

POLICY BRIEF

Ensuring school re-entry for pregnant teenagers and young mothers in Uganda refugee and host communities

ECHIDNA GLOBAL SCHOLARS PROGRAM





Executive Summary

School re-entry for pregnant girls and young mothers is increasingly recognized by African governments as a critical measure to improve the education of marginalized adolescents and mitigate school pushout. In Uganda, the high rate of teenage pregnancy, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, prompted the government to approve *Revised Guidelines for the Prevention and Management of Teenage Pregnancy in School Settings in Uganda* (Ministry of Education and Sports [MoES] 2020b), which outline necessary steps and measures within school environments to facilitate the safe return of girls to school post-pregnancy. However, a significant gap in implementation persists.

This policy brief addresses the disparity between policy and actual practice regarding the re-entry of pregnant girls and young mothers into schools, particularly in the refugee and host communities of Uganda's West Nile region. It underscores the community practices that deny opportunities to this demographic and delineates the intersectional barriers, social, economic, and policy-based that obstruct their educational continuation. Furthermore, the brief offers policy recommendations to overcome these obstacles. Overall, the brief emphasizes a call to action for stakeholders to prioritize the educational needs of marginalized populations, specifically pregnant teenagers and young mothers in refugee and host communities, to ensure that they can lead dignified lives.

I. Introduction

Teenage pregnancy remains a significant impediment to educational opportunities for young girls globally, with Uganda facing an alarming rate of 25%, one of the highest in sub-Saharan Africa. (Chemutai et al. 2022). It not only disrupts girls' education but also has far-reaching consequences on critical socio-economic indicators, including maternal and child health, economic empowerment, and life outcomes (Musasizi et al. 2024) (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR] 2021). This challenge is particularly acute in Uganda's refugee settlements and host communities, where teenage pregnancy intersects with existing economic and socio-cultural factors, creating formidable barriers to school re-entry for pregnant girls and teenage mothers.

Amid escalating rates of teenage pregnancy and school dropouts among Ugandan girls, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Nakiyingi et al. 2022), in September 2020 the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) took a crucial step by approving the *Revised Guidelines for the Prevention and Management of Teenage Pregnancy in School Settings* (MoES 2020b). The primary goal of the revised guidelines is to facilitate the safe re-entry of girls into school after pregnancy. However, as this policy brief shows, while these guidelines represent a pivotal first step, outlining measures and steps to be taken in school settings, their implementation falls short. According to a 2023 study (Nalubega and Kalanzi 2023), the national rate of teenage mothers not returning to school stands at 25%. However, the same study shows that the rate is significantly higher in refugee and host communities, where over 45% of teenage girls do not resume their education after pregnancy (Nalubega and Kalanzi 2023). These statistical disparities highlight the ongoing challenges that pregnant teenagers and young mothers face in refugee communities, including school pushout and substantial obstacles to school re-entry (Bukuluki et al. 2020).

Against the backdrop of Uganda's government and the global community's commitment to prioritizing educational outcomes for forcibly displaced youth, it is imperative to reassess policies and practices in light of existing barriers to re-entry. The purpose of this policy brief is to highlight the disparity between policy intentions and on-the-ground realities concerning school re-entry for pregnant girls and teenage mothers. Focusing on refugee and host communities in Adjumani, a district with the highest population of refugees in the country, this brief identifies key barriers to school re-entry. Furthermore, it proposes actionable pathways for enhancing the design and implementation of the 2020 guidelines aiming to fortify support structures for school re-entry to improve learning opportunities and life outcomes for pregnant teenage girls and young mothers.

II. Contextualizing teenage pregnancy and school pushout in Uganda

Teenage pregnancy is a pressing issue in Uganda, which has one of the highest rates in sub-Saharan Africa. The impact of teenage pregnancy is particularly pronounced among socio-economically marginalized adolescent girls and young women. Girls from the poorest households and with limited education experience a staggering 60.4% pregnancy rate, compared to 18.9% for their counterparts from wealthier households with secondary education (Uganda Bureau of Statistics 2018).

The already high rates of teenage pregnancy in Uganda witnessed a significant escalation caused by the school closures and lockdown measures associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. A two-year lockdown, affecting over 15 million learners, significantly heightened the vulnerability of adolescent girls. At the height of the lockdown, between March and June 2020, the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE) Uganda recorded a disturbing 22.5% increase in pregnant girls ages 10–24 seeking their first prenatal care services, a likely underestimation given that not all pregnant girls avail themselves of prenatal care, often considered a proxy measure for teenage pregnancy (FAWE Uganda 2021; Kayemba et al. 2023).

Such high rates of teenage pregnancy in Uganda have profound consequences on adolescent girls' educational trajectories, leading to elevated levels of school dropout. A 2015 study indicated that of 28% of sexually active school-going teenage girls. Of those, 80.1% got pregnant, and of these, 97% were pushed out of school (Ministry of Education and Sports Uganda and Teenage Pregnancies 2015). The study noted that only 8% of girls who were pushed out of school were reported to have received a second chance to re-enroll.

The exclusion of pregnant girls and teenage mothers from school has ramifications that extend beyond individual and familial consequences and impact Uganda's broader socio-economic landscape. Failing to provide learning opportunities for this demographic not only jeopardizes the well-being of the girls, their families, and communities but also exerts strain on the

country's economy and government expenditures. According to UNICEF (2022), an estimated 645 billion in Ugandan shillings (\$172 million in U.S. dollars) was allocated for health care services for teen mothers and the education of their children. This underscores the urgency for comprehensive interventions that prioritize school re-entry and support for pregnant girls, not only for their empowerment but also for the overall socio-economic development of Uganda.

THE EXISTING POLICY FRAMEWORK

The Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) in Uganda responded to the escalating issue of increased teenage pregnancy by launching the *Revised Guidelines for the Prevention and Management of Teenage Pregnancy in School Settings in Uganda* in September 2020 (MoES 2020b). This initiative, designed to mitigate the severity of the problem, extends support to young mothers, including those in refugee settings covered by the Education Response Plan (ERP). The guidelines have a threefold objective: (1) to outline modes of service delivery within learning institution settings that enable the prevention of pregnancy among girls, (2) to propose linkages for a minimum care package for the prevention and management of teenage pregnancy within learning institution settings, and (3) to outline steps and services that should be in place to reintegrate adolescent mothers into learning institutions (MoES 2020b).

However, despite the guidelines being in place, three-quarters of the pregnant teenagers and young mothers in refugee and host communities are still out of school (Nakiyingi et al. 2022). In this policy brief, I argue that this has resulted from the challenges stemming both from policy implementation and existing socio-cultural and economic barriers. I then address both how the existing guidelines can be strengthened in their implementation and what intersecting socio-cultural and economic barriers should be addressed to further ensure school re-entry for pregnant girls and young mothers.

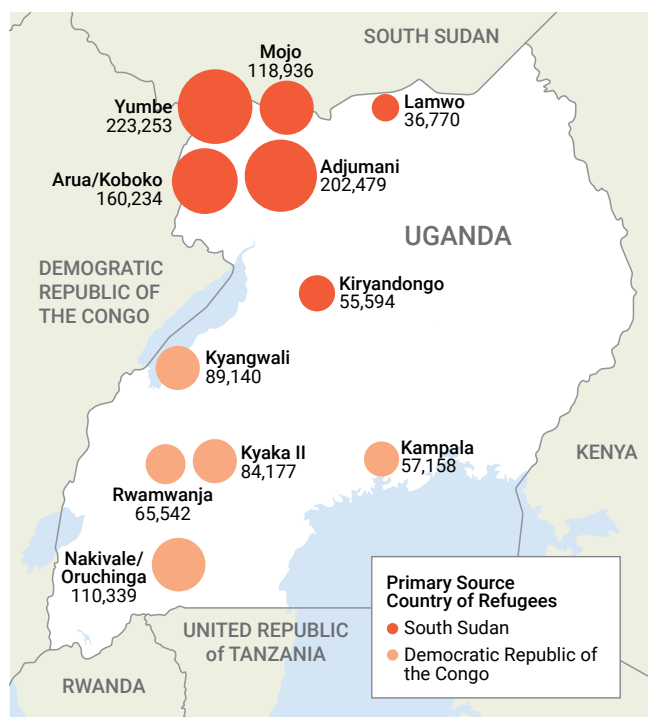
TEENAGE PREGNANCY AND GIRLS EDUCATION IN REFUGEE SETTINGS

The challenges of teenage pregnancy and ensuring girls' right to education are amplified within refugee settings in Uganda, which hosts one of the largest refugee populations in the world (see Box 1).

There are significant challenges associated with ensuring girls' right to education within Uganda's refugee context. Conflict; insecurity such as civil strife, political persecution, and inter-tribal strife; violence; and poverty exacerbate the vulnerability of adolescent female refugees, subjecting them to high risks of sexual violence, exploitation, abuse, and early or forced marriage (Okot et al. 2023; Shi et al. 2021). The factors associated with teenage pregnancy in refugee and host communities also mirror those in other contexts, including various environmental factors such as education, socio-economic status, local socio-cultural norms, and the availability of contraceptives (Okiror et al. 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the rate of teenage pregnancy among South Sudanese refugees in Uganda's West Nile region, home to 60% of the country's refugee settlements (see Figure 1). Studies have noted this surge in teenage pregnancies and school dropouts among adolescent girls in refugee communities (War Child 2021). For example, in the Arua District of West Nile, Uganda, over 6,500 teenage pregnancies were recorded from January 2020 to November 2021, a period marked by lockdown (Adiga 2023). In the West Nile region, most of those affected by teenage pregnancies were school-going children (Adiga 2023).

FIGURE 1.
Map of refugee settlements in Uganda (with population size)



Source: Atari and McKague (2019)

WHY ADJUMANI?

Located in the West Nile region of Uganda, Adjumani District plays a pivotal role in the nation's humanitarian efforts, as it forms Uganda's common border with the Republic of South Sudan. Since 1989 this district has hosted refugees and hosts one of the largest numbers of refugee settlements, totaling 18,

BOX 1.

Refugee education in conflict settings

The landscape of worldwide conflict and forced migration has reached unprecedented proportions, jeopardizing the lives of millions of youths, particularly marginalized girls. According to UNHCR, over 114 million people globally were compelled to flee their homes by September 2023, driven by conflict, persecution, and human rights violations (UNHCR 2023b). Remarkably, three-quarters of those in need of international protection found refuge in low- and middle-income countries. In the heart of sub-Saharan Africa, Uganda shoulders a significant burden, hosting the largest refugee population on the continent, with 1.5 million refugees and asylum seekers, predominantly from South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo (Musasizi et al. 2024). A staggering 81% of this population comprises women and children, with children accounting for 58.9% (UNHCR 2021). Education for refugees is crucial not only for imparting essential knowledge and skills but also for providing protection and fostering resilience among displaced populations.

with a population of 468,901. The demographic composition reflects a nearly equal host-to-refugee ratio, with an overwhelming 85% of the population made up of women and children, as reported by UNHCR (2023a). Predominantly sheltering South Sudanese refugees with diverse ethnic backgrounds, Adjumani grapples with the challenges typical of many refugee-hosting districts in Uganda. Despite being among the least developed districts, with socio-economic programs struggling to keep pace with the population influx, the majority of Adjumani's residents are engaged in subsistence agriculture, according to a UNHCR (2023a) report. The district's significance lies not only in its geographical position but also in its ongoing efforts to provide support and resources amid the continuous influx of refugees from neighboring regions.

Refugee education in Adjumani District faces considerable challenges because of the underdeveloped state of the education sector. The influx of many refugees into the district and their enrollment in schools cause enormous strain on existing education facilities and infrastructure. As of a UNHCR (2019) report, the national gross enrollment rate in Adjumani among refugee children in primary education stood at 67.2%, with a stark drop to only 6.6% in secondary education (Owiny and Talbot 2022). For refugee girls, the situation is even more dire, with a mere 3.3%

enrollment in secondary education. This is similar at the district level, given that some unpublished programmatic reports from partners in education indicate that the educational opportunities are scarce in the district, posing a significant hurdle for orphans and children from the poorest families to access schooling. While government-aided schools do not charge direct fees, other associated expenses still hinder the poorest segment of the population from sending their children to state schools.

Given Uganda's unique challenges with regard to education in emergency settings, key stakeholders have partnered to operationalize an ERP to provide a framework for refugee education in the country. The ERP 2020 (MoES 2023) has played a crucial role in ameliorating these challenges, providing safety, protection, and hope through educational opportunities (see Box 2). However, the transition from primary to secondary school remains low, and retention rates, especially for girls, continue to be an obstacle to ensuring comprehensive and accessible education for refugee children in Adjumani.

Teenage pregnancy poses a significant challenge to schooling in Adjumani, encompassing both refugee settlements and host communities. The chart in Figure 2 shows an annual overview of teenage pregnancy rates across the 12 subcounties of Adjumani.

BOX 2.

The framework for refugee education in Uganda

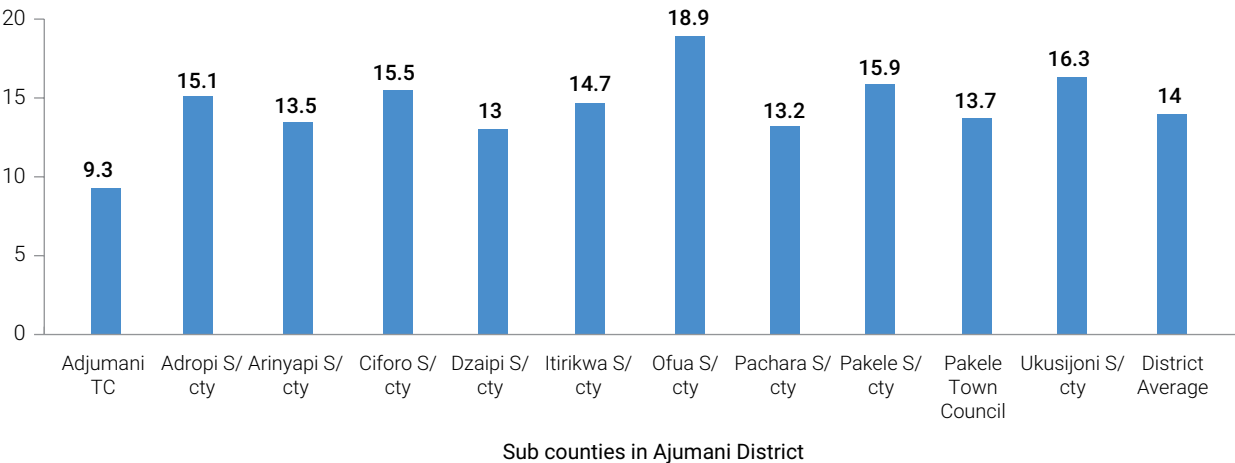
Uganda's refugee policy stands out as a model for countries grappling with similar situations, offering the right to work, public social services, and land (World Bank 2019). The legal framework governing refugee education in Uganda is anchored in the country's ERP 2020 (MoES 2023), a comprehensive policy that guides the response to refugees and integrates them into national legislation, policies, and programs. The ERP 2020 focuses on ensuring equitable access to inclusive learning, delivering quality education, and strengthening systems for effective service delivery, and has led to equitable school enrollment rates for primary school-age refugee children at a similar rate to that of hosts (65% and 68%, respectively) (Gabryelczyk 2020; World Bank 2019). Despite this, the ERP largely remains unfunded and thus unable to make significant strides in school re-entry for young mothers.

Despite the success in achieving equitable primary school enrollment rates for both refugee and host community children, secondary education remains a significant challenge for refugees in Uganda. Refugees have limited access to secondary education (Tulibaleka 2022). Only 10% of refugees are enrolled in secondary education in Adjumani District compared to 24% at the national level for refugee-hosting districts (UNHCR 2023a). Globally, refugee girls face unique hurdles, as they are only half as likely as their male counterparts to be enrolled in secondary education (UNHCR, 2018). In Uganda, along with the systemic discrimination, numerous barriers further impede refugee education, including poverty, language, certification, lack of documentation from home countries, unaccompanied child-headed families, inadequate health care, and hidden school costs (such as scholastic materials, uniform, and meals) (Bellaert 2016).

mani, with Ofua and Okusijoni subcounties reporting the highest rates at 18.9% and 16.3%, respectively, surpassing the 14% district average. This issue has widespread repercussions, as Adjumani District, like many refugee-hosting areas, grapples with the dual impact of high teenage pregnancy rates and the subsequent school pushout of adolescent girls from both refugee

and host communities. A mere 15%–19% of girls who initially enroll in primary school in Adjumani complete it, with a significant majority dropping out as early as primary four (Nakiyingi et al. 2022). Tackling the complex interplay between teenage pregnancy and its impact on education is crucial for the overall well-being and prospects of adolescent girls in Adjumani.

FIGURE 2. Teenage pregnancy rate (%) by subcounty in Adjumani District, July 2022 to June 2023.



Source: Adjumani District Health Office (2023)

III. Intersecting socio-cultural and economic barriers to school re-entry for pregnant girls and teenage mothers

The government's policy mandates the return of pregnant girls and young mothers to school through a standardized framework. However, the existing policy, while articulated on paper, has not translated into tangible change on the ground. This brief identifies the key barriers preventing the effective implementation of the policy. It explores why the revised guidelines have remained largely ineffective in refugee and host communities such as Adjumani and the impact this has had on the lives of pregnant girls and young mothers.

Data come from mixed-methods research I conducted in July and August 2023 that explored the experiences of young mothers ages 10–24, both those attending and not attending school, in refugee settlements and surrounding host communities in Adjumani. I conducted a survey with school-attending young mothers, involving 49 participants from both refugees and host communities. Additionally, we organized two focus group discussions (FGDs) with young mothers from both the settlement and host communities who were out of school. The research also included 35 key informant interviews with a diverse group of stakeholders, including district technical and political officials, development partners, school administrators, community leaders, health care workers, police, and policymakers at both district and national levels. To round out the study, observational

methods were employed to provide a thorough analysis of the circumstances.

Our research found that significant intersecting economic and socio-cultural barriers exist that preclude school re-entry for pregnant teenagers and young mothers in refugee and host communities of Adjumani.

ECONOMIC BURDENS

Economic barriers emerge as significant impediments to the re-entry of pregnant teenagers and young mothers into school. In our FGDs, nearly all of the young mothers in both refugee and host communities cited poverty and their inability to pay school fees as their major barrier to school re-entry. While theoretically free universal primary and secondary schools exist in refugee communities, these schools impose various fees, such as registration, Parent Teacher Association (PTA), and examination fees, that preclude access for many girls. Moreover, the government's funding calculation for schools does not consider the population of refugee children in the area, leading to underfunded schools in these areas. Given that secondary school is not mandatory in Uganda, government funding is not available to schools for refugee children.



Research team orientation, Adjumani.

Photos courtesy of Serugo George, Driver FAWWE Uganda.



FGD with parents at Mirieyi Refugee Settlement, Adjumani.

Despite the expressed eagerness of all of the interviewed young mothers in the focus group discussions from refugee and host communities to re-enroll, the lack of financial support proved to be a significant hindrance. For example, a member of the school PTA noted, “Conditions are harsh in the settlements. Refugees have no money to send girls to school even if the girls have interest.”

A UNHCR official interviewed for this study reported that refugee parents, grappling with poverty, find it challenging to afford such school-related costs while also bearing the expense of midday meals. Consequently, they often use pregnancy to justify their daughters not re-enrolling. My research revealed that 67% of refugees and 69% of teenage mothers from the host community did not re-enroll.

Despite the expressed eagerness of all of the interviewed young mothers in the FGDs from refugee and host communities to re-enroll, the lack of financial support proved to be a significant hindrance. For example, a member of the school PTA noted, “Conditions are harsh in the settlements. Refugees have no money to send girls to school even if the girls have interest.” Another individual remarked, “When sent for fees, they don’t return. They study in installments and drop off!” These comments support the premise that economic burdens are likely to hinder school re-enrollment for young mothers.

SOCIO-CULTURAL AND ECONOMIC DRIVERS OF CHILD MARRIAGE

Such economic burdens are often compounded by existing socio-cultural practices. In a context within which social norms already encourage early marriage (e.g., among the Dinka and Nuer tribes), economic need further incentivizes early marriage as a source of income for the girls’ families. A woman refugee leader in the Mirieyi Refugee Settlement explained that cultural norms dictate that a pregnant Sudanese girl must be immediately married to the man responsible for her pregnancy, making it impossible for her to continue with her education.

Participants in the FGDs also pointed to specific practices that contribute to these negative social norms. For example, puberty is seen as a marker of readiness for marriage—often symbolized

by white flags on rooftops signaling the presence of an upcoming bride. Moreover, during a focus group discussion, a refugee girl spoke about the cultural constraints: “You cannot even report because this is their culture!” However, instances were noted where girls sought intervention against early marriage at the Office of the Prime Minister in Adjumani. Research participants, including pregnant girls, young mothers, parents, civil society organization (CSO) leaders, and policymakers, noted how socio-cultural norms such as child marriage (and the economic aspects of it) add significantly to the girls’ marginalization.

All of the participants in the research highlighted how economic needs often lead to girls being used to acquire wealth through child marriage. Teenage girls are often married off young, as they are considered more valuable—as is the case in many patriarchal societies. A senior education officer recounted a disconcerting incident where an exorbitant amount of 100 million Ugandan shillings (\$27,000 in U.S. dollars) was paid to marry an adolescent girl. The economic dimensions of child marriage are further exemplified through the range of fines associated with teenage pregnancy and child marriage. For example, *ladu laur’oko* is a fine that the family of a girl imposes on a boy’s or man’s family in cases of cohabitation. Similarly, *uniform nzi* is a fine levied on boys and men responsible for teenage pregnancy, and *ti awi* is a form of dowry imposed by the parents or guardians of the girls.

Socio-cultural norms such as these can act as a significant economic burden in refugee settings for the families of boys and men from already marginalized contexts. Coupled with the fact that many pregnant girls and young mothers are often married off to their partners, this then acts as a barrier to school re-entry for girls entering their new family, where economic resources are already scarce. Girls are also expected to shoulder new household responsibilities—along with already existing child care responsibilities—thus affecting school re-enrollment.

LACK OF SUPPORT FROM PARENTS AND INTIMATE PARTNERS

The lack of support from parents, intimate partners, and the community also poses a significant obstacle to the re-entry of young mothers in refugee and host communities. Insights from key informant interviews with local government officials, CSOs, and FGDs with girls revealed the use of derogatory language by parents and limited provisions, such as child care support. Such conversations with key informants indicated that parents and caregivers' negative attitudes toward education for pregnant girls and young mothers may hinder their re-enrollment and may lead to early marriage, cohabitation, or remaining at home with minimal support, neglect, and abuse.

Participants indicated that such a lack of support often manifests in parents' refusal to pay school-related fees (e.g., school dues), which can contribute negatively to girls' perception of their well-being and thus also affect school re-enrollment. A young refugee mother shared how her father rejected her: "Ever since my father heard that I am pregnant, he refused to talk to me, and he even said he doesn't want to find me at home when he returns from Juba." Such statements by parents are seen by the girls as intending to intimidate young mothers, making them uncomfortable, and affecting the girls' perceptions of their chances for school re-entry.

Stakeholders also shared that the pregnant girls' partners often disappear—the boys' family members send them into hiding because of being young and fear of legal redress—leaving teenage mothers to care for the children with limited support from their parents, partners, and community. Respondents noted how these are seen to affect girls' psycho-social well-being at a crucial time, while also acting as a barrier to school re-entry. This was echoed by all the girls during the interviews, as well as parents

and policymakers. In addition, such challenges that the pregnant girls face in relation to re-entry because of limited social support systems were observed by the research team while in the field.

INADEQUATE CHILD CARE SUPPORT

Child care challenges present formidable obstacles to the re-entry of girls from refugee and host communities into school. As stated in the preceding section, partners often disappear, but even when intimate partners are present, they are often reported to inhibit the young mothers' opportunity to re-enroll, expecting them to undertake household chores and shoulder child care responsibilities. These hurdles encompass the essential needs of caregivers, such as food, clothing, and health care, highlighting the limited psychological and financial support provided by parents and intimate partners. While some schools run by development partners offer basic child care facilities and meals, the schools researched did not, leaving mothers to navigate these challenges independently.

In addition to a lack of support at home, schools do little to alleviate the child care burden of young mothers who have re-enrolled. One head teacher explained the school's stance on children in the learning environment: "We cannot allow them to bring their children to school, and we have advised them to find places in the school neighborhood to leave the children, where they can easily go to breastfeed during breaks." None of the school-going young mothers responding to the survey reported being able to have their children with them in school.

A young refugee mother attending Maaji secondary school described her experience of navigating child care responsibilities while pursuing education. Despite her mother agreeing to care for the baby, she must constantly strike a balance between

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school programs and child-rearing responsibilities. The fear of her mother's disapproval prompts her to forego extracurricular activities and rush home to prevent confrontations. She explained, "I have to sacrifice important school programs; otherwise, my mother throws hard words at me. I have to do this to avoid problems with my mother, who is carrying the burden of looking after my baby while I am at school." The geographical distance from school further complicates her situation, compelling her to rush home to prevent facing unwarranted criticism. This presents a challenge for many in-school young mothers.

In lieu of formal child care accommodations, along with limited family and intimate partner support, even existing social protection programs cannot fully address the socio-economic burdens on young mothers. One example is Nutricash, a component of the Child Sensitive Social Protection Program offered to breastfeeding mothers from the poorest households, designed to address the needs of children (under two years) in the West Nile region of Uganda. Beneficiaries receive a monthly stipend of 48,000 Ugandan shillings (approximately \$14 in U.S. dollars). Given existing economic burdens, such as the inability of parents and intimate partners to provide support, girls often enroll in Nutricash. However, research participants noted how such social protection programs could incentivize recurring pregnancies and encourage reluctance by intimate partners and families to provide child care, thus taking away support that mothers need to facilitate school re-entry.

INCOHERENT MESSAGING AROUND SCHOOL RE-ENTRY GUIDELINES

While the guidelines are generally acknowledged by educationists as a positive starting point for ensuring gender equality and providing second-chance education opportunities for girls,

different stakeholders—including girls, local stakeholders, and other research participants—report receiving inconsistent messages regarding school re-entry by multiple stakeholders. While the policies by the MoES are designed to support pregnant girls and young mothers' re-enrollment, other governmental and non-governmental institutions do not necessarily share this viewpoint. During the interview process, the Uganda Muslim Supreme Council, for example, expressed nonsupport for re-entry, encouraging girls to leave school immediately upon pregnancy and not to re-enroll until after delivery. On the other hand, the Uganda Joint Christian Council supports only a limited form of education re-entry, proposing the creation of specialized spaces for training and child care that would maintain pregnant girls and young mothers outside of formal school settings. Adding to the different viewpoints, the Parliament of Uganda has sanctioned girls' enrollment only a year after delivery, contradicting the revised guidelines, which allow for re-entry within three to six months postdelivery. This discrepancy in implementation adds to the confusion about the proper application of the guidelines.

Implementation is further complicated by a lack of coordination and support for school re-entry for pregnant girls and young mothers by key officials at the school and community level. At the community level, schools vary in how long they retain pregnant girls, with some allowing them to stay almost until delivery, deviating from the guideline's principle.

Along with mixed messaging on school re-entry on the ground, various respondents, including school administrators, district leaders, and policymakers, expressed concerns that accommodating pregnant girls and establishing breastfeeding spaces within school could normalize what is perceived by them as immoral behavior, potentially encouraging other female learners to become pregnant. For example, a school board member

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expressed difficulty in supporting re-entry, citing what seemed to them the unconventional nature of the situation. The member remarked, “It is difficult for us to support re-entry. In the beginning, we did so because of the directive from the MoES. For an abnormal thing to become normal is not easy.” Contradicting messaging by key institutions on school re-entry, along with negative perceptions of teenage pregnancy, can then act as a significant barrier for pregnant girls and young mothers.

POLICY BARRIERS

The government’s revised guidelines were a crucial step in addressing the urgency for school re-entry for pregnant girls and teenage mothers in Uganda. However, their impact has been limited especially in refugee and host communities such as Adjumani. This limitation can be attributed to intersecting economic and socio-cultural barriers (as described in preceding sections), as well as challenges related to a lack of robust support through proper dissemination and implementation of the guidelines.

Budgetary constraints

The absence of a concrete implementation framework with an approved budget poses a challenge to effective implementation. The approval of the guidelines was not accompanied by a corresponding budget for its rollout and implementation. Despite efforts from agencies and CSOs to disseminate and implement the guidelines, the Gender Unit of the Ministry of Education faces challenges in fulfilling its mandate because of the absence of an allocated budget.

Lack of implementation framework

The absence of a well-defined implementation framework creates obstacles to the guidelines’ effective implementation.

Although the guidelines mention stakeholders who should be involved in the processes, there is a lack of clear information on how these processes should be carried out, especially considering the diverse resources required. At the district level, there was an expectation that the MoES would spearhead the rollout of the guidelines, with the anticipation that this would have a multiplier effect.

Inadequate awareness and availability

Limited availability, distribution, and subsequent access to the guidelines document contribute to inadequate implementation. Although there is general awareness of the government’s efforts on re-entry at the district level, stakeholders, including technical and political figures, lack knowledge of the revised guidelines. During the study, none of the interviewed stakeholders, such as the local council V (LCV), District Community Development Officer (DCDO), Assistant District Health Officer, development partners, the Office of the Prime Minister, or UNHCR coordinators, had copies of the document.

Within schools, participants indicated the need for training teachers and parents as essential to ensure school re-entry. Overall, 60% of the participants knew about government efforts for school re-entry, although there was limited knowledge of the policy document. Through the interview process, it was clear that over 80% of the participants confused the policy with the “go back to school campaigns” instituted by development partners and the government. One of the reasons for this might be that the guidelines have not been translated into any language other than English, making it hard to access for the host and refugee populations. Over the course of the research, it became clear that inadequate knowledge and access to the guidelines has led not only to mixed feelings about it but also hindered interest in its rollout.

IV. Recommendations for ensuring school re-entry for pregnant girls and teenage mothers

School re-entry for pregnant girls and young mothers in both refugee and host communities is a contentious issue, particularly for refugees. The MoES Guidelines are a crucial first step to addressing re-entry; however, implementation is hindered by barriers including a lack of information, budgetary constraints, ineffective implementation framework, and rollout capacity. These, coupled with the intersecting socio-cultural and economic barriers described above, then hinder school re-entry for young mothers and pregnant girls in Uganda's refugee communities.

Promising signs have emerged, associated with the level of awareness and knowledge by select local government officials and CSOs within the district, as well as the will by the central government and development agencies. The CSOs have also continued to meet the socio-cultural and economic barriers to school re-entry identified in this research, including meeting basic needs and offering child care support. To address the policy issues herein, comprehensive funding is required to address the gap between policy and practice and ensure the right to education for pregnant girls and young mothers through the following mechanisms.

TABLE 1. Actions needed to implement targeted assistance programs in Uganda to alleviate economic barriers hindering school re-entry for pregnant girls and teenage mothers

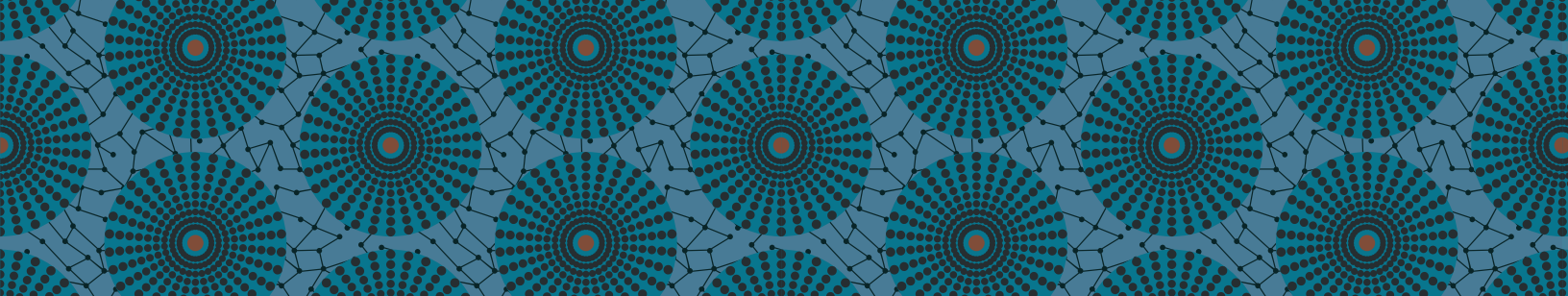
ACTION	DETAILS	RESPONSIBLE PARTIES
Link refugee families and girls with economic livelihood programs.	This linkage serves as a crucial mechanism to empower girls economically and enable them to meet their day-to-day basic needs. By intertwining educational initiatives with economic support, a holistic framework can be created that not only facilitates school re-entry but also addresses the broader socio-economic challenges faced by refugee communities.	District Community Development Officer (DCDO), District Education department and UNHCR, Office of the Prime Minister, CSOs (e.g., Windle Trust, Uganda; Plan Uganda; FAWE Uganda; Enabel; Finn Church Aid)
Finance for school re-entry.	Provide scholarships and alternative education programs, such as the Accelerated Education Program (AEP) to facilitate school re-entry for young mothers in both refugee and host communities, allowing them to meet the economic burdens and hidden costs of schools (e.g., PTA fees, midday meals, etc.).	MoES, UNHCR, CSOs
Provide child care support.	Advocate for comprehensive policy measures to provide essential child care support for teenage mothers within schools and the community. Implement accessible and subsidized child care services, enabling young mothers to pursue educational opportunities including funding.	MoES, UNHCR, Education CSOs

TABLE 2. Actions needed to address discriminatory socio-cultural barriers and foster a supportive community environment for pregnant mothers to resume their education

ACTION	DETAILS	RESPONSIBLE PARTIES
Work with communities to change discriminatory gender and socio-cultural norms.	Support change for gender discriminatory norms through mentorship programs, sexual and reproductive health and rights education, family engagement, psycho-social support programs for young parents, and initiatives targeting boys as gender champions, which can help shape social norms facilitating school re-entry for pregnant teenagers and young mothers.	District political leadership, DCDO, CSOs
Develop national-level policy and programs to reshape socio-cultural norms.	Embed gender-responsive pedagogy training in school curricula to foster inclusivity and awareness, along with introducing behavioral change communication strategies, and enacting by-laws as part of comprehensive approach toward school re-entry.	MoES, Ministry of Gender, Labour, and Social Development (MGLSD), district local government, UNICEF, UNHCR, CSOs
Promote community role models.	Establish mentorship and role model programs that leverage community role models to inspire girls, with the goal of reducing teenage pregnancies and encouraging the successful reintegration of young mothers into the educational system.	MoES, MGLSD, district local government, UNICEF, UNHCR, CSOs

TABLE 3. Actions needed to establish an enabling policy environment in Uganda to support school re-entry for teenage mothers

ACTION	DETAILS	RESPONSIBLE PARTIES
Develop a multisectoral approach for a coherent school re-entry policy.	Emphasize the interconnectedness of various sectors and actors to address the complex challenges surrounding the re-entry of students, particularly girls and families in refugee contexts.	MoES, MGLSD, district local government, UNICEF, UNHCR, CSOs
Establish a comprehensive and well-funded policy implementation plan.	Ensure the translation of revised guidelines into actionable steps, emphasizing practicality. The government should also ensure sufficient funding to facilitate the rollout of guidelines. Pilot the implementation of the school re-entry process in identified schools, settlements, and host communities within the Adjumani district, allowing for assessment, refinement, and scalability before nationwide implementation.	MoES, Education in Emergency steering committee (includes government entities and CSOs)
Create coherent messaging around school re-entry,	Develop a coordinated approach for religious leaders, parliament, school boards, and government bodies to advocate and communicate the importance of teenage mothers' reintegration into the education system.	MoES, Education in Emergency steering committee



Conclusion

In conclusion, strengthening the school re-entry policy framework in Uganda, coupled with direct community engagement to tackle socio-cultural and economic barriers, is imperative. By fostering collaboration between policymakers and communities, we can build a foundation that not only empowers young mothers but also contributes to a more inclusive and equitable educational landscape, ultimately shaping a society that prioritizes the well-being and educational aspirations of every adolescent girl.

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APPENDIX A

For the study, I adopted a cross-sectional mixed-methods research design. My team and I collected qualitative data using three methods: (1) key informant interviews (KIIs), (2) focus group discussions (FGDs), and (3) school observations. We collected quantitative data using survey tools. The analysis was undertaken using quantitative computer guided software (SPSS), and the qualitative analysis was undertaken using Atlas Ti 9 software, which facilitated thematic analysis, and the results were presented according to the objectives of the study.

QUANTITATIVE SAMPLING DESIGN

A robust sampling design procedure that considers the population demographics factors was critically assessed. The sampling strategy followed a stratified three-stage cluster sampling approach, where the first stage of sampling involved stratification of the sample by subcounty to ensure that the sample was representative of the district. The second stage of sampling involved selection of villages within the respective subcounties. The third stage of sampling involved selection of schools and communities to sample young mothers and pregnant girls who managed to return to school. The last stage randomly selected young mothers and pregnant girls who managed to return and who met the eligibility criteria within the selected schools and communities.

QUALITATIVE SAMPLING DESIGN

The study used a purposive sampling approach to capture the broadest range of views, attitudes, and experiences within

qualitative participants, considering the various stakeholders that the study targeted (i.e., young mothers and pregnant girls who were out of school, MoES, the district education officer, school administrators, CSOs/FBOs, donor agencies, and local and central government officials). Qualitative data collection involved three methods of collection: (1) key informant interviews (KIIs), (2) focus group discussions (FGDs), and (3) school observations. Refer to Table A.1.1 for further categorizations of the participants.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

We ensured the data collection teams adhered to the ethics and research principles of equity, respect for the dignity and worth of persons. The team was guided by the Code of Ethics for Research in the Social and Behavioral Sciences Involving Human Participants. Consent of study participants to take part in the evaluation as well as having the interviews recorded (for qualitative interviews) was sought. In order to ensure that the consent was informed, the evaluation team explained to participants the purpose of the study and procedure used to select them, the benefits (direct or indirect) that accrued to them, the likely risks involved (if any), and the fact that their views were treated with utmost confidentiality and their identities kept anonymous. We emphasized that participation was voluntary, and the participants had the right to opt out at any time. After data collection, the transcript and data sets were encrypted, and only the data analyst and the principal investigator were given access to raw data; the other research team members had limited access to the decoded data.

APPENDIX A. 1.1. Categorisation of research Participants

LOCATION	PERSONS INTERVIEWED	DESCRIPTION	NUMBERS
OFUA S/Cty Host	Ofua Seed Sec Sch (Host)- In Sch Teenage Mothers	15–19years 20–24years	6 10
	Senior Man teacher/ Matron-Ofua Secondary School	Interview	2
	Parents Teachers Association (PTA) - Ofua Secondary School	Focus Group Discussion	2
	Parents of Pregnant Girls	Focus Group Discussion	6
	Head teacher Ofua Seed	Interview	1
Mireyi Town Council- host community	Teenage mothers out of school	Focus Group Discussion 15–19yrs Focus Group Discussion 20–24yrs	9 13

APPENDIX A. 1.1. continued

LOCATION	PERSONS INTERVIEWED	DESCRIPTION	NUMBERS
Maaji Refugee Settlement	Maaji Secondary school- In school mothers- refugees	Survey	7
	Maaji primary school- In school mothers- refugees	Survey	3
Ukusijoni sub county- Host rural	Teen mothers out of school refugees FGD	Below 15 15–19yrs 20–24	0 11 12
	Host in school Teenage Mothers Survey/ interviews	15–19yrs 20–24	10 13
Parents of In school girls- ukusijoni	Focus Group Discussions with parents of both host and refugee girls	15–24	06
District Officers in Adjumani	District technical- Key informant interviews	Principal Education Officer Adjumani (PEO), Assistant District Health Officer (ADHO), Woman Councilor, Chair Social services Pacara sub county, LCV, Office of the Prime Minister, Adjumani (OPM), Health Center III in charge, Police, Refu- gee leaders	8
	Civil Society Organisations/Agencies- Key informant interviews	Plan International, Finn Church Aid, Windle Trust International in Uganda, UNHCR	4
Policy makers- Central	Key informant interviews Development partners	Unicef, Finn Church Aid, World Vision, Windle Trust International in Uganda, Uganda Joint Christian Council (UJCC), Uganda Muslim Supreme Council (UMSC), Education Response Plan (ERP) Secretariat/UNHCR, Unicef	7
	Government	Office of the Prime Minister (OPM), Min- istry of Education and Sports (MOES), Ministry of Gender Labor and Social Development (MGLSD), Min of Informa- tion and Min of Local Government	4

APPENDIX B

Additional insights into strengths and areas of improvement for revised guidelines

STRENGTHS OF THE REVISED GUIDELINES	AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT IN THE REVISED GUIDELINES
Includes the right to education including re-enrollment for young mothers after birth	Include stay-in-school for pregnant girls beyond three months proposed for maternity leave
Provides for child care services and economic support linkages to affected mothers	School re-admission only six months after delivery
Eligibility to participate in end-of-year exams even while on maternity leave	
Provides for in- and out-of-school support for girls when pregnant and after delivery	Need to provide for the actualization of guiding principles on how the different roles will play both in school and community to guarantee young mothers' re-enrollment
Provides for life-skill and in-school counseling for young mothers	Need to guarantee the right to education and inclusion and prevent forced maternity leave at three months; need to guarantee that teen mothers can re-enroll before six months after delivery
Has guiding principles and categorization for the different issues to be dealt with, that is, pregnancy prevention, management of pregnancy in school, management of pregnant girls, and management of re-entry	Need to provide a systematic framework on how and when to deal with the prevention, management of pregnancy in school and management of re-entry
Indicates the different processes of how pregnant girls should be supported	Ensure availability of all required resources to facilitate prevention, management, and re-entry including capacities
Recognizes the vulnerability of certain categories of persons: young girls, orphans, refugees, etc.	Need to clarify the linkage between access to Accelerated Education Program (AEP) or alternative education and formal schooling as a solution to girls' learning needs
	Requires parental involvement for re-entry
Advocates for attitude change and provision of opportunity for pregnant girls and young mothers' education	Assumes the pregnancy is a result of immorality (have to commit to good conduct)
Provides for penalties for default under each guideline	States that girls have to repeat the same class, a waste of an entire school year, an indication that the point at which pregnancy is identified within the school cycle is immaterial
Consideration on how to deal with the males responsible, if the learner also takes maternity leave	Has no budget allocation for roll out
Recognizes the need for partnerships and linkages between different stakeholders	No coherent implementation framework

APPENDIX C

Data collection instrument—Survey for head teachers

SECTION 1: IDENTIFICATION QUESTIONS

IDENTIFICATION				
SCHOOL EMIS NUMBER: <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between;"> <div style="border: 1px solid black; width: 20px; height: 20px;"></div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; width: 20px; height: 20px;"></div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; width: 20px; height: 20px;"></div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; width: 20px; height: 20px;"></div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; width: 20px; height: 20px;"></div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; width: 20px; height: 20px;"></div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; width: 20px; height: 20px;"></div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; width: 20px; height: 20px;"></div> </div>				
NAME OF SCHOOL:				
Q100: TYPE OF SCHOOL	Mixed Day Mixed Day and Boarding Single (Boys or Girls)			TICK 1 2 3
Q101: SCHOOL OWNERSHIP	Government-Aided Private Community			1 2 3
Q102: LOCATION	Rural Peri-Urban Urban			1 2 3
INTERVIEWER'S VISITS				
	1	2	3	
DATE				START TIME: END TIME:
INTERVIEWER'S NAME		-		
RESULT*				Q103: Gender Man Woman

SECTION 2: HEADTEACHER'S QUESTIONNAIRE

NO	QUESTIONS AND FILTERS	RESPONSES	CODES(TICK)	SKIP TO
Q104	How many learners are in your school?			
Q105	How many learners have dropped out in the last five years because of pregnancy?			
Q106	What is the Ministry of Education's policy regarding teenage pregnancy in schools?	<div>.....</div> <div>.....</div> <div>.....</div>		
Q107	How is the re-entry policy implemented in your school?	<div>.....</div> <div>.....</div> <div>.....</div>		
Q108	How many students have re-entered school after pregnancy in your school?			
Q109	What are the major reasons for their not re-entering school?	<div>.....</div> <div>.....</div> <div>.....</div>		
Q110	What have you done to follow up on those who do not re-enter?	<div>.....</div> <div>.....</div>		
Q111	What challenges do the teenage mothers, schools, and communities face and how are they addressed?	<div>Challenges</div> <div>.....</div> <div>.....</div> <div>.....</div> <div>.....</div> <div>How they are addressed</div> <div>.....</div> <div>.....</div> <div>.....</div>		
Q112	What support systems can be developed to enhance the effective implementation of the policy?	<div>.....</div> <div>.....</div>		
Q113	What effective implementation framework can be designed to ensure the effective implementation of the re-entry policy?	<div>.....</div> <div>.....</div>		

SECTION 3: TREND OF RE-ADMISSION AND ENROLLMENT

YEAR	ENROLLMENT OF GIRLS	NUMBER PREGNANCY RELATED DROPOUTS	RE-ENROLLED OF GIRLS	GIRLS DROPPED OUT AFTER RE-ENROLLMENT	GIRLS COMPLETED SECONDARY EDUCATION AFTER RE-ENROLLMENT
2018					
2019					
2021					
2022					

APPENDIX D

Data collection instrument—Survey for In-School Teenage Mothers

SECTION 1: IDENTIFICATION QUESTIONS

IDENTIFICATION						
SCHOOL EMIS NUMBER:						
<div> <div></div> <div></div> <div></div> <div></div> <div></div> <div></div> <div></div> <div></div> </div>						
NAME OF SCHOOL:						
Q100: TYPE OF SCHOOL					Mixed Day Mixed Day and Boarding Single (Boys or Girls)	TICK 1 2 3
Q101: SCHOOL OWNERSHIP					Government-Aided Private Community	1 2 3
Q102: LOCATION					Rural Peri-Urban Urban	1 2 3
INTERVIEWER'S VISITS						
	1	2	3			
DATE				START TIME:	1	
INTERVIEWER'S NAME		-		END TIME:	2	
RESULT*				Q103: Gender Man Woman		

SECTION 2: TEENAGE MOTHERS IN SCHOOL INTERVIEW GUIDE

Section 2a: Bio Data Module				
No	Questions and filters	Responses	Codes (tick)	Skip to
Q104	What is your gender?	Man Woman	1 2	If 1, stop
Q105	How old are you? Years		
Q106	In which class are you?	P4–P5 P6 P7 S.1 S.2 S.3 S.4 S.5 S.6	1 2 3 4 5 6	
Q107	What period have you enrolled in this school?	<1 year 1–2 years >2 years	1 2 3	
Q108	Have you changed school?	No Yes	0 1	If no, skip Q109
Q109	If yes, why?		
Section 2b: Social Support Module				
Q110	How old were you when you became pregnant?			
Q111	In which class were you?	P.6 P.7 S.1 S.2 S.3 S.4 S.5 S.6		
Q112	How long did you stay in school before leave?	Less than 1 school term 1 school term More than 1 school term	1 2 3	
Q113	What was the reaction of, learners, teachers, parents, and community members when you became pregnant?	Rebuked me Was laughed at Felt Sorry No reaction	1 2 3 4	

No	Questions and filters	Responses	Codes (tick)	Skip to
Q114	Did you receive any form of counseling at school or home?	No Yes	0 1	
Q115	Do you know about re-enrolment?	No Yes	0 1	If no, skip Q116
Q116	If yes, it states that? (Tick as many as you know)	Pregnant girls to continue learning, take leave, and re-enroll Teenage mothers change schools to re-enter Teenage mothers should take one year leave School support completion of education after re-admission	1 2 3 4	
Q117	Did you take for maternity leave and re-enroll in this school?	No Yes	0 1	
Q118	How far is this school from your home?	<1 km 1-5 km > 5km	1 2 3	
Q119	Did you re-enroll in school within 1 year?	No Yes	0 1	
Q120	Into which class did you re-enroll?	S.1 S.2 S.3 S.4 S.5 S.6	1 2 3 4 5 6	
Q121	Did you change school?	No Yes	0 1	
Q122	Teachers did these for your re-admittance? Tick as many as possible [<input type="checkbox"/>]	Supported child care Supported with money Provided counseling Facilitated re-entry Others (specify)	1 2 3 4 99	
Q123	Your parents did these to re-admit you? Tick as many as possible [<input type="checkbox"/>]	Child care Financed me Guided me Took me back to school Specify others	1 2 3 4 99	
Q124	School provided money for? Tick as many as possible [<input type="checkbox"/>]	Bursary for school fees Waiver of school fees/school levies Free lunch/meals at school Resting room None	1 2 3 4 99	
Q125	Currently do you pay school fees	No Yes	1 2	

No	Questions and filters	Responses	Codes (tick)	Skip to
Q126	What how much do you pay per term?	UShs.....		
Q127	How much is the school fees per term?	Shs.....		
Q124	What challenges do you face at school and at home and how are they addressed?	Challenges How they are addressed		
Q125	What support systems can be developed to enable re-entry of teenage mothers in schools?		
Q126	What framework can be designed to effectively implement the re-entry policy in schools?		



SUSAN OPOK is a development executive who exudes passion and integrity with the aim to create impact. Currently executive director of Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE) Uganda Chapter, Susan has led three other nongovernmental organizations: country director,

Nurture Africa, Promoting Equality in African Schools (PEAS) Uganda, and the Windle Trust Uganda-Acholi Bursary Scheme, all utilizing different approaches to education of youth focused on providing socio-economic services in development and post conflict programs for youth, in education, maternal and HIV/AIDS care, protection, livelihood support, research, and advocacy to enhance gender equality. Susan's work has involved steering innovative processes, creating partnerships and linkages, engaging with institutional systems strengthening and overall support to the well-being of learners. She has worked closely with government of Uganda structures and development partners and is also an entrepreneur, having started a micro-enterprise to facilitate sustainable livelihoods for vulnerable communities. She sits on various boards and is a mentor and advocate for girls' and youth education—a cause that has heightened her resilience and self-awareness.

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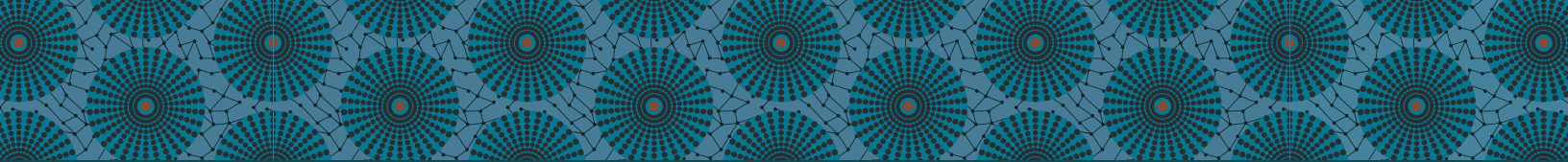
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