heavy work at home, denying them access to education.

She explained that child negligence is also high in Karamoja, thus affecting the growth and education of children.

Loitakori said rich men still flock to Karamoja to look for young girls to employ as househelps to look after their

Kaabong parents forcing girls into early marriage



Pupils of Nakoreto Primary School in Rengen sub-county, Kotido district lining up for lunch. Photos by Paul Watala



Pupils of Kamacharikol Primary School in Kaabong. Some schools air out messages of early marriage and defilement through music, dance and drama



Matembe, once suggested that men who defile young girls should be castrated. I think I should support her by tabling the Bill before Parliament," Seninde said.

Seninde added that laws are too weak and need to be tightened to give defilement culprits heavier punishments.

"Our laws are so weak that defilers are not scared. So the only way to scare these bad men is to castrate them," she added.

Seninde appealed to parents to stop thinking only of cows, but encourage and support their children while in school.

She added that local leaders should sensitise communities on the benefits of educating girls.

Seninde said it is good to embrace culture, but also appealed to parents to shun the bad practice of abusing the rights of children and women, which in turn affect development.

Seninde hailed ADRA for supporting girls and spearheading development in Karamoja sub-region, adding that many innocent souls have been touched and saved because of ADRA's interventions.

"Our defilement laws are so weak that defilers are not scared." Seninde

Suicide cases

Katerega added of late, there have been cases of young girls committing suicide to escape being forced into marriage."

In 2015, five girls committed suicide in Kaabong, including a 15-year-old, who hanged herself in Kalapata sub-county. Four others committed suicide in Kapedo sub-county. These girls were being forced to marry against their wish," Katerega said.

In her remarks, Seninde warned men against defilement, saying she will be prompted to table a motion in Parliament to have all the culprits castrated.

During the function, Seninde and other stakeholders also launched a campaign to end the school dropout rate, defilement and early marriages in Karamoja.

"Former ethics minister Miria

WHAT OTHERS SAY



Josephine Akello
We have been sensitising parents on the importance of educating the girls. When you educate a girl, you educate the nation.



Charles Aber
Parents had excuses that they do not have money. But with the coming of SACCOS, we can borrow to pay fees and keep children in school.



Viola Achele
Some parents would come and abduct children from school. So as a mother who cares about education, I lobbied to have the school fenced such that these acts do not happen again.



Scovia Akidi
We opted to volunteer to help children go to school after attending the *baraza* meetings conducted by ADRA and we realised that no one else will solve our problems but us.

babies. Robert Omara from Gulonger Primary School in Abim district said children in Karamoja are still denied food, beaten and forced to do heavy work.

Omar appealed to the Government to increase the punishment for defilers to life imprisonment, saying they are the reason HIV is escalating in the region.

"Why should defilers walk freely because they have negotiated with the girls' parents? The Police should stop interfering in defilement cases," Omara said.

Solomon Katerega, ADRA's programme director (human resource) attributed the increased cases of defilement and child neglect in Karamoja sub-region to the bad attitude

of parents towards education in addition to heavy drinking. He said as ADRA, they will continue to support the girls in Karamoja and appealed to parents not to run away from their responsibilities.

"Our work is to facilitate the advocacy and give a hand to disadvantaged children that are denied education," Katerega said.

In 2015, five girls committed suicide in Kaabong, including a 15-year-old, who hanged herself in Kalapata sub-county. Another four committed suicide in Kapedo sub-county.

COMMITTING SUICIDE