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SEXUAL ABUSE IN HOUSEHOLDS AND ITS IMPACT ON GIRLS' SCHOOL DROPOUT IN UGANDA: A LITERATURE REVIEW

Atwongire Tushabe

Department of Development Studies, College of Humanities and Social Sciences, Kampala International University, Uganda.

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the relationship between sexual abuse in households and school dropout among girls in Uganda. Despite increasing policy attention to girls' education, limited focus has been placed on household-level sexual abuse as a contributing factor to school discontinuation. This study adopts a qualitative narrative literature review approach, drawing on peer-reviewed articles, policy reports, and institutional publications from 2010 to 2024. The findings indicate that sexual abuse significantly contributes to teenage pregnancy, early marriage, and psychological trauma, which disrupt girls' educational trajectories. The review further identifies poverty, cultural norms, and weak enforcement of education and child protection policies as reinforcing factors. The paper highlights sexual abuse as a hidden but critical driver of educational inequality and recommends integrated interventions focusing on awareness, legal enforcement, and school re-entry support systems.

Keywords: Sexual abuse, School dropout, Teenage pregnancy, Early marriage, Girls' education, Uganda

INTRODUCTION

Sexual abuse of children remains a critical global concern with far-reaching psychological, social, and educational consequences. Evidence indicates that experiences such as rape and defilement have long-term adverse effects on victims, including trauma, poor health outcomes, and disrupted educational trajectories (World Health Organization, 2022; UNICEF, 2023). In many developing contexts, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, these experiences are closely linked to broader social challenges such as teenage pregnancy, early marriage, and school dropout (UNFPA, 2022; World Bank, 2023).

Girls' education is widely recognized as a key driver of socio-economic development and social transformation. However, despite increased global and national efforts to promote girls' education, school dropout rates among girls remain

persistently high. In Uganda, national statistics indicate that dropout rates at both primary and secondary levels remain significant, particularly among girls, largely due to socio-economic and gender-related challenges (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2012). Existing studies have attributed this trend to factors such as poverty, limited parental involvement, and unequal access to educational opportunities (Asimwe & Nabitaka, 2022; Mugenyi & Kobusingye, 2023).

Emerging literature further highlights that sexual abuse within households is an often overlooked but significant contributor to girls' school dropout. Victims frequently experience psychological distress, stigma, and fear, which negatively affect their participation in school and overall academic performance (Melton, 2019; UNESCO, 2022). In many cases, these experiences lead to teenage

pregnancy and early marriage, which ultimately disrupt girls' educational trajectories (Ahikire & Madada, 2024; Awena & Asiimwe, 2024).

Additionally, structural factors such as poverty and cultural norms continue to reinforce vulnerability among girls. Studies suggest that economic hardship within households increases exposure to exploitation, while cultural practices often prioritize early marriage over education (UNFPA, 2020; Matte & Asiimwe, 2024). In some cases, limited access to school resources and extracurricular engagement further reduces girls' motivation and ability to remain in school (Kayindu & Asiimwe, 2022).

Although several studies have examined teenage pregnancy and early marriage as drivers of school dropout, limited attention has been given to the role of household-level sexual abuse as a root cause of these outcomes, particularly in the Ugandan context. Furthermore, gaps in education policy implementation and access continue to hinder effective responses to these challenges (Wehye & Asiimwe, 2024).

Therefore, this paper examines sexual abuse in households as a critical underlying factor contributing to school dropout among girls in Uganda. By synthesizing existing literature, the study explores how sexual abuse interacts with poverty, cultural norms, and policy environments to influence educational outcomes and highlights the need for integrated interventions to address this issue.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative narrative literature review design to examine the relationship between sexual abuse in households and school dropout among girls in Uganda. A literature review approach is appropriate for this study as it enables the synthesis and critical analysis of existing scholarly work, policy reports, and institutional publications on the subject.

Research Design

The study employs a narrative review design, which allows for a comprehensive examination of existing literature to identify patterns, relationships, and gaps in research. This approach is particularly suitable for exploring complex social issues such as sexual abuse and its impact on educational outcomes, where multiple interrelated factors are involved.

Data Sources and Search Strategy

Relevant literature was obtained from credible academic databases, including Google Scholar, JSTOR, PubMed, and institutional repositories. The search focused on studies published between 2010 and 2024 to ensure the inclusion of recent and relevant findings.

Key search terms used included:

- "sexual abuse in households"
- "teenage pregnancy"
- "early marriage"
- "school dropout"
- "girls' education in Uganda"

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To ensure the quality and relevance of the reviewed literature, the following criteria were applied:

Inclusion Criteria:

- 1) Peer-reviewed journal articles, policy reports, and institutional publications
- 2) Studies focusing on sexual abuse, adolescent pregnancy, early marriage, and school dropout
- 3) Research conducted in Uganda, Sub-Saharan Africa, or comparable contexts
- 4) Publications written in English

Exclusion Criteria:

- 1) Studies not directly related to education or sexual abuse
- 2) Non-scholarly or non-credible sources
- 3) Publications outside the specified time frame

Data Analysis

A thematic analysis approach was used to analyse the selected literature. The researcher systematically reviewed and categorized the data into key themes, including:

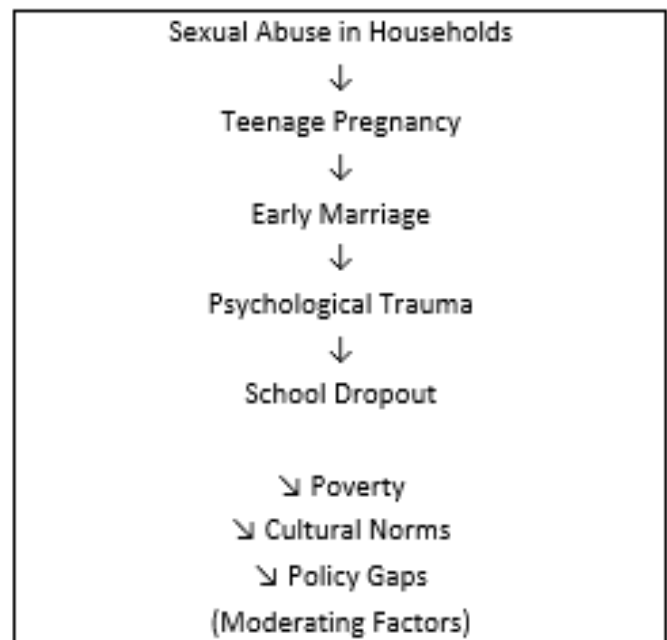
- 1) Sexual abuse and educational outcomes
- 2) Teenage pregnancy and school dropout
- 3) Poverty and household vulnerability
- 4) Cultural norms and early marriage
- 5) Education policy and school re-entry

These themes were critically examined to identify patterns, relationships, and gaps in the literature. This process enabled the study to develop a comprehensive understanding of how sexual abuse in households contributes to girls' school dropout.

Conceptual Framework

This study is guided by a conceptual framework that illustrates the relationship between sexual abuse in households and school dropout among girls. The framework positions sexual abuse as a central underlying factor that triggers a series of interconnected outcomes, including teenage pregnancy, early marriage, and psychological trauma, which ultimately lead to school dropout. The framework further identifies moderating factors, including poverty, cultural norms, and policy gaps, which reinforce vulnerability and limit girls' ability to remain in school. These factors interact dynamically, creating a cycle of disadvantage that affects educational attainment. The conceptual framework provides an analytical lens through which the reviewed literature is interpreted, enabling a deeper understanding of how multiple variables interact to influence girls' educational outcomes.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework



Source: Researcher's Conceptualization based on reviewed literature (2026).

Literature Review and Thematic Analysis

Sexual Abuse and Educational Outcomes

Sexual abuse remains a significant violation of children's rights with profound implications for their psychological, social, and educational well-being. Global evidence indicates that victims of sexual abuse often experience trauma, stigma, and emotional distress, which negatively affect their ability to participate effectively in school and maintain academic performance (World Health Organization, 2022; UNICEF, 2023). These experiences are strongly associated with absenteeism, poor academic outcomes, and eventual school dropout.

In many contexts, particularly within households, sexual abuse remains underreported due to fear, shame, and weak institutional support systems. This hidden nature of abuse makes it a critical yet overlooked factor in understanding educational inequalities among girls. Studies have shown that victims often withdraw from school due to psychological instability and lack of supportive

environments (Melton, 2019; UNESCO, 2022). In Uganda, this challenge is compounded by gaps in policy implementation and access to protective services, which limit effective responses to abuse (Wehye & Asiimwe, 2024).

Teenage Pregnancy and School Dropout

Teenage pregnancy is widely recognized as a leading cause of school dropout among girls, particularly in low- and middle-income countries. Research indicates that early pregnancy is often associated with sexual abuse, limited access to reproductive health education, and socio-economic vulnerabilities (UNFPA, 2022; World Bank, 2023). These factors significantly disrupt girls' educational trajectories and reduce their chances of completing school.

In the Ugandan context, studies highlight that teenage pregnancy leads to school discontinuation due to stigma, institutional barriers, and increased domestic responsibilities (Ahikire & Madada, 2024; Awena & Asiimwe, 2024). Although some policies allow re-entry, implementation remains weak, limiting opportunities for young mothers to continue their education (Mugenyi & Kobusingye, 2023).

Furthermore, teenage pregnancy contributes to intergenerational cycles of poverty and educational disadvantage, as children born to adolescent mothers are more likely to experience poor educational outcomes. This reinforces long-term inequalities in access to education and socio-economic opportunities.

Poverty and Household Vulnerability

Poverty remains a fundamental driver of both sexual abuse and school dropout. Households facing economic hardship often lack the resources to support children's education, increasing vulnerability to exploitation and abuse (World Bank, 2023). In Uganda, national data indicates that socio-economic disparities significantly influence school participation and completion rates among girls (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2012).

Studies further suggest that poverty limits parental involvement in education and reduces access to essential learning resources, thereby increasing the likelihood of school dropout (Asiimwe & Nabitaka, 2022; Mugenyi & Kobusingye, 2023). In addition, limited access to extracurricular activities and supportive learning environments has been identified as a contributing factor to reduced academic engagement among pupils (Kayindu & Asiimwe, 2022).

This economic vulnerability often interacts with other factors such as sexual abuse and early marriage, creating a cycle of disadvantage that disproportionately affects girls' educational outcomes.

Cultural Norms and Early Marriage

Cultural norms and traditional practices play a significant role in shaping girls' educational experiences. In many communities, early marriage is viewed as a socially acceptable pathway for girls, often driven by economic pressures and deeply rooted gender norms (UNFPA, 2020). These practices frequently prioritize marriage over education, limiting girls' opportunities for personal and professional development.

Empirical studies in Uganda indicate that cultural beliefs and practices contribute significantly to teenage pregnancy and early marriage, which in turn lead to school dropout (Matte & Asiimwe, 2024). In many cases, families perceive girls' education as less valuable compared to boys, reinforcing gender inequalities within households. Moreover, cultural expectations often normalize the consequences of sexual abuse by encouraging early marriage as a solution to pregnancy, rather than addressing the underlying causes. This perpetuates a cycle in which girls are denied the opportunity to complete their education and achieve economic independence.

Education Policy and School Re-entry

Education policies play a crucial role in shaping access to and retention in school for girls. While Uganda has made efforts to promote inclusive

education, significant gaps remain in the implementation of policies supporting pregnant girls and survivors of sexual abuse. Evidence suggests that despite the absence of formal restrictions, many schools continue to exclude pregnant learners due to stigma and institutional practices (Mugenyi & Kobusingye, 2023).

Comparatively, global reports emphasize the importance of supportive policy environments in improving girls' educational outcomes (UNESCO, 2022). However, effective implementation requires not only policy frameworks but also community awareness and institutional capacity.

Studies further indicate that improving access, quality, and relevance of education policies is essential for addressing systemic barriers to girls' education (Wehye & Asiimwe, 2024). This includes strengthening guidance and counselling services, teacher training, and support systems that enable young mothers to return to school.

Discussion of Findings

The findings from the reviewed literature reveal that sexual abuse in households' functions as a hidden but central driver of school dropout among girls, operating through multiple interconnected pathways. While existing studies have predominantly emphasized poverty, teenage pregnancy, and cultural norms as independent factors, this review demonstrates that these variables are deeply interlinked, with sexual abuse often acting as an underlying trigger (UNICEF, 2023; World Health Organization, 2022).

One of the key insights emerging from this study is the causal pathway between sexual abuse, teenage pregnancy, and school dropout. Evidence suggests that many cases of adolescent pregnancy are closely associated with coercion and abuse within household settings rather than purely consensual relationships (UNFPA, 2022; World Bank, 2023). This aligns with findings in the Ugandan context, where teenage pregnancy significantly disrupts girls' educational progression and limits school

completion (Ahikire & Madada, 2024; Awena & Asiimwe, 2024).

Furthermore, the findings highlight the reinforcing role of poverty in exacerbating vulnerability to both sexual abuse and educational discontinuation. Economically disadvantaged households often lack the capacity to provide safe environments for children, increasing the risk of exploitation (World Bank, 2023). In Uganda, national statistics and empirical studies show that socio-economic inequalities significantly influence school participation and retention (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2012; Asiimwe & Nabitaka, 2022; Mugenyi & Kobusingye, 2023).

Cultural norms and gendered expectations also emerge as critical factors influencing educational outcomes. In many communities, early marriage is socially sanctioned, particularly in cases of pregnancy, often masking the underlying issue of sexual abuse (UNFPA, 2020; Matte & Asiimwe, 2024). This reflects a broader pattern in which cultural practices normalize the consequences of abuse instead of addressing its root causes.

In addition, the review underscores the limitations of existing education and policy frameworks. Although policies may support girls' right to education, implementation gaps, stigma, and institutional practices continue to limit re-entry opportunities for pregnant girls and survivors of abuse (UNESCO, 2022; Wehye & Asiimwe, 2024). This suggests that policy effectiveness depends not only on formulation but also on social acceptance and institutional capacity.

Overall, this study contributes to existing literature by reframing sexual abuse as a foundational driver of educational inequality, rather than a secondary issue. By integrating global and local evidence, the paper provides a more comprehensive understanding of how household dynamics, socio-economic conditions, and cultural norms collectively shape girls' educational outcomes.

Conclusion and Implications

This study has examined the relationship between sexual abuse in households and school dropout among girls in Uganda through a qualitative review of existing literature. The findings demonstrate that sexual abuse is a critical yet often overlooked factor contributing to educational discontinuation. It operates through interconnected pathways, including teenage pregnancy, early marriage, and psychological trauma, all of which significantly disrupt girls' ability to remain in and complete school (UNICEF, 2023; World Health Organization, 2022).

The study further reveals that sexual abuse is not an isolated issue but is reinforced by broader structural factors such as poverty, cultural norms, and gaps in policy implementation (World Bank, 2023; UNESCO, 2022). In Uganda, these challenges are compounded by socio-economic inequalities and limited institutional support systems, which continue to hinder girls' educational participation and retention (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2012; Mugenyi & Kobusingye, 2023).

By reframing sexual abuse as a central driver of school dropout, this study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of educational inequality among girls. It highlights the need to move beyond isolated interventions and adopt integrated approaches that address the underlying causes of vulnerability within households and communities.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings of this study carry several important implications. First, there is a need to strengthen child protection systems and enforcement mechanisms to address sexual abuse, particularly within household settings (UNICEF, 2023). Second, education systems must create supportive environments that enable pregnant girls and survivors of abuse to return to school without stigma or discrimination (UNESCO, 2022).

Additionally, community-based interventions are essential in challenging harmful cultural norms that perpetuate early marriage and limit girls'

educational opportunities (UNFPA, 2020). Addressing economic vulnerability through targeted support programs can further reduce the risk factors associated with school dropout (World Bank, 2023).

Finally, the study underscores the importance of a multi-sectoral approach involving education, health, and legal institutions to effectively respond to the complex and interconnected nature of sexual abuse and its impact on girls' education.

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