

ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

Poor Parenting: Teenagers' Views on Adolescent Pregnancies in Eastern Uganda

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ABSTRACT

In Uganda teenage pregnancy is considered a problem for moral and social, as well as health, reasons. This qualitative study in Busia District focused on the views of teenagers themselves as expressed in 9 focus group discussions with girls and boys. Their perspectives were contrasted with those of community leaders and mothers of adolescents. The young people blamed teenage pregnancy on failures of the parental generation. They asserted that parents and guardians were both too lenient and too harsh, that they failed to provide for their daughters' needs, and that they pressured them into early marriages instead of giving priority to education. Although poverty and family breakdown were recognized as underlying structural causes of parental failure, the teenagers experienced these factors in their everyday lives as problems with their parents and guardians. The teenagers expressed the 'enlightened' view that adolescent pregnancy was undesirable, even though many girls have few alternatives to marriage and childbearing (*Afr J Reprod Health* 2009; 13[4]:113-127).

RÉSUMÉ

Mauvaise éducation des enfants : Les opinions des adolescents sur la grossesse chez les adolescentes en Ouganda de l'est. En Ouganda, on considère que la grossesse chez les adolescentes est un problème pour des raisons morales, sociales aussi bien que de la santé. Cette étude qualitative menée dans le District de Busia est concentrée sur les opinions des adolescents eux-mêmes comme elles ont été exprimées dans 9 discussions à groupe cible avec les filles et les garçons. Nous avons mis leurs opinions en contraste avec celles des chefs de la communauté et les mères des adolescents. Les jeunes gens ont rejeté la responsabilité de la grossesse chez les adolescentes sur le dos des parents. Ils affirment que les parents et les gardiens étaient à la fois trop indulgents et trop sévères qu'ils ont échoué dans leur responsabilité de fournir ce dont leurs filles ont besoin et qu'ils ont mis la pression sur les filles pour qu'elles se marient tôt au lieu de donner la priorité à l'éducation. Bien que la pauvreté et la rature dans la vie familiale ont été reconnues comme étant des causes structurales qui sous-tendent l'échec parental, les adolescents vivent ces expériences quotidiennement comme des problèmes avec leurs parents et leurs gardiens. Les adolescents ont exprimé cette opinion éclairée que la grossesse chez les adolescentes était indésirable, bien que beaucoup de filles ont peu d'alternatifs au mariage et à la maternité (*Afr J Reprod Health* 2009; 13[4]:113-127).

KEYWORDS: Parental care, adolescent pregnancies, Uganda

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Introduction

Adolescent pregnancy is seen as a problem in Uganda. But what kind of problem is it? An immediate answer is that it is a health problem—in fact, one of the key reproductive health concerns in the country. The most recent Demographic and Health Survey¹ points to higher morbidity and mortality for young mothers and their children. Early childbearing is an indication of unprotected sex and thus a red flag marking the dangers posed by HIV and STDs. Unwanted pregnancies may lead to unsafe illegal abortions and the risk of death². Moreover termination of education when pregnant girls are required to leave school has indirect effects on the health of mothers and children, in that mothers' education is positively correlated with health indicators, including child survival³.

Yet teenage pregnancy is more than a health problem. It is also perceived as a moral issue, especially when the girl is not married. Understanding moral concerns necessarily makes the problem a social and cultural one. Sexuality and reproduction have not been subjected to proper social control; parents who have invested money in a girl's education are disappointed; questions arise about who is responsible for the care and support of the child; pressure may be brought on the girl to marry; the paternity of a child must be established, especially in patrilineal societies, and this may involve confrontations, compensation, lawsuits, and even imprisonment for 'defilement'. Progressive campaigners for gender

equality emphasize education and delayed marriage for girls⁴; for them there are human rights issues with ethical if not moral overtones.

This study addresses adolescent pregnancy as a social and moral issue that can be studied in terms of the different perspectives and positions of teenagers and their parents or guardians. Whereas much research takes a 'neutral' point of view about the factors responsible, this work specifically distinguished the viewpoints of teenage boys and girls, and contrasted them with the opinions of mothers and other key adults about reasons for premarital pregnancy. Strikingly, the teenagers in eastern Uganda were highly concerned about their relationships to their parents. They were critical and sometimes bitter in describing intergenerational issues that promoted teenage pregnancy and what they saw as the moral failures of parents and guardians.

Background and setting

A comparison of Demographic and Health Survey data from eleven African countries collected in the late 1980s showed that 68% of Ugandan women aged 20-24 and 73% of those aged 35-39 had given birth before age 20⁵. Among those eleven countries, Uganda was firmly in the lead in terms of teenage motherhood. Since the turn of the millennium, Ugandan Demographic and Health Surveys (UDHS) show a decline in adolescent motherhood. In 2001, at the time of this study, 31% of girls ages 15-19 had begun childbearing, a decrease

from 43% in 1995. The 2000-2001 rates were highest among teenagers who were poor, uneducated, and rural. The eastern sub-region, where this study was undertaken, had one of the highest levels of teenage childbearing at 37% of those currently aged 15-19. Evidence shows that age at first sex and at first marriage had also declined, and this fits with the decrease in teenage childbearing evident over the last decade⁶. By 2006, the UDHS reported a national rate of 25%, a substantial fall, but the unevenness of teenage childbearing was still pronounced and with a rate of 31% the eastern sub-region continued to be well above the national level⁷.

While rates have been falling, concern has been rising. Whereas early marriage and early entry into sexual relations and motherhood were once the accepted norm, Ugandan policy now aims at delaying them, as does policy in neighbouring Tanzania⁸. The intention is partly to protect girls from the danger of HIV infection and partly to encourage them to stay in school. (Family planning and control of population growth seem to be more important reasons for urging girls to delay sexual activity in countries like Kenya and Tanzania with a stronger policy on limiting total fertility.) The Defilement Law prescribes a heavy punishment for sexual relations with a girl under 18, the legal age of majority, even if the relation is consensual and the partners are of the same age. The health education efforts to prevent the spread of HIV also focus on protecting girls from premarital sexual activity and pregnancy.

The problematization of teenage sexuality, marriage, and motherhood has been emphasized not only by policy makers, but also by NGOs, women's rights activists and the media. There is thus a public 'enlightened' criticism of the pattern whereby girls, especially from rural areas and poor families, are sexually active and marry at a young age. An alternative viewpoint, which is widely held but muted in national policy discussions, is that marriage or cohabitation and motherhood are the normal routes to social recognition and economic security. Especially for girls who are not in school or who have few prospects for continuing education and securing a job, there may seem little point in delaying.

The setting of this study was Busia, a rural district bordering Kenya in the eastern part of Uganda. The population of Busia District is comprised of the closely related Basamia and Bagwe people, and a variety of other ethnic groups who have migrated to the area. The district is relatively poor, with an economy based on agriculture, which is not very profitable, fishing on Lake Victoria, and a vibrant cross-border trade, part of which is 'informal'. Much of this trade is focused on Busia town, the only significant urban centre, where hotels, discos, music shops, and video centres, are to be found. Children are increasingly exposed to different sources of information—newspapers, magazines, internet, television and the FM radio stations that are mushrooming in the area as in the rest of the country. Commercial sex is a feature of the urban and trading

milieu and of the fishing villages. Transactional sex, the exchange of sex for gifts or money on a non-commercial basis, is a common pattern here as it is in other parts of East Africa⁹⁻¹¹. At the same time, the activities of churches and mosques, public and private schools, and NGOs, often with donor backing, emphasize that teenage sexual activity and childbearing are problems. Health workers and teachers in the district underlined their concern that adolescent girls start sexual activities at an early age (even at 9 to 12 years, as some noted).

In principle, teenagers in Busia District lived with their parents, usually near the extended family of their father, since land was inherited patrilineally and wives went to live in the homes of their husbands. Instability in families was common in the area, mostly due to separation and divorce or death of one of the spouses. Polygyny was favoured by many men, but outside affairs or bringing a second wife often led to the departure of the first wife. Then children might remain with the father (especially boys had an interest in staying with their fathers since they acquired land rights through him), or they might go with the mother into a new marriage, or stay with another relative, often a maternal grandmother. In general, children often stayed for shorter or longer periods with other family members, not only because parents had divorced, but also because they had lost one or both parents to AIDS, or in order to take advantage of a schooling opportunity.

Universal Primary Education was established in 1997 and at the time of the

study about half of girls ages 15-19 had completed some, but not all seven, years of primary school. Girls tended to drop out of school at a higher rate than boys, and more boys went on to secondary school¹².

The situation of young people in Busia may to some extent be influenced by its border location. During the time of 'regimes' (1971-1986), it was known for cross-border trade and smuggling (*magendo*). Mobility was not only a matter of traders coming to and passing through Busia; many family members left the district for shorter or longer periods to seek work and opportunities in wealthier environments. Fishing involves mobility too for both the fisherman and those who trade in fish. Mobility may contribute to the family breakdown that our informants underlined.

Methods

The study was carried out in 2001 and covered six sub counties: Buhehe, Lumino, Bulumbi, Masaba, Buteba and Busia Town Council. These were randomly chosen out of the nine sub counties that make up the district, with the exception of Busia Town Council, which was purposively selected due to its uniqueness as the only urban area. This was a descriptive cross-sectional study that used qualitative methods of data collection. A total of 11 focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted with adolescent girls (6), adolescent boys (3), mothers of adolescents (1) and community leaders (1).

The themes of the FGDs were adolescent pregnancies and early marriages: contributing factors, attitudes, and interventions. There were 6 to 12 participants per focus group, selected with the assistance of leaders from the sampled villages. Focus groups for adolescent girls were conducted according to age dividing those aged 13 to 15 years from those aged 16 to 20 years. This helped the young girls to express themselves freely during the discussions. The groups included both in- and out-of-school girls. Adolescent boys were aged 15 – 20 years. They were considered key stakeholders, as sexual partners of adolescent girls. There were no FGDs for boys under 15 because only a small proportion of boys have started sexual activity at that age. (The Uganda Demographic and Health Surveys for 2001 and 2006 showed that nearly a quarter of girls, but only about 10% of boys were sexually active by age 15.) Adult community members and mothers of teenagers were included in the study so as to get their views about early pregnancies and their recommendations on how to prevent it. In addition a total of 16 key informant interviews were conducted with people involved in adolescent health in the area; these included district health officials, local leaders, health workers, Senior Women Teachers, traditional birth attendants and members of the Safe Motherhood committee.

The extensive data was subjected to a thematic analysis, retaining the gender and generation differences in order to

examine possible contrasts in views expressed.

Results

The adolescents themselves, and to a large extent the community leaders, blamed parents for failing to care for and control their teenage daughters. The main lines of criticism are presented in the sections below. While teenage boys and girls expressed similar views on almost every point, the mothers of adolescents had a different perspective, tending to lay blame upon the girls themselves, or their peers, or other community members. Their views are summarized in the last section.

Parents and guardians fail to control girls' movements

Adolescent girls reported that parents and guardians were no longer strict with their daughters' movements as (they hear) was the case in the olden days, and this allowed them to loiter around. They said that young girls were now going to social gatherings such as night prayers, discos, parties, and blue movies. In these places, adolescents saw examples of bad behaviour and had opportunities to imitate it. When they experimented with these models, they ended up becoming pregnant. As one girl explained:

Through the blue movies that we watch, one may want to experience it or do it practically.

Because of this freedom to move around, in-school adolescent girls reported that adolescents started dating early and this

led to pregnancy. They further observed that some girls were just raped during these social gatherings.

There was general agreement among both in-school and out-of-school girls on the failure of parents and guardians to control their daughters. They reported that family breakdown contributed to reduced parental control of adolescent girls, which led them to loiter about acquiring lovers and falling pregnant. The assumption was that without parental discipline, girls were unable to control themselves, a point that was also emphasized by boys during focus group discussions. One adolescent boy remarked:

When girls enter places where there are boys and music, their behaviour changes completely.

In-depth interviews with schoolteachers and local leaders also confirmed the view that parents did not sufficiently monitor their daughters' whereabouts. They noted that adolescent girls had freedom to go to night discos where they learnt bad habits like taking alcohol and engaging in sexual activities and thus became pregnant.

Parents and guardians are too harsh

Paradoxically, teenagers complained of harshness as well as leniency. They pointed to the mistreatment of girls by their parents and guardians, particularly by stepmothers. Adolescent girls stated that most stepmothers were too harsh; they overloaded them with household work, which made them run away to better places where they got men,

married, and became pregnant. Adolescents further reported that sometimes parents and guardians sent away their daughters when they came home late. They could be picked up by men, with whom they spent the night, played sex and got pregnant. One schoolgirl said:

Because of this harshness, adolescents seek consolation by getting boyfriends who always impregnate them.

The issue of mistreatment of young girls by their parents and guardians also came out strongly during in-depth interviews with school teachers who reported that they called the responsible adults and counseled them as indicated below:

There was one girl in Primary 5 who went to visit a friend and delayed to come back home. When she came back, the mother blamed her for being late and told her to go back. She went back, stayed for two days and then came back home. Again the mother told her to pack her things and go and stay with that friend. This time the girl decided to go with a man and got married. I talked to her uncle who later talked to the mother. The girl was later on allowed back in the home and she resumed studies.

Parents and guardians fail to provide basic needs

Adolescent girls reported that due to the rampant poverty in the country, parents had difficulty in providing basic necessities such as food, clothing, shoes

and soap. Thus girls found men who provided these items in exchange for sex, sometimes impregnating them in the process:

Girls lack basic things, so boys convince them easily that they will be given these things in exchange for sex.

Admiring nice things like shoes, clothes and soap that their parents or guardians could not afford to provide and exchanging sex for these things were emphasized by all adolescent girls, both in-school and out-of-school. Adolescent boys and opinion leaders also stressed the issue of lack of enough material support from parents and guardians as a factor in adolescent pregnancy during focus group discussions. In-depth interviews with schoolteachers, health workers and local leaders pointed to the same problem.

The death of parents deprived children not only of parental love, but of other basic needs, such as clothing, food, shelter and health care. It was noted that orphaned adolescents opted for early marriages and other risky sexual behaviour in the hope of gaining a better life.

Household poverty was a major issue for schoolgirls as it undermined payment of school fees and purchase of other school requirements like books, pens and uniforms. Adolescent girls reported that with the prevailing poverty, parents and guardians could not afford to provide adolescent girls with all the school requirements, a fact that led to adolescent girls dropping out of school thereby becoming idle, joining bad groups and engaging in sex. Other schoolgirls

reflected on the risk of depending on a boyfriend to help with school requirements:

You may think that by getting a lover, he will provide you with school fees but instead he ends up impregnating you.

Although poverty as a factor in adolescent pregnancy featured prominently in all focus groups and in-depth interviews, the issue of failure to pay school fees was only highlighted by adolescent girls and schoolteachers.

Parents and guardians do not provide information and guidance

Both in-school and out-of-school adolescent girls indicated that they lacked enough knowledge about their sexuality and information on the use of family planning and contraceptives. They said that most parents, guardians and elders could not provide such knowledge because they were not confident about what to tell the young girls. Out-of-school adolescents were worst affected because they reported getting information on sexuality through 'rumours'. Schoolteachers and health workers observed that lack of such knowledge was a very important factor in the occurrence of adolescent pregnancies in the area. Schoolteachers complained that parents and guardians were neglecting to play this role hoping that the teachers would do it, whereas teachers were busy with other school activities. Local leaders confirmed that parents and guardians were not offering proper guidance to their children. They further observed that

even government programs on safe motherhood, family planning and condom distribution did not target adolescents for fear of spoiling these girls:

Safe motherhood is entirely for grown up women and this leaves behind the adolescents.

Furthermore, in-depth interviews and discussions with community members revealed that parents and guardians felt shy to discuss with their daughters issues related to their sexuality because traditionally extreme sexual modesty, even a degree of avoidance, obtained between parents and children.

Parents pressure their daughters to find a partner

Adolescent girls revealed that some parents and guardians (and even siblings) pressurized them to get settled in marriage at a young age. One explained:

Another reason is culture because if a girl does not marry at 14 or 16 years, it becomes a curse to the family.

Discussions with adolescent boys also confirmed this finding. During in-depth interviews, teachers reported that schoolgirls tell them that parents and guardians advise them to marry early. Other adolescent girls were just forced to marry as reported by one schoolteacher:

We have a girl in Primary 4, aged between 13 and 14 years. The mother is pestering her to get married. We called the parent and talked to her. She denied the allegation but the girl confirmed it.

We tried to guide and counsel the parent. The mother has a husband but she is the type of person who divorces now and again, and only comes back to check on the girl whether she is ready for marriage.

The need to collect bridewealth from their daughters' husbands' families was one reason for encouraging early marriages. It was further explained that some parents and guardians thought this was one way of alleviating poverty. Adolescents reported that in some cases, parents and guardians sent their girls to have an affair with a boy from a family, which they suspected to have money. Adolescent girls who were already married by the time of the study also confirmed that their senior relatives had wanted them to marry:

Some parents give out girls willingly like they gave me out. Some grandparents feel happy because they will be getting cigarettes.

Interviews with health workers and district leaders reinforced this finding; they reported that bridewealth was highly valued. The standard amount agreed was 3 cows, 2 goats and some little money. It was difficult for most men and their families to raise this amount and it was not necessary that the entire payment be transferred before a marriage could be recognized. But still it stood as an obligation and thus a potential economic input for the girl's family.

A concomitant of the expectation that girls should marry early was said to be the low value attached to girls' education.

Girls reported that some parents/guardians just refused to educate their daughters saying it was a waste of time to send them to school when they were supposed to get married. If one daughter became pregnant while still at school, parents were discouraged to pay school fees for their other girls.

Opinion leaders and school teachers interviewed were also of the view that parents in the area attached low value to girls' education. This led to the adolescents becoming idle, loitering around to get men, engaging in sex and becoming pregnant. Schoolteachers reported that:

Girls tell us that their parents tell them to marry early, that educating girls is a waste of time.

The Defilement Law is not applied

The Defilement Law, which makes sexual intercourse with girls under 18 a criminal offense, is seen as especially relevant in cases where underage girls become pregnant. However, adolescent girls reported that many parents and guardians were not applying the existing Defilement Law because they opted to settle the issue with the person who impregnated the young girl, rather than involve the authorities. The parents and guardians asked for money in compensation for the school fees spent on the girl and then allowed the man to marry her, thereby leaving him to go unpunished according to the law, while collecting a compensation that confirmed their rights over the girl, just as bridewealth does. Interviews with district

officials also confirmed that parents and guardians of adolescent girls who became pregnant were not applying the existing laws on defilement. Parents opted for out-of-court settlements because there were some immediate economic benefits (in the form of compensation); there was also the possibility of the man marrying the girl or at least providing some support for the child, which would not be forthcoming were he in prison. Parents believed that sending such culprits to the police was useless, because they bribed their way out and went unpunished. It may be that parents avoided litigation partly because of the moral opprobrium attached to unplanned teenage pregnancy. But there were probably other moral concerns as well: in particular, ensuring a good relation to the father of the child and his family.

Mothers' views

Discussions in the focus group consisting of mothers of adolescents provided quite another view of factors promoting teenage pregnancy and early marriage. Their opinions are summarized briefly here to put the views of the young people into another perspective.

Some mothers blamed the girls themselves for misbehaving. They said that girls were just stubborn and escaped from homes at night to go to discos. Children did not want to be disciplined for wrong-doing. They feel mistreated if they are advised about their behaviour. Mothers said that girls failed to confide their problems, making it difficult to offer advice. They thought that girls were

greedy for good things and therefore easily seduced by men who promised them gifts. Mothers suggested that girls were looking for excuses to drop out of school because they were not doing well in their lessons. This view was confirmed by a senior woman teacher who said that when a girl has to repeat a class three or four times, she finally feels ashamed and drops out of school and gets married. (One out-of-school girl put it bluntly: *'We girls are too dull at school so we resort to marriage.'*)

Daughters were not the only ones to blame, according to mothers. They reported that peer pressure was a major problem and that girls sought advice from their peers rather than their parents. Mothers remarked that community members interfered when they tried to discipline their children, accusing them of mistreatment. They said that grandparents sometimes advised their granddaughters to marry early, to obtain a more secure situation for themselves and perhaps some help for the grandparents too. They confirmed that parents sometimes feel happy to see their girls married early because it can reduce their chances of acquiring AIDS.

Discussion

Premarital pregnancy is not new in African societies. In 1933 Isaac Schapera published an article on its increasing frequency and toleration among the Kxatla people of the Bechuanaland Protectorate. Beyond assertions about 'general moral decay', his informants offered several explanations for the

change. The old initiation ceremonies, which had emphasized chastity, were no longer held. Male labour migration created a shortage of marriageable men in the reserve, a pattern strengthened by church prohibition of polygyny. Schooling and European influence had created a taste for independence among young people; they no longer accepted their parents' guidance, especially not in matters of marriage. Thus Schapera's informants explained premarital pregnancy in terms of political economy and patterns of cultural change¹³. Many recent studies offer similar views about changing social conditions¹⁴⁻¹⁶. The informants in our study also pointed to cultural changes (discos, blue movies) and to economic conditions. But mainly they spoke about the everyday issues of family relations, including household economy, communication, values and expectations. It was not 'general moral decay' that worried them, but the specific moral failings of the parental generation.

Bledsoe and Cohen suggest that adolescent fertility in Africa can be understood in terms of two configurations with very different implications. The first pattern involves (often rural) teenagers who marry and give birth early. 'Marriage and childbearing for these young women commence with the approval, if not the insistence, of their families, for reasons of economic necessity or commitment to societal or religious norms that confer value on a woman through childbearing¹⁷. The second configuration, gaining ground and causing increasing concern, involves pregnancy of

unmarried teenagers, often when they are still in school. Births to young mothers outside of marriage are strongly disapproved. Whereas teenage pregnancy in Europe is seen as a health risk, in Africa, as in the United States, it is viewed as a moral problem. Bledsoe and Cohen argue that the social context of adolescent childbearing in Africa has changed; schooling and other factors delay marriage, lengthening the period between childhood and adulthood, and exposing girls to the moral opprobrium of unmarried motherhood.

The distinction between morally acceptable early marriage and immoral premarital pregnancy serves as an initial framework for discussing the material from Busia. However this study provides further nuances to that dichotomy through its emphasis on the perspectives of teenagers.

Beginning with Bledsoe and Cohen's second configuration, disapproved premarital pregnancy, the study findings confirm that teenagers saw pre-marital pregnancy as a social and moral problem. However, from the point of view of the teenagers, moral fault lies with their parents and guardians rather than themselves. In pointing out the failure of responsible adults to control teenage girls, the adolescents emphasized the moral obligation of the older generation to supervise them closely. They seemed to see themselves as moral dependents rather than as independent actors capable of controlling themselves. The fact that teenagers blamed guardians both for being too lenient and too harsh suggests that their underlying complaint was that

their parents and guardians did not show enough care and concern. The failure to provide guidance, advice and information was another aspect of this perceived lack. Adolescents recognized that parents were poorly equipped to explain about reproductive health and contraception; they also realized that the culturally prescribed avoidance of reference to sexuality between parents and children made such discussions very difficult. But they seemed to long for a more supportive relationship in which senior relatives offered advice and attentiveness.

Both teenagers and adults pointed out two structural reasons for the failure of the parental generation to provide sufficient care. The first was poverty; parents and guardians could not afford to meet the needs of teenage girls, such as school fees and uniforms, much less the small luxuries like soap, body oil, or a new dress. With little income and many children (total completed fertility rate in Uganda is just under 7) as well as AIDS orphans to care for, household economies were usually stretched. The second reason for the failures of the parental generation was family breakdown. As we have mentioned, this was due to death of parents as well as divorce. Orphans tended to feel that they were not as well treated as biological children¹⁸. In cases where parents had remarried the relation to stepmothers or stepfathers was often problematic.

Turning to Bledsoe and Cohen's first configuration, pregnancy within early marriage, teenagers again blamed their parents and guardians. They were critical of parents and other older relatives who

encouraged them to marry young, either before or after they fell pregnant. What was morally acceptable to their elders, was wrong according to the adolescents. In the focus group discussions, the girls, like the boys and the teachers, seemed to adopt the dominant discourse that girls should be educated and that schooling is incompatible with marriage as well as with childbearing. This position may have been partly situational, for the benefit of the interviewers whom they assumed had progressive views on these matters. In other situations, some girls at least, might have seen early marriage as their best option. Yet in these discussions they clearly placed approval of, and insistence on, early marriage on a par with other moral failings of the senior generation. They accused their parents and grandparents of wanting bridewealth and the other gifts that are expected from a daughter's husband. They suspected that their parents wanted to relinquish responsibility for educational and economic support by handing them over to a husband.

There is a striking contrast between the discourse of educating girls and the realities of life chances for young people. Schooling is highly valued in eastern Uganda and many see it as a gateway to a better life¹⁹. For girls as for boys, education is linked to hopes for employment, social mobility, and being a modern person. In other fieldwork in eastern Uganda, the second author has also heard explicit or implicit criticism of parents for 'just wanting their daughters to marry' instead of keeping them in school. Yet the reality is that secondary

schooling is expensive, often of poor quality, and unlikely to lead to employment for either girls or boys.

Generational conflicts in Africa revolve around several different issues, but teenage sexuality and reproduction is surely one of the most tense²⁰. While older people are quick to criticize the 'loose morals' of today's youth, young people also point to the failings of the older generations in fulfilling their duties as guides, supporters, and providers. The immense difficulties in communicating across the generational divide, and the painful situation of teenage girls is movingly described in two recent studies from Tanzania^{21,22}. The present study in Uganda reinforces the picture, not only of a generation gap, but of longing for a particular kind of family: one that is intact; has financial resources; holds progressive ideas about the education and rights of girls; communicates well about intimate matters; and takes time to pay attention to teenage daughters with the right mix of concern and affection.

The issue of teenage pregnancy and sexuality is closely linked to the dangers of HIV infection in the minds of many people. Some of the parents and health workers interviewed mentioned that sexual activity exposed teenagers to the risks of contracting HIV. But in our research this danger was not brought up by the young people themselves. A study by Bukuluki and colleagues in the nearby district of Jinja specifically addressed the twin dangers of HIV and pregnancy and found that young people were far more concerned about pregnancy²³. Our findings fit with theirs, although our

study did not explicitly pursue the comparison. In the Jinja study, teenagers suggested that pregnancy was more immediately evident and shameful than HIV and had abrupt consequences for both girls and boys because it was morally condemned. We might add that teenage pregnancy is more common than adolescent HIV infection, which may be one reason for the greater concern. When our study was undertaken, HIV testing was not yet available in the district and awareness was not very high among teenagers, whereas teenage pregnancy was a frequent occurrence. From the teenagers' perspective, the moral criticism of the parental generation might be just as relevant to HIV infection as to pregnancy. The point remains that they felt their parents had failed them.

Conclusion

The study shows that adolescents in eastern Uganda related teenage pregnancy not so much to the sexual practices of teenagers as to the failures of girls' parents and guardians. They presented themselves in a generational perspective, rather than as an isolated category of 'youth' with its own problems and sub-culture. It was striking that adolescent girls claimed that girls needed more control from their seniors, as if they could not control themselves; but control should be blended with concern and support. They felt that their parents and guardians had an obligation to provide them with basic needs as well as information. However they did not like the idea of their guardians

controlling their sexuality by forcing them into early marriages. It is further evident that much as the Defilement Law was meant to protect adolescent girls from early sexual activities, it in fact reinforced the rights of the parental generation over girls' sexuality in that girls' senior relatives could be compensated by men who appropriated that sexuality.

While overall political, economic, and cultural changes (including the response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic) surely are relevant to understanding teenage pregnancy, these changes are experienced by adolescents not so much directly as indirectly within the framework of their daily relations to parents and guardians. In underlining the responsibility of the senior generation for their conduct, they also emphasized the obligations that they felt were being neglected. The young people from Busia District seemed to be pointing to the need for policies and programmes that address the parental generation together with their adolescent children.

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