

School Dropout Rates: When Consent Becomes a Curse

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Uganda is the country with the 16th highest prevalence of child marriage in the world. According to UNESCO, the school dropout rate in Uganda is 68%, significantly higher than the average 42% for Sub Saharan Africa.

The constitutions of most African nations have declared the age of consent as 18, where one is fully recognized as an adult. Specifically, the third clause of the Ugandan marriage Act states that ‘marriage shall be entered into with the free consent of man and woman intending to marry’. Most countries have since ratified the Convention on Rights of Children in 1990, which further dictates 18 as the minimum age for marriage. In short, the rights of children are being fought for with utmost diligence.

So, where could the missing link in fighting school dropouts and possible forced marriages be? The education system in Uganda and some Sub Saharan countries is such that one year is spent in a certain grade. However, in the event that one does not perform satisfactorily in a former grade, they are required to repeat that class before proceeding to the next level. An average student will most likely repeat about 2 grades in their lifetime.

However, this means that this average student will finish their high school at 20 years, instead of the supposed 18. At 18, a girl will be just about to sit for her Ordinary Level High school National exams. Unfortunately, these girls do not get to realize their educational dreams because sooner or later they are quietly whisked off into marriage. This provides her poor family with a hefty bride price to ‘briefly’ uplift their standards of living.

Sadly, these girls have no one to go to. By virtue of the fact that they are 18, neither the authorities nor the law will ever fend for her. She is now considered an adult who is perfectly ‘eligible’ for marriage as stated within the constitution. Consequently, becoming of consensual age is the greatest curse a schoolgirl can experience in Uganda. Considering children’s rights, the lives of young adults still in school should also be taken into account and are often shelved. I wish for stakeholders to review clauses in this and many other laws that indirectly infringe on the rights of these young adults. This could be one of the first stepping stones towards eradicating school dropout rate.

For references, footnotes and endnotes, click [here](#).