

Early pregnancy as a mechanism of female educational exclusion in Ugandan secondary schools

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Abstract

Early pregnancy constitutes one of the most pervasive yet structurally embedded barriers to girls' secondary education in Uganda, operating through intersecting social, economic, and institutional mechanisms that collectively sustain gender inequality. This study examined the role of early pregnancy as a mechanism of female educational exclusion in Ugandan secondary schools, with a specific focus on the prevalence of school dropout attributable to pregnancy, the socio-economic and institutional factors that mediate the pregnancy-dropout relationship, and the effectiveness of existing re-entry policies and school-based support systems in facilitating academic continuation. A cross-sectional quantitative research design was employed, utilizing a structured questionnaire administered to a sample of 500 female secondary school students and recent school leavers from 20 purposively selected secondary schools across rural and urban districts in Uganda. Data were analysed using univariate descriptive statistics, bivariate chi-square tests, and binary logistic regression. The findings revealed that 40.2% of respondents reported a history of pregnancy, of whom 87.2% had dropped out of school. Early pregnancy was the strongest independent predictor of school dropout (Adjusted OR = 28.7; 95% CI: 14.3-57.6; $p < 0.001$), followed by lack of access to school re-entry policies (Adj OR = 31.4; 95% CI: 17.2-57.4; $p < 0.001$). Rural residence, low household income, and low paternal education further compounded dropout risk. Re-entry rates were dismally low (22.1%) and strongly associated with access to financial support, parental encouragement, and teacher attitudes. The study concluded that early pregnancy functions not merely as a biological event but as a socially and institutionally amplified mechanism of educational exclusion, whose effects are disproportionately borne by girls in resource-constrained and rural settings. The study recommends strengthening national school re-entry policies, scaling up multi-sector socio-economic support programmes for pregnant and parenting learners, and implementing comprehensive sexuality education integrated into the formal secondary school curriculum to address the root causes of adolescent pregnancy and its educational consequences.

Keywords: Early pregnancy, school dropout, female educational exclusion, school re-entry, Uganda, secondary education, logistic regression, adolescent girls

INTRODUCTION

Education is widely recognized as a fundamental human right and a critical pathway to gender equality, economic empowerment, and national development; yet, for millions of adolescent girls across sub-Saharan Africa, this right remains systematically curtailed by the intersecting consequences of early pregnancy (Julius, 2025b, 2025c; Julius & Nelson, 2024; Julius Arinaitwe, 2025). In Uganda, adolescent pregnancy constitutes a public health and educational crisis of significant proportions: national statistics indicate that approximately 25% of girls aged 15-19 are either pregnant or already mothers, a reality that translates directly into interrupted schooling, truncated life opportunities, and the perpetuation of intergenerational cycles of poverty and gender subordination (John et al., 2023a, 2023b; Makumbi et al., 2025; Sangaré et al., 2012). Secondary education, which represents a pivotal developmental stage during which girls acquire cognitive skills, social agency, and economic competencies, is particularly vulnerable to

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disruption by early pregnancy, not only due to the physical demands of gestation and childbirth but more consequentially because of punitive institutional policies, social stigma, parental withdrawal of support, and structural resource constraints that collectively ensure most pregnant girls never return to the classroom (Gibson-Helm et al., 2015; Mathias, et al., 2022; Rosenbaum et al., 2016). While Uganda's Ministry of Education and Sports promulgated a Presidential Directive in 1998 affirming that pregnant girls should be allowed to remain in or return to school, implementation has remained inconsistent, under-resourced, and deeply contested at the school level, resulting in a de facto regime of exclusion that operates through informal social norms, teacher attitudes, peer dynamics, and community values rather than through explicit legal prohibition (Aidonojie et al., 2024; Supardin & Syatar, 2021; Susan, 2024). This study thus examined early pregnancy as a multi-dimensional mechanism of female educational exclusion in Ugandan secondary schools, interrogating the statistical relationships between pregnancy history, socio-demographic characteristics, institutional factors, and educational outcomes to generate evidence that can inform policy reform, programmatic intervention, and advocacy for gender-responsive education systems in Uganda and comparable contexts across the region.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The relationship between early pregnancy and female educational exclusion in Uganda is deeply embedded within a historical and structural context characterized by patriarchal norms, inadequate sexual and reproductive health education, poverty, and institutional failure (Julius & Geofrey, 2025; Julius & Mategeko, 2025; Julius & Sula, n.d.; Julius & Twinomujuni, 2025a, 2025c). Uganda has one of the highest adolescent fertility rates in the world, estimated at 134 births per 1,000 women aged 15-19 according to the Uganda Demographic and Health Survey (UDHS, 2022), situating the country among those most severely affected by the educational consequences of early childbearing (Asrat et al., 2024; Evelyne et al., 2023; Harriet et al., 2023; Salume & Jacob, 2024). Despite international commitments to gender equality in education under the Sustainable Development Goals - particularly SDG 4 (quality education) and SDG 5 (gender equality) - and regional frameworks such as the African Union's Campaign to End Child Marriage, Uganda continues to grapple with a paradox wherein national policy nominally supports the retention and reintegration of pregnant learners while ground-level realities undermine these provisions at nearly every institutional juncture (Ariho & Kabagenyi, 2020; Jane & Isaac Kazaara, 2023; Mark & Moses, 2025; Yudaya & Aggrey, 2023). Research conducted in similar contexts has consistently demonstrated that early pregnancy does not independently determine educational outcomes; rather, it interacts powerfully with household poverty, school type, parental education, and the availability of targeted support services to produce differential patterns of dropout and re-entry (Julius & Godfrey, 2025; Julius & Milly, 2025; Julius & Sula, 2025a, 2025b; Julius & Twinomujuni, 2025b). In Uganda specifically, studies have documented the role of school fees as a compounding exclusionary factor when girls return from maternity leave without financial resources, the prevalence of negative teacher attitudes that stigmatize and shame returning mothers, and the absence of childcare facilities or flexible timetabling that would enable young mothers to reconcile caregiving with academic demands (Adams & Myran, 2022; Bala et al., 2020; Carrillo et al., 2023; Julius, 2025a; Tumusabe et al., 2022). Furthermore, the concentration of pregnant girls in government secondary schools - which serve predominantly low-income rural communities - reflects the structural inequality of an education system where the most marginalized girls face the greatest institutional barriers to continuation (Kurusumu & Rebecca, 2025;

Rebecca & Jill Margaret, 2024; Suomi et al., 2024; Yildiz et al., 2023). This study situates itself within this broader landscape of educational injustice, drawing on quantitative empirical evidence to map the pathways through which early pregnancy becomes a mechanism not merely of temporary educational disruption but of lasting and often permanent exclusion.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Notwithstanding Uganda's formal commitment to inclusive education and the protection of pregnant girls' right to schooling, early pregnancy continues to function as one of the most powerful drivers of female dropout from secondary school, with the majority of affected girls failing to re-enrol following delivery. The persistence of this phenomenon represents a critical gap between policy intent and implementation reality: existing re-entry directives are poorly communicated, inconsistently enforced, and insufficiently supported by the fiscal, human, and social resources required to make academic reintegration viable for parenting adolescents (Gracious Kazaara & Kazaara, 2025; Jamil et al., 2024; Kazaara & Nancy, 2025; Sullivan et al., 2023). Moreover, the quantitative evidence base examining the specific pathways through which early pregnancy translates into educational exclusion - and the institutional, socio-economic, and community-level factors that moderate this relationship - remains limited in the Ugandan context, constraining the ability of policymakers, school administrators, civil society organisations, and development partners to design evidence-based interventions that effectively interrupt the pregnancy-to-dropout pipeline (Görgün & Taşgün, 2025; Gracious Kazaara & Nancy, 2025; Nihal & Shekhar, 2024; Pauline, 2023). Without a rigorous understanding of the magnitude, distribution, and determinants of pregnancy-induced educational exclusion, programmatic responses risk misallocating resources, overlooking the most vulnerable sub-populations, and failing to address the structural root causes that sustain this pattern of gender inequality. This study therefore addressed the critical gap in quantitative evidence on early pregnancy as a mechanism of female educational exclusion in Ugandan secondary schools.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Main Objective

To examine early pregnancy as a mechanism of female educational exclusion in Ugandan secondary schools.

Specific Objectives

1. To assess the prevalence and patterns of school dropout associated with early pregnancy among female secondary school students in Uganda.
2. To identify the socio-economic, demographic, and institutional factors associated with pregnancy-induced school dropout among female secondary school students in Uganda.
3. To evaluate the effectiveness of school re-entry policies and support mechanisms in facilitating academic reintegration among pregnant and parenting female learners in Ugandan secondary schools.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What is the prevalence and pattern of school dropout associated with early pregnancy among female secondary school students in Uganda?

2. What socio-economic, demographic, and institutional factors are significantly associated with pregnancy-induced school dropout among female secondary school students in Uganda?
3. To what extent do existing school re-entry policies and support mechanisms facilitate academic reintegration among pregnant and parenting female learners in Ugandan secondary schools?

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a cross-sectional quantitative research design to examine the relationship between early pregnancy and educational exclusion among female secondary school students in Uganda, with data collected between January and April 2024. A sample of 500 female respondents - comprising both current students and recent school leavers who had dropped out within the preceding two years - was recruited from 20 purposively selected secondary schools across four districts in Uganda (Kampala, Wakiso, Mbale, and Lira), chosen to ensure adequate representation across urban-rural divides, government-private school typologies, and regional diversity. Stratified random sampling was employed within each selected school to ensure proportional representation of participants by school year and residential background, and data were collected using a pre-tested, structured self-administered questionnaire comprising closed-ended items on socio-demographic characteristics, reproductive history, school dropout experience, awareness of re-entry policies, availability of institutional and family support, and experiences of stigma. All instruments were translated into Luganda and Luo for participants with limited English proficiency, and research assistants were trained to administer questionnaires in a confidential, non-coercive manner consistent with ethical approval granted by Makerere University Research Ethics Committee. Quantitative data were entered into SPSS version 26.0 and analysed at three progressive levels. First, univariate analysis was conducted to describe the sample characteristics using frequency distributions, percentages, means, and standard deviations for continuous variables, providing an initial mapping of the socio-demographic profile of respondents and the crude prevalence of pregnancy, school dropout, and re-entry. Second, bivariate analysis using Pearson's chi-square tests (with significance threshold set at $p < 0.05$) was performed to examine unadjusted associations between each candidate predictor variable (including pregnancy status, school type, residence, household income, parental education, peer support, and re-entry policy access) and the binary outcome variable of school dropout (yes/no), enabling the identification of factors with statistically significant crude associations warranting inclusion in the multivariable model. Third, binary logistic regression was conducted to simultaneously estimate the adjusted odds ratios (AOR) and 95% confidence intervals for each predictor variable, controlling for the confounding effects of other covariates, with model goodness-of-fit evaluated using the Hosmer-Lemeshow test and model explanatory power assessed via Nagelkerke's R^2 , yielding a parsimonious and statistically robust model explaining the independent determinants of pregnancy-related school dropout.

RESULTS

Socio-Demographic Characteristics and Pregnancy History

Table 1: Socio-demographic Characteristics of Study Participants by Dropout Status (n=500)

Variable	Dropped Out (n=187)	Stayed (n=313)	Total (n=500)	p-value
Age group				
14-16 years	62 (33.2%)	148 (47.3%)	210 (42.0%)	
17-18 years	125 (66.8%)	165 (52.7%)	290 (58.0%)	<0.001
School type				
Government	142 (75.9%)	187 (59.7%)	329 (65.8%)	
Private	45 (24.1%)	126 (40.3%)	171 (34.2%)	0.001
Region				
Rural	138 (73.8%)	172 (54.9%)	310 (62.0%)	
Urban	49 (26.2%)	141 (45.1%)	190 (38.0%)	<0.001
Household income				
Low	131 (70.1%)	119 (38.0%)	250 (50.0%)	
Middle	44 (23.5%)	143 (45.7%)	187 (37.4%)	
High	12 (6.4%)	51 (16.3%)	63 (12.6%)	<0.001
Father's education				
None/Primary	122 (65.2%)	98 (31.3%)	220 (44.0%)	
Secondary	48 (25.7%)	143 (45.7%)	191 (38.2%)	
Tertiary	17 (9.1%)	72 (23.0%)	89 (17.8%)	<0.001
Pregnancy history				
Ever pregnant	163 (87.2%)	38 (12.1%)	201 (40.2%)	
Never pregnant	24 (12.8%)	275 (87.9%)	299 (59.8%)	<0.001

The univariate analysis of the 500 female study participants revealed a socio-demographic profile marked by systematic inequalities that closely tracked the distribution of school dropout. The total sample was comprised of 187 girls who had dropped out of school (37.4%) and 313 who remained enrolled (62.6%), establishing a crude dropout prevalence that was substantially higher than national average rates reported in Uganda's Education Statistical Abstract for the general female secondary school population. The bimodal age distribution, wherein the majority of participants (58.0%) were aged 17-18 years, reflected the period of peak vulnerability to both sexual activity and educational disengagement. Critically, a history of pregnancy was documented in 40.2% of all respondents (n=201), and among those who had ever been pregnant, an overwhelming 87.2% (n=163) had dropped out of school, compared to only

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12.1% (n=38) dropout among those with no pregnancy history ($p < 0.001$), establishing a powerful crude association between early pregnancy and educational exclusion that provided the central statistical finding of the univariate layer of analysis. The distribution of participants across school types reflected Uganda's stratified education landscape, with 65.8% of the total sample attending government secondary schools; however, the concentration of dropout cases in government schools (75.9% of dropouts) versus private institutions (24.1%) indicated a gradient of institutional risk that interacted with pregnancy vulnerability to compound educational exclusion for already-disadvantaged learners.

The household socio-economic data further illuminated the structural determinants of educational vulnerability among the study population. The disproportionate concentration of dropout cases in the lowest income quintile (70.1% of all dropouts came from low-income households, compared to only 38.0% of those who remained in school; $p < 0.001$) underscored the indivisibility of economic and reproductive determinants of educational exclusion, suggesting that pregnancy does not operate as an isolated biological trigger for dropout but functions within an economic ecology that substantially constrains girls' ability to navigate the financial, logistical, and social demands of school continuation during and after pregnancy. Similarly, paternal educational attainment followed a strongly inverse gradient with dropout risk: 65.2% of girls who dropped out had fathers with no or only primary-level education, while only 9.1% had fathers with tertiary education, compared to 23.0% among girls who stayed in school ($p < 0.001$). This finding resonated with a substantial body of comparative education research linking parental human capital to investment in daughters' schooling and to household normative frameworks regarding the perceived value and feasibility of female education, particularly when complicated by reproductive events. Taken together, the univariate profile established that school dropout among females in Uganda was not randomly distributed but was systematically concentrated among the most economically and educationally marginalized girls - those for whom early pregnancy served as a triggering mechanism operating within a pre-existing architecture of structural disadvantage.

Bivariate Analysis: Factors Associated with School Dropout

Table 2: Bivariate Analysis of Factors Associated with School Dropout Among Female Secondary Students (n=500)

Factor	Dropout n(%)	Non-Dropout n(%)	chi2	df	p
Early pregnancy (Yes)	163 (87.2)	38 (12.1)	241.6	1	<0.001
School type (Govt)	142 (75.9)	187 (59.7)	14.8	1	0.001
Rural residence	138 (73.8)	172 (54.9)	17.6	1	<0.001
Low household income	131 (70.1)	119 (38.0)	48.2	1	<0.001
Low father education	122 (65.2)	98 (31.3)	57.9	1	<0.001
Age 17-18 years	125 (66.8)	165 (52.7)	9.4	1	0.002
No peer support	115 (61.5)	89 (28.4)	52.3	1	<0.001

No school re-entry	147 (78.6)	22 (7.0)	218.7	1	<0.001
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The bivariate chi-square analysis identified eight variables with statistically significant crude associations with school dropout at the $p < 0.05$ level, confirming the findings of the univariate analysis while quantifying the differential strength of association across predictor domains. Early pregnancy emerged as the single most statistically powerful predictor of dropout in the bivariate layer, with 87.2% of girls who had ever been pregnant having dropped out compared to 12.1% among those who had never been pregnant ($\chi^2 = 241.6$, $df = 1$, $p < 0.001$), a magnitude of association that was by far the largest observed in the analysis and that underscored the near-deterministic role of pregnancy in precipitating educational disengagement within the Ugandan context. Similarly, the absence of school re-entry mechanisms produced a highly significant association with dropout ($\chi^2 = 218.7$, $p < 0.001$), reflecting the institutional dimension of educational exclusion: in the absence of structured pathways and supported processes for academic reintegration, pregnancy-induced withdrawal from school becomes effectively permanent for the vast majority of affected girls. The school-level and spatial predictors further reinforced the role of structural factors: girls in government schools were significantly more likely to have dropped out than those in private schools ($\chi^2 = 14.8$, $p = 0.001$), and rural residence was significantly associated with dropout compared to urban ($\chi^2 = 17.6$, $p < 0.001$), consistent with the pattern observed in the descriptive analysis.

Beyond the reproductive and spatial variables, the bivariate analysis highlighted the importance of economic and social support dimensions as determinants of educational persistence. Low household income demonstrated a highly significant association with dropout ($\chi^2 = 48.2$, $p < 0.001$), corroborating the structural economic vulnerability documented in Table 1 and suggesting that even when girls wish to continue their education following pregnancy, the financial requirements of school re-enrolment - including school fees, uniforms, scholastic materials, and potential childcare costs - create prohibitive economic barriers for families already operating in conditions of poverty. The lack of peer support for school continuation was likewise strongly associated with dropout ($\chi^2 = 52.3$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that social network influences within the school and community environment play a significant role in shaping girls' educational decisions during and after pregnancy - a finding that aligns with social learning theory frameworks emphasising the importance of normative referents in adolescent decision-making. Low paternal education also produced a highly significant association with dropout ($\chi^2 = 57.9$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that fathers' own educational experience substantially shapes the household value placed on daughters' academic continuation when competing demands of pregnancy and childcare arise. Collectively, these bivariate findings pointed to a multi-dimensional model of pregnancy-induced educational exclusion wherein reproductive, economic, social, and institutional factors compound one another to produce a cumulative disadvantage that is substantially greater than any single predictor in isolation - providing the empirical rationale for the logistic regression model reported in the subsequent section.

Logistic Regression: Independent Predictors of School Dropout

Table 3: Binary Logistic Regression of Predictors of School Dropout Among Female Secondary Students in Uganda (n=500)

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Predictor Variable	Crude OR	Adj OR	95% CI	Wald chi2	p-value
Early pregnancy (ref: No)					
Yes	41.2	28.7	14.3-57.6	88.4	<0.001
School type (ref: Private)					
Government	2.9	2.1	1.3-3.4	9.6	0.002
Residence (ref: Urban)					
Rural	3.1	2.4	1.5-3.9	14.3	<0.001
HH Income (ref: High)					
Low	5.8	3.6	1.9-6.8	17.8	<0.001
Middle	3.2	2.1	1.1-4.0	5.4	0.020
Father educ (ref: Tertiary)					
None/Primary	5.4	3.1	1.6-5.9	11.2	<0.001
Secondary	2.2	1.6	0.9-2.9	2.8	0.094
No re-entry policy access	43.8	31.4	17.2-57.4	91.3	<0.001
No peer support	4.1	2.8	1.7-4.6	13.5	<0.001
Nagelkerke R ² : 0.71 Hosmer-Lemeshow p=0.43 Model accuracy: 88.6%					

The binary logistic regression model demonstrated excellent overall fit (Nagelkerke R² = 0.71; Hosmer-Lemeshow p = 0.43; model accuracy = 88.6%), confirming that the selected predictors collectively explained a substantial proportion of the variance in the school dropout outcome while demonstrating adequate calibration between observed and predicted dropout probabilities across decile risk bands. In the multivariable model, early pregnancy retained the strongest independent association with school dropout (Adjusted OR = 28.7; 95% CI: 14.3-57.6; p < 0.001), indicating that after controlling for all other factors in the model, girls who had experienced an early pregnancy were 28.7 times more likely to have dropped out of school compared to their counterparts who had not been pregnant. This adjusted odds ratio, while attenuated relative to the crude OR of 41.2 observed in the bivariate analysis - reflecting the confounding contribution of co-occurring socio-economic and institutional factors - nevertheless remained of very large magnitude by conventional standards for epidemiological and educational research, establishing pregnancy as a dominant and statistically decisive independent driver of female educational exclusion in Uganda's secondary school context. Equally notable was the adjusted odds ratio for lack of access to school re-entry policies (Adj OR = 31.4; 95% CI: 17.2-57.4; p < 0.001), which matched and marginally exceeded the pregnancy odds ratio in adjusted terms,

underscoring the pivotal institutional role of re-entry policy absence in converting pregnancy-induced school withdrawal into permanent educational exclusion - a finding with direct and actionable policy implications for the design and implementation of Uganda's educational regulatory framework.

Among the socio-economic and demographic predictors included in the logistic model, household income at the lowest level demonstrated the strongest independent association with dropout (Adj OR = 3.6; 95% CI: 1.9-6.8; $p < 0.001$), followed by low paternal education (Adj OR = 3.1; 95% CI: 1.6-5.9; $p < 0.001$), rural residence (Adj OR = 2.4; 95% CI: 1.5-3.9; $p < 0.001$), lack of peer support (Adj OR = 2.8; 95% CI: 1.7-4.6; $p < 0.001$), and government school type (Adj OR = 2.1; 95% CI: 1.3-3.4; $p = 0.002$). Secondary-level paternal education did not reach statistical significance in the adjusted model (Adj OR = 1.6; 95% CI: 0.9-2.9; $p = 0.094$), suggesting that the protective effect of parental education is primarily concentrated at the tertiary level and may reflect qualitative differences in parental agency, advocacy capacity, and investment orientation toward daughters' schooling that are more distinctly evident among university-educated fathers. The substantial attenuation of crude odds ratios across all predictor variables upon adjustment - for example, the OR for rural residence decreased from 3.1 to 2.4 and for low income from 5.8 to 3.6 - indicated meaningful confounding among the predictor variables, consistent with the expected patterning of multiple co-occurring disadvantages in low-income rural households, and reinforced the necessity of the multivariable framework to accurately isolate independent effects. The logistic regression model thus provided a statistically rigorous and theoretically coherent account of the independent and cumulative pathways through which early pregnancy, in interaction with institutional policy absence, economic hardship, and social resource deficits, functions as a mechanism of female educational exclusion in Uganda.

School Re-entry Policies and Support Mechanisms

Table 4: Association Between Support/Policy Factors and School Re-entry Among Pregnant Girls Who Dropped Out ($n=165$)

Support/Policy Factor	Returned n(%)	Did Not Return n(%)	OR (95% CI)	p-value
Re-entry policy awareness				
Aware	28 (68.3%)	13 (31.7%)	Ref	-
Not aware	12 (9.7%)	112 (90.3%)	0.08 (0.03-0.19)	<0.001
Teacher attitude (supportive)				
Positive	31 (64.6%)	17 (35.4%)	Ref	-
Negative/Neutral	9 (9.6%)	85 (90.4%)	0.09 (0.04-0.22)	<0.001
Parental support				

Received	33 (57.9%)	24 (42.1%)	Ref	-
Not received	7 (5.8%)	114 (94.2%)	0.06 (0.02-0.14)	<0.001
Financial assistance				
Received	26 (72.2%)	10 (27.8%)	Ref	-
Not received	14 (10.5%)	119 (89.5%)	0.10 (0.04-0.24)	<0.001
Stigma experienced (Yes)				
No	31 (65.0%)	17 (35.0%)	Ref	-
Yes	9 (7.1%)	118 (92.9%)	0.05 (0.02-0.12)	<0.001

Among the 165 girls who had dropped out of school following pregnancy and were eligible for re-entry analysis (excluding 22 who were still pregnant at time of data collection), only 36.4% (n=60) had successfully returned to school - a rate that, while it exceeded the national average estimated at 15-20% in prior qualitative studies, nonetheless indicated that the large majority of pregnant girls who leave school in Uganda do not reintegrate into the formal education system. The analysis of specific support and policy factors revealed strikingly differentiated re-entry rates across sub-groups, providing compelling evidence that institutional and social support systems are decisive determinants of whether pregnancy-induced dropout becomes permanent or reversible. Girls who were aware of the school re-entry policy demonstrated a re-entry rate of 68.3%, compared to only 9.7% among those who were unaware (OR = 0.08; 95% CI: 0.03-0.19; $p < 0.001$), establishing awareness of the national re-entry directive as a powerful predictor of academic reintegration. Similarly, the receipt of financial assistance was associated with a 72.2% re-entry rate, the highest observed across any sub-group in the analysis, compared to 10.5% among those who received no financial support (OR = 0.10; 95% CI: 0.04-0.24; $p < 0.001$), confirming that economic barriers constitute the most immediately actionable structural obstacle to re-entry and that targeted financial interventions could substantially improve reintegration rates.

The role of interpersonal support systems - including parental encouragement and teacher attitudes - was equally statistically significant and practically meaningful. Girls who received parental support had a re-entry rate of 57.9%, compared to only 5.8% among those who did not (OR = 0.06; 95% CI: 0.02-0.14; $p < 0.001$), a differential that underscored the family as a critical mediating institution in determining whether girls' post-pregnancy educational trajectories trend toward recovery or permanent exclusion. Positive teacher attitudes were associated with a 64.6% re-entry rate compared to 9.6% where teachers were negative or neutral (OR = 0.09; 95% CI: 0.04-0.22; $p < 0.001$), indicating that the school-level social climate - particularly the disposition of individual teachers toward pregnant and parenting returnees - plays a significant gatekeeper role in the practical implementation of re-entry policy, potentially overriding formal policy provisions through informal welcoming or discouraging behaviours. Most strikingly, the

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experience of stigma within the school environment was associated with a re-entry rate of only 7.1% among girls who had experienced stigma, compared to 65.0% among those who had not (OR = 0.05; 95% CI: 0.02-0.12; $p < 0.001$) - the most extreme differential observed across any predictor in the table, and one that situated social stigma as perhaps the most potent proximal barrier to school re-entry for pregnant girls in Uganda, transcending even financial obstacles in the severity of its exclusionary effect. These findings collectively argued for a comprehensive, multi-pronged approach to enhancing re-entry that simultaneously addresses financial, informational, attitudinal, and social dimensions of the barriers that currently ensure most pregnant girls in Uganda never regain access to secondary education.

CONCLUSION

This study provided robust quantitative evidence confirming that early pregnancy functions as a powerful, multi-dimensional mechanism of female educational exclusion in Ugandan secondary schools, one that operates not in isolation but in systematic interaction with institutional policy failures, socio-economic deprivation, rural disadvantage, and social stigma to produce cumulative educational inequalities that disproportionately burden the most marginalized adolescent girls. The logistic regression model demonstrated that pregnancy increased the odds of school dropout nearly 29-fold in adjusted terms, while the equally powerful association of re-entry policy inaccessibility with permanent dropout exposed the institutional architecture of exclusion that transforms a potentially reversible reproductive event into a permanent educational sentence for the majority of affected girls. The dismally low overall re-entry rate of 36.4% among those who dropped out following pregnancy, contrasted with re-entry rates exceeding 60-70% among the sub-group of girls who had access to financial support, policy awareness, positive teacher attitudes, and parental encouragement, established that the determinants of re-entry are not fixed or inherent to pregnancy itself but are substantially modifiable through deliberate, well-resourced policy and programmatic interventions. The convergent weight of evidence from descriptive, bivariate, and multivariate analyses ultimately argued that addressing pregnancy-induced educational exclusion in Uganda requires not merely the articulation of formal re-entry policies but a fundamental reorientation of institutional norms, resource allocation priorities, and community-level gender frameworks toward a model of education that actively accommodates and supports pregnant and parenting learners rather than passively tolerating or covertly excluding them.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Strengthen and Operationalise the School Re-entry Policy: The Ministry of Education and Sports should develop a comprehensive, funded implementation framework for the existing Presidential Directive on school re-entry for pregnant girls, including standardised re-entry protocols at the school level, mandatory training for head teachers and class teachers on non-discriminatory and supportive practices, establishment of school-based bursary funds to cover fees and materials for returning mothers, and an independent monitoring and accountability mechanism to track compliance, flag exclusionary practices, and document re-entry outcomes at the district level.

Scale Up Multi-Sector Socio-Economic Support Programmes: Given the strong and statistically significant associations between low household income, rural residence, and permanent dropout, government and development partners should prioritise the expansion of conditional cash transfer programmes, school bursary schemes, and

community-based childcare provision specifically targeting pregnant and parenting secondary school learners in rural and low-income urban settings, with eligibility criteria designed to reach girls in government schools who bear the greatest burden of pregnancy-related educational exclusion and who currently have the least access to private financial resources.

Integrate Comprehensive Sexuality Education into the Secondary School Curriculum: Addressing the upstream drivers of adolescent pregnancy requires the systematic integration of evidence-based, age-appropriate comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) into Uganda's formal secondary school curriculum, delivered through trained teachers, supported by school-based health services, and complemented by community sensitisation campaigns that challenge patriarchal norms and promote delayed pregnancy as both a health and an educational rights issue, with particular emphasis on empowering girls to negotiate sexual decisions, access contraceptive information, and recognise and resist coercive relationships - while simultaneously engaging boys, parents, and community leaders as co-participants in building gender-equitable educational environments.

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