

“I wanted to study with all my heart”

Unpacking Reasons for Girls' School Drop-out in West Nile, Uganda

Introduction

Ensuring that all young people receive a quality education is one of the world's great development challenges. While tremendous progress has been made in closing the gap between boys and girls in education at the primary level, girls still lag behind boys in secondary school enrollment and completion in several regions, especially in sub-Saharan Africa. Decades of evidence have shown that education at the secondary level is critical for girls' empowerment. Secondary education is also an engine of economic, social and political development.

In Uganda, the gender gap in primary school enrollment has completely closed; however, for every 10 boys enrolled in secondary school, there are only 8 girls (The World Bank, 2013). In the West Nile sub-region, where decades of past conflict and displacement have stunted economic and infrastructural development, the situation is even more dire: for every 10 boys enrolled in secondary school, there are only 5 girls (Twinomujuni, 2011). While nearly 40 percent of boys in the sub-region complete secondary education or higher, fewer than 11 percent of girls can claim the same (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2012).

In order to develop effective interventions to increase girls' secondary school attainment, it is important to understand why girls drop out of school. The beginning of secondary school usually coincides with the onset of adolescence, a time when girls become more vulnerable to sexual coercion, violence, pregnancy and forced marriage. Pregnancy, in particular, is often blamed as a cause of school drop-out. While we know that sexual debut, pregnancy and drop-out often occur very close in time, so far the global evidence base has not conclusively established to what extent pregnancy alone causes drop-out. The International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) and our partners wanted to take a closer look at the causes of dropout, and in particular to test the hypothesis that both pregnancy and drop-out are driven by pervasive gender-inequitable attitudes, beliefs and practices instilled in girls by their families, communities and classrooms.

From 2013 to 2014 ICRW and the Forum for African Women Educationalists Uganda (FAWEU) partnered to answer several questions about girls' education in two districts in the West Nile sub-region of Northwestern Uganda:

- What percentage of adolescent girls (14-18) have dropped out of school?
- How much of girls' drop-out could be explained by pregnancy?
- To what extent are *gendered social norms* and the effects of *conflict* influencing pregnancy and drop-out?

The purpose of answering these questions is to develop more effective programs and policies to keep girls in school, and to help girls who have dropped out of school to return and complete their educations.



About the Study Area

Arua and Adjumani are two districts located within the West Nile sub-region of Northern Uganda, bordered by South Sudan to the north and the Democratic Republic of Congo to the West. Arua is the larger of the two districts and includes one of the larger towns in Uganda, while Adjumani is a predominately rural district. Poverty in Uganda is concentrated in the arid and sparsely-populated Northern Region—the center of much of the nation's 22 years of conflict. The West Nile sub-region was affected by many of the rebel uprisings and related violence beginning in the early 1980s, and has resulted in a large number of internally displaced persons (an estimated 41,000 in Adjumani alone) (Uganda Population Secretariat, 2008). In addition, the region hosts a large international refugee population, namely from neighboring South Sudan and the DRC.

Methodology

ICRW, FAWEU, Wilsken Agencies and the Applied Research Bureau (ARB) collaborated to implement this research study. The research team collected data in July, 2013, and from December 2013 to April 2014. Table 1 provides an overview of research methods.

TABLE 1 : Research Method and Study Groups

Tools	Arua	Adjumani	Total
Household survey of girls ages 14-18	405	400	805
In-depth interviews with girls (14-18), mothers and fathers (of girls 12-18)	20	20	40
Focus Group Discussions with community members (18-24; 40-55), male and female	8	8	16

Findings

The situation facing girls in West Nile

The Adjumani and Arua districts are largely rural and poor. Over 90% of the surveyed girls' homes were constructed of thatched roof and 89% had a mud floor; in addition most reported owning few material assets. Only 22% of girls reported that their mothers had achieved an education higher than primary level.

Over a quarter of the girls interviewed were orphans, having lost at least one parent. Fewer than half of the girls in the survey reported having lived in households with both parents. **Conflict had affected 34% of households from Adjumani**, compared to only 5% of households from Arua.

Girls' educational status

Overall, nearly 31% of the study participants (37% of girls in Arua and 24% in Adjumani) **ages 14-18 were no longer in school.**

TABLE 2 : Girls' Schooling Experience and Environment

	Arua	Adjumani
Percent who have dropped out of school	37	24
Average age at start of school	7.9	8.6
Median completed grade of school	P6	P6
Percent did NOT feel safe at school at age 12	28	18
Percent could access sanitary materials if needed in most recent school term	46	29

Girls start school late and drop out early. The average age of starting schooling was 8.25. The highest reported grade achieved, on average, among respondents was Primary 6. Only 15.7% of respondents had completed any secondary schooling. Among those who had dropped out of school, the average age of drop-out was 14.9 years. **Eighty-one percent of girls who had dropped out expressed an interest in returning to school if given the opportunity.**

"I wish my [mother and brother] were alive to pay for my school fees. I would have gone to school and studied and fulfilled my future dreams.... I have dropped out of school. So now I know that I will get married, give birth to children whom I cannot send to school because I will be poor. This is not what I wanted."

-Girl out of school, age 14, Adjumani

Nearly one-fourth of respondents said that they did not feel physically safe at school. Additionally, fewer than half the girls said that they could access sanitary materials if needed.

Girls' Sexual and Reproductive Behavior and Relationship Status

By the age of 18, more than 1 in 5 girls had had sexual intercourse, and more than 1 out of every 10 girls has been pregnant. In total, 8.3% of respondents ages 14-18 report having at least one child (7.6% in Arua, 9% in Adjumani). Fewer than half said that they knew how to avoid a pregnancy. While marriage before 18 is illegal in Uganda, 9% of the respondents said that they had ever been married (11% in Adjumani, 7% in Arua).

TABLE 3: Sexual and Reproductive Health Knowledge and Behavior of Girls ages 14-18

	Arua and Adjumani
Report ever having had sexual intercourse	22%
Report ever having been pregnant	10%
Know how to avoid a pregnancy	45%
Know where to access family planning	39%

Main Reasons for School Drop-Out

The main reason given for school dropout was financial reasons, followed by pregnancy. Overall, 41% of girls who had dropped out of school described financial reasons (lack of funds, or no money for schooling), as the main reason for drop-out. Twelve percent of girls who had dropped out of school described pregnancy as the main reason. Pregnancy and marriage were more frequently cited as reasons for dropout in Adjumani than Arua.

TABLE 4: Main Reasons Given for Girls' School Drop-Out (n=248 girls ages 14-18)

	Arua	Adjumani
Financial Reasons (lack of funds, or lack of fees)	37%	48%
Parents Stopped Paying School Fees	13%	1%
Pregnancy	10%	15%
Marriage	1%	6%

Relationship between School Dropout and Pregnancy

To better understand these patterns, we analyzed how dropout and pregnancy correlated with other factors, such as background household characteristics, family and school environment influences on schooling, sexual and reproductive health behavior, and gender normative beliefs. Finally, we looked at which factors were most likely to lead to pregnancy-related dropout. The results are shown in Table 5.

Background Characteristics:

Household-level socio-economic and socio-demographic characteristics that were associated with both pregnancy and dropout included: poverty, parents' education level, and having been affected by conflict. In addition, the death of a parent or living with a single mother were both also associated with dropout.

"I had to stop schooling because... of my mother's condition. She cannot afford to pay for our school fees and instead she really needed our help at home so much. I went to school, but... they would chase me home for school fees and other school requirements. I did not even finish that term."
- Girl out of school, Age 18, Adjumani

Influences on Schooling: Poor self-rated school performance, irregular school attendance, self-reported assessment that domestic responsibilities interfered with schooling, and belief that parents were not supportive of the respondents' being in school were all associated with pregnancy in addition to school dropout.

Sexual and Reproductive Behavior and Characteristics: Because the relative timing of sex, romantic relationships and school dropout is not always clear, we report only events most likely to have preceded, and therefore influenced, dropout. An early age of onset of menstruation is associated with dropout. Reporting a higher number of romantic relationships increased the likelihood of dropout, pregnancy and dropout due to pregnancy.

Societal Gender Norms: Our findings support the hypothesis that gendered social norms and belief systems are contributing to girls' dropout as well as their pregnancy. The survey included a set of gender-inequitable statements, with which girls could agree or disagree. Girls who agreed with gender-inequitable statements were significantly

TABLE 5: Characteristics Associated with Dropout or Pregnancy in Arua and Adjumani Districts

	Associated with Dropout?	Associated with Pregnancy?	Associated with Dropout Due to Pregnancy?
Family Background Characteristics			
Lives in home with a thatched roof	Yes	Yes	No
Mother has less than primary education	Yes	Yes	No
At least one parent has died	Yes	No	No
Lives with single mother	Yes	No	No
Family was impacted by recent conflict	Yes~	Yes	Yes
School -Related Influences			
Respondent rated herself as a below average or poor student	Yes	Yes	No
Attended school only irregularly during last term enrolled	Yes	Yes	No
<i>Respondent responsible for paying own:</i>			
-School fees	Yes	No	No
-School supplies	Yes	No	No
Respondent reported that domestic chores limited their ability to go to school (at age 12)	Yes	Yes	No
Began school after the age of 9	Yes	No	No
Believed parent did not support the idea of respondent being in school	Yes	Yes	No
Sexual and Reproductive Behavior Characteristics			
Early onset of puberty (<13 years)	Yes	No	No
Reported having had multiple romantic relationships	^See note	^See note	^See note
Gender Norms	Yes	Yes	
<i>Respondent agreed with the following statements:</i>			
-Boys deserve more education than girls	Yes	Yes	No
-Girls must marry a boy they have sex with	Yes	Yes	No
-Women sometimes deserve to be beaten	Yes	Yes	No
Respondent agreed with multiple gender unequal statements***	Yes	Yes	Yes

Note: All reported relationships are based on bivariate logistic regression; light green shading indicates significant at $p < .05$; darker green significant at $p < .01$ unless otherwise indicated

~Only borderline significant ($p < .08$)

***Includes 5 statements total: the 3 stated above, "If a girl has stopped going to school, the best thing for her is marriage," and "A man should have the final say in all family matters."

^There was a strong association between the number of reported romantic relationships with dropout, pregnancy, and dropout due to pregnancy as compared to other causes, however, we cannot assess if the reported relationships preceded or followed dropout or pregnancy.

more likely to have dropped out or to have gotten pregnant. For example, girls who agreed that “women sometimes deserve to be beaten” were 2.3 times more likely to have dropped out, and over 3 times more likely to have gotten pregnant. Girls who agreed that “boys deserve more education than girls” were over 2 times more likely to have dropped out or gotten pregnant. This strongly suggests that girls who adhere to more traditional expectations are more likely to leave school.

“I would at times be stopped from going to school. I would be told to remain home and take care of my young siblings.”

- Girl out of school, age 18, Arua

“My brother was not allowed to do any domestic work at home, and yet for me I was beaten if I failed to do work at home...so most of the time I reached school late.”

- Girl In school, age 14, Adjumani

In multivariate models that examine the associations with drop-out and pregnancy controlling for age, district, and the household, school, sexual and reproductive behaviors and social norm characteristics shown in

table 5, we find that the strongest predictors of pregnancy are age, conflict, gender norms, having had multiple relationships, and lack of parental support for school; and the strongest predictors of drop-out are age, district, mother’s education, self-rated school performance, gender norms and lack of parental support for school.

Discussion

Our findings show that a large proportion of adolescent girls have dropped out of school prematurely in these districts. The vast majority of girls who had dropped out stated that they would like to return to school, if given the opportunity. Pregnancy is a leading cause of dropout, and poverty is an even bigger obstacle to school continuation. Overall, a number of key characteristics appear to be associated with both dropout and pregnancy. It is clear that girls’ sexual and reproductive health status and their educational status are inextricably connected, and that both sexual and reproductive health and educational attainment are undermined by gender-inequitable attitudes, beliefs and practices. All of these findings point to important opportunities for future interventions.

Policy and Programmatic Implications

To help girls be all they can be, we must engage them in their schools, homes and communities, and we must also engage parents, teachers and community members. Programs and policies should ensure that girls feel safe and valued in school, that they feel encouraged and supported in their educational goals by their families, and that they live in an environment where they believe they have potential to fulfill their own aspirations and contribute to their community’s development. Below are more specific areas for intervention.

In the school

1. Girls who start school at the appropriate age and maintain grade-for-age progression have the best chance of completing their educations. Information about existing policies for starting school should be disseminated to parents and community authorities, and these policies must be effectively enforced.
2. Fewer than half of girls know how to avoid pregnancies. Girls and boys need comprehensive sexuality education as well as access to services and materials to help improve their health. The education and health sectors should coordinate to improve access to age-appropriate reproductive health information and care for all girls and boys.
3. If girls are not safe, they cannot attend school and learn effectively. Ensure that the school environment is safe, supportive and gender-equitable.

In the home

4. At the household level, girls’ chore burden needs to be relieved. Campaigns can encourage household chores to be shared among all family members.

5. Parents need to be empowered to support their daughters to start school on time, to stay in school, or return to school after dropout. Providing livelihood opportunities and incentives to parents would help offset the financial burden of school.

In the community

6. Women, men, boys and girls need to be engaged in transforming gender norms. Working at the community level can help raise awareness and promote more gender-equitable beliefs, attitudes and practices. These efforts must include engagement with opinion and cultural leaders.

Policies

7. Because costs are such a significant barrier to continued education, policies need to ensure that secondary education is completely free and that any fees are subsidized.
8. Guidelines and training to support girl-friendly school environments, including menstrual hygiene management, safety, and gender-equitable treatment in the school environment, should be widely and effectively implemented.
9. A significant proportion of adolescent girls have dropped out of school because of pregnancy, or have become pregnant shortly after dropping out. These girls need support to return to school so that they can help themselves and their families. Retention and reintegration policies should be improved for these girls, and supportive programs should be offered to provide them with the appropriate range of services, including catch-up courses, psychosocial support, mentoring, counseling and guidance, livelihood support, and childcare and skills development.

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