



Good policies versus daily discrimination: Adolescent girls and gender justice in Uganda

Country briefing

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Key messages

- There is an enabling legal and policy environment for gender empowerment and adolescent girls' development in Uganda, but there are large gaps in application and practice
- Positive changes include growing educational opportunities for girls, as well as changes in practices related to marriage and household roles and responsibilities
- Nevertheless, adolescent girls still lack a voice in the decisions that concern them and there are limits on their income earning potential and skills, their reproductive and sexual health, and their legal and physical protection
- Entrenched discriminatory norms and practices combine with high levels of poverty and limited service provision to significantly limit the development of adolescent girls' capabilities, while a sense of isolation and strict boundaries circumscribes their life trajectories
- Gender discrimination spans every aspect of girls' lives, with discrimination in one area reflected and reinforcing similar patterns in other areas
- Integrated approaches are needed to enhance service provision while promoting gender justice – building on and nurturing today's positive trends and enhancing the ability of girls to empower themselves

1 Introduction: why focus on adolescent girls in Uganda?

Poised at the intersection between childhood and the world of adults, adolescent girls face unique challenges to the full development and exercise of capabilities. A recent analysis of national survey data in Uganda reveals alarming proportions of adolescents living in poverty, deprived of full educational attainment, and – for girls – impelled into child marriage or early pregnancy, with sexual- and reproductive-health indicators revealing high levels of vulnerability. Economic discrimination against girls and women persists, and the limited data available indicate high levels of gender-based violence. Meanwhile, current national debates about law reform to regulate marriage and divorce reveal deep resistance to any change to today’s discriminatory practices at the household and family level.

This briefing is part of a broader multi-country initiative funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) on gender justice for adolescent girls (Box 1), which uses a common set of research tools that is adapted to the local context.

For us girls, what are we expected to do? It looks like we are not liked in many places, including home... tell me – what’s wrong with being a girl?

(Adolescent girls focus group discussion, Mayuge)



Box 1: Gender justice for adolescent girls: a new research initiative

This study is part of a multi-year DFID-funded policy research programme on gender justice for adolescent girls. The programme examines four countries: Ethiopia, Nepal, Uganda and Viet Nam. ODI, in partnership with national researchers, is exploring the key capabilities that shape girls’ current well-being and future potential. Focusing on economic, educational, physical, psycho-emotional and civic participation capabilities, it aims to shine a light on discriminatory social norms, make visible the often hidden experiences of adolescent girls and identify how policy and programme actors can better respond to their needs and priorities.

Research in Uganda focused on adolescent girls in two hard-to-reach rural communities – Mayuge in the East Central Region and Sembabule in Central 1 Region – where poverty levels are high and social indicators poor (Figure 1). Field work used qualitative methods to gather first-hand information, opinions and experiences from adolescent girls and boys, family and community members, district officials and national stakeholders on areas of vital importance for the development of adolescent capabilities. These findings were enriched by the analysis of available written documentation at national and district levels.

The study comes at a time when governments and development partners are beginning to realise the importance of investing in adolescence, with a focus on adolescent girls seen as critical in efforts to break the inter-generational transmission of poverty. For this to happen, we need more and sharper evidence to make adolescent girls more visible in policy and planning processes and to pinpoint the social and cultural forces that shape their lives.

2 A positive policy context, but continuing challenges

Uganda has a framework of national laws and policies to address the vulnerabilities of adolescent girls as they make the crucial transition to adult life. The Constitution (1995) prohibits all forms of discrimination and provides for the protection and promotion of women's rights. The National Development Plan (2010–2015) promotes affirmative action in all spheres and recognises gender inequality and inequity, as well as negative attitudes, mindsets, cultural practices and perceptions, as some of the most binding constraints on Uganda's national development.

A number of key sectoral plans, policies, legal provisions and programme initiatives promote gender equality and the capabilities of girls and young women. A whole raft of interventions are underway to improve women's access to, and control of, productive resources; implement affirmative action; create training programmes; protect against exploitation; expand access to education and training; protect physical and bodily integrity through the promotion of sexual and reproductive health rights; and promote women's participation in politics and civic affairs. Progress in education has been particularly strong, promoted through government policies of universal primary education (1997) and secondary education (2007) that highlight national commitment to the empowerment of girls.

But despite all of these commitments, indicators at the district-level paint a picture of women's lives that are constrained by low levels of service provision, limited economic opportunities, and persistent patterns of gender discrimination.

The findings from our field research highlight the heavy burden of gender discriminatory norms and practices on the daily experiences of adolescent girls. Their overall opportunities and development are also weighed down by poverty and the lack of good quality social services.

However, there are signs of progress – particularly in educational opportunities for adolescent girls – according to our inter-generational interviews and a review of historical time-lines. While such changes do not yet appear powerful enough to fully transform the options for the development of adolescent girls, and there are still clear signs of persistent discriminatory practices, they do show us that the situation is not static. This suggests, in turn, that policies and programmes to empower adolescent girls and enhance their capabilities can build on the positive forces for change that already exist.

‘Decisions in the home are made by the father because he is the head of the family - the mother decides only when the father is away’

(14 year old boy, Mayuge)

2.1 The foundational nature of household and family

According to our research in Mayuge and Sembabule, the capabilities of adolescent girls remain severely constrained by household and family structures, with patriarchal norms, attitudes and practices permeating girls’ lives through socialization processes that they then internalise. Such patterns are then replicated across the wider community and institutional structures that reinforce these underlying norms and values.

Families often give boys space to build their own huts, while girls, who are seen as ‘transient’ dwellers in their natal households, have no permanent place of abode, which relegates them to a vulnerable status. This, coupled with strong taboos against shedding menstrual blood in their natal homes, is one reason why girls may choose, or submit to, child marriage and early pregnancy, regardless of the high risks involved.



‘The girl child remains a target of culture. Girls are for gaining cattle for the parents: they get married, get pregnant, give birth and that is it’.

(Government official, Sembabule)

The unequal division of labour within the household along gender lines burdens women and girls with most of the ‘care’ work, limiting their time for other activities, including education, training and productive labour. Practices such as bride wealth payments contribute to child marriages and, in effect, turn girls into commodities that pass from being owned by fathers to being owned by husbands. ‘Compound’ families and family break-up are also seen to create situations of particular vulnerability. A lack of any voice or role in family decisions is normal for girls, who, in the patriarchal models of family that are most common, are doubly vulnerable on the basis of both their gender and their age. At the same time, violence within households – including gender-based violence – is a common experience.

2.2 Progress and challenges in education

As a result of national policies of universal primary and secondary education, educational opportunities for girls have expanded significantly (Box 2). Inter-generational interviews showed that while very few older women had attended any school at all, most of the younger women had at least some primary education, and a number were also continuing on in secondary school. This, in turn, had inspired changing aspirations for future opportunities and employment.

‘Most parents don’t think that girls are meant to go to school – they are meant to marry’.

(District Technical Committee, Sembabule)



Nevertheless, significant challenges remain. On the one hand, these stem from weaknesses on the service-provision side, characterised by the absence of secondary schools close to home, gender-insensitive teaching and learning processes and school environments, and violence (or the fear of violence) in school and on the way there. On the other hand, we see that the continuing weight of social norms that limit the expectations of girls beyond marriage and the family; child marriage fuelled in part by bride wealth; and the need for girls’ labour at home all make parents less likely to invest in the education of their daughters. Adolescent pregnancy and childbirth also lead to high levels of school drop-out among adolescent girls.

Overall, findings from field research show that in spite of positive changes, socio-cultural norms combine with a lack of quality service provision to undermine the ability of the adolescent girls to realise their full potential through education.

Box 2: Changes for adolescent girls across three generations

Educational opportunities have greatly increased in Mayuge and Sembabule, supported by the Government’s universal primary education (UPE) programmes and policies. Our respondents reported that, in their grandmothers’ time, few girls, if any attending school. Today, most of their grand-daughters are either attending or have gained at least some level of schooling: ‘These days children go to school, whereas in earlier days children would spend time in the bush. Now the government is providing free education through UPE. If you do not go to school and are five years or older you are arrested.’ (32-year old mother in Mayuge).

There have also been clear changes in marriage and household practices. While child marriage persists, expectations are slowly changing; ‘In our mother’s time,’ noted a 20-year old girl in Sembabule, ‘children used to get married when they were still young. Even some girls of today get married when they are still young. But for

me, I prefer to be around 28 years old, after I have finished school and get a job.' Other changes include greater choice in marriage partners: a 71-year old grandmother in Mayuge reflects that 'When I was growing up, girls would be sold, but these days girls identify their own husbands.' Family planning options are also slowly becoming available, in contrast to earlier times, as a 66-year-old grandmother explained: 'In the time I was married, I didn't see family planning. We would produce as many children as we could - my co-wives and I.'

Some changes have been seen in women's economic roles and their control of assets. A 66-year-old grandmother in Sembabule explained that 'In those years, when you would dig a garden of groundnuts, the man would sell the produce and not give you money, but now you sell it yourself.' A 44-year-old mother in Mayuge confirmed that: 'Now I can also hold personal values.....Today each one of you in a home will own their own things like chicken, goats.....' However, decision-making over household expenditures remains limited: 'For me I only decide on what to cook for my family' stated a 32-year-old mother in Mayuge.

The mobility of women and girls - though still limited - has improved over time. Some women today can go to the markets to conduct informal business, and participate in community meeting/activities, something that was impossible for older generations of women, while some adolescent girls also have more freedom to move around in the community. As a 32-year-old mother in Mayuge observed: 'I see that young women these days are free - if you want to go somewhere you can freely go. But adolescents of our time were very much restricted from moving about.' Nevertheless, girls still find their movements more restricted than those of boys.

2.3 Persistent limits on economic independence

Girls and young women face serious limits on their opportunities to develop and benefit from their own economic capabilities. They are hampered from the outset by property inheritance customs that favour boys and men. The exclusion of girls and women from ownership and control of critical productive assets such as land and livestock, leaves girls and women vulnerable and economically insecure, a situation that translates into their increased dependence and subordination to men for economic survival. This is in spite of a favourable land policy and other positive national legislation that is already in place.

Other challenges include the lack of parental investment in girls' education, limited opportunities for vocational training, limited access to credit facilities, exploitation of children's labour, and the burden of unpaid domestic chores, which are seen as 'natural' for girls and women, but only add to their time poverty. Although both boys and girls work on a variety of primarily agricultural activities, one specific factor that blocks girls' full economic participation is their limited freedom of movement. Girls also labour on plantations under hazardous conditions without protective gear and for many hours, which disrupts their schooling, while those who work as housemaids or in bars in town are vulnerable to sexual exploitation.

'...the land is for my brothers – it is only given to the boys since they say that girls can never own land where they were born'.

(17 year old out-of-school girl with a baby, Mayuge)

2.4 Compromised physical integrity, security and health

Girls' experience of adolescence in our two research sites is marked by an abrupt change from childhood to womanhood, defined by cultural conceptions of sexual maturity. Their physical integrity and security and their sexual and reproductive health rights are severely undermined by a combination of challenges rooted in patriarchal norms of male control over female bodies, and the primacy placed on women's reproductive roles. These perpetuate such practices as child and/or forced marriage, early and frequent pregnancy, and various forms of sexual- and gender-based violence. Girls have little or no access to justice or protection. Indeed, a girl who has been raped is sometimes expected to marry her rapist – if the bride price offered is enough – a de facto continuation of the traditional practice of marriage by abduction. There seem to be few 'safe spaces' for girls who face violence in homes, in schools, or anywhere in between.



The study has also revealed the ignorance of adolescent girls when it comes to critical reproductive health issues and their limited access to adolescent-friendly health services and quality maternal health care. Together, these contribute to poor reproductive-health outcomes and only heighten vulnerability to HIV and AIDS and other sexually-transmitted infections.

2.5 The fragility of psychosocial well-being

A sense of psychosocial well-being is important for girls as they grow into adults and develop their capabilities to the fullest. Such a sense can be brought about through the sense of security and values that is created through supportive networks. While such networks do exist for girls in the study areas, with some girls talking about turning to friends, families and others when they need help or comfort, there is no doubt that this is an area that could benefit from deeper attention.

The girls we spoke to expressed a variety of worries and concerns – about their bodies, their relationships, their lives, and their futures – and it is not at all clear that such concerns are being addressed through established patterns of adult/child communication and interaction. Formal counselling services are rare and access to them is very limited.

'It is normal to beat a woman to correct her where she is going wrong – if a woman makes a mistake you give her some 'tea' [canes]'

(Focus group discussion, adult men, Sembabule)

'My biggest worries are about getting AIDS and schooling – seeing that my future does not stop on the way.'

(Adolescent girl in Sembabule)

2.6 Age and gender restrictions on political and civic participation

Adolescent girls and boys have very limited participation in networks beyond the household through community meetings or decision-making in civic life. The views of adolescents are not recognised and they are not expected to participate, as they are considered too young to contribute to what is seen as an adult domain. Nor do they have much scope for participation in adolescent-specific clubs or associations, which are very rare in the communities we visited, even though some avenues for youth participation are offered through schools, churches or mosques

Particular gender-based limitations on girls' participation arise out of deeply entrenched ideologies of 'public' and 'private' domains, with adolescent girls consigned strictly to the latter. Their scope for participation and leadership is greatest in schools, but even here, they face limitations, particularly the 'shyness' that they have been socialised to exhibit from an early age. One notable development, however, has been the sudden arrival of the mobile phone in the lives of many adolescents, which allows them to expand their networks. However, some older community members have expressed negative opinions about this new technology.

'Young people rarely get chances to participate in community decision-making. All I know is that when you rise up your hand they never select you to say a word. I have never gotten that chance'.

(17 year old out-of-school girl, Mayuge)

3 What this means for policies and programmes

Our research in Mayube and Sembabule indicates that interventions for adolescent girls are rare at the household level. The findings suggest the value of programme approaches that include communication on gender equality in the household to break down existing stereotypes; information campaigns around the reforms foreseen in the marriage and divorce bill that is being promoted and both information and enforcement of the existing laws on child marriage. We would also recommend the introduction of labour-saving technologies to cut down on the 'time poverty' of women and girls and the expansion of crèches to relieve some of the burden of care for younger siblings.

Key recommendations on measures to enhance education for girls derive from well-known global good practice that addresses barriers at the level of both supply and demand. On the supply side, this would mean: investing in 'girl-friendly' school infrastructure, particularly separate latrines and appropriate hygiene; eliminating gender-stereotypes in school texts; investing in female teachers and mentors, and training and supervising all teachers on gender-sensitive approaches. On the demand side, it would require: incentives for parents to send their daughters to school, such as take-home rations, fee reductions/abolition, the provision of uniforms and conditional cash transfers; strengthening enforcement of the national policy allowing pregnant school girls and girl mothers to continue schooling; offering more 'second chance' alternatives; and implementing specific measures to ensure that girls stay on for secondary education, including, where appropriate, scholarship support or boarding facilities.

'I think the key strategy is working with communities, because that is where the girls come from, that is where the stereotypes are, that is where the attitude towards the education of girls is negative'.

(Ministry of Education Official)

Expanding quality vocational and technical training for adolescent girls is critical to enhance their economic capabilities. Support for productive activities and decent employment for young women is also critical, and should include gender-sensitive measures that recognise their dual productive and reproductive roles. Rural development programmes should include specific measures to support and enhance women's agropastoral activities and contributions to the household economy. Support for appropriate income generating opportunities for young mothers – particularly those who are on their own – is particularly important. The dynamics of marriage and family practices, and in particular their impact on inheritance and the transfer of assets, need to be further understood as a backdrop to measures that will expand the access of young women to key assets.



Far greater efforts are needed to insist on the bodily integrity of adolescent girls and young women, encourage girls to remain in school and to delay marriage, expand access to quality sexual- and reproductive-health information and services, and combat prevailing norms and practices of male violence. Measures to reinforce laws against gender-based violence and to bring perpetrators to justice are also crucial.

Mentoring by adult women (e.g. female teachers; district or sub-district development staff; NGO service providers; community leaders) could be promoted around different issues and at different venues, alongside peer-to-peer counselling and support services, while special outreach services and support may be needed for adolescent mothers. Community dialogue processes designed specifically to take adolescent girls' views and concerns into account could provide a conduit for interaction with caring adults. At the same time, girls' clubs and other forms of female solidarity systems could also be established or reinforced.

Further investment in the development of adolescent girls' capabilities for civic involvement, leadership and decision-making is sorely needed, as are initiatives to expand and strengthen social networks and engagements. Schools offer the potential to encourage leadership and decision-making by adolescent girls, but to do so they must create an environment that nurtures girls' voice; identify role models of positive, assertive women; strengthen and expand school clubs; and provide guidance on options to explore outside school. For adolescent girls who are out of school, appropriate groups and associations could be established to support them and encourage their participation in community affairs. Issues surrounding the restricted mobility of girls and young women should be addressed through community dialogue and bolstered with positive examples of the benefits of participation in networks outside the home.

4 Lessons learned and further research considerations



- **The household is the foundation.** A girl’s home and family emerged as a ‘foundational domain’ that can impose multiple limitations on her prospects. This is where both girls and boys are socialized into the patriarchal norms and structures that are replicated in their wider community. A much more nuanced and complete understanding is needed of the diverse types of household and family experiences, their change and persistence over time, and the potential – beyond calls for ‘stronger families’ – for the emergence of structures that transform gender relations.
- **Cultural definitions and understandings of adolescence vary.** Our two communities defined life trajectories for girls in a number of different ways – not always in terms of age, but more often in terms of their physical characteristics (particularly the development of their breasts) with marriage or pregnancy marking the start of womanhood, regardless of a girl’s age. We need a greater understanding of such cultural categories and their implications for the potential of adolescent girls and young women to participate in ‘youth’ programmes, which tend to exclude them as a category.
- **The different areas of girls’ lives are interconnected.** Girls’ experiences in the different ‘capability domains’ of their lives take place in a fluid and interconnected manner that is not yet captured in full by our analytical categories. This may be inevitable, but reveals the importance of maintaining a ‘holistic’ vision of ‘the social’ – of trying to understand how the different domains are connected, and of being open to more dimensions that need to be considered when trying to gain a full understanding of girls’ lives.

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- **Social norms are reinforced and ‘enacted’ through institutions.** We need to identify and understand social norms, attitudes and practices beyond the household or community level, looking at specific institutions, such as schools, health centres and justice services that both embody and operationalise these norms – reproducing the patterns of gender discriminatory norms and behaviour seen in the wider community.
 - **‘Gatekeepers’ at different levels exert considerable power.** Analysis of our study findings revealed patterns in some of the processes we observed in terms of who or what was opening up (or closing) opportunities for adolescent girls. It is important to identify and understand the individuals or institutions that enforce or reinforce the barriers to girls’ empowerment – the gatekeepers who must be brought into the debate to generate positive change.
 - **More work is needed to identify change processes and drivers.** Listening to the views and life histories of inter-generational pairings – mothers/grandmothers and daughters – captured the changes experienced by girls and their families through the generations. But wider community dialogue around changing social norms would enrich such findings and provide a more contextualised understanding of broader social trends. Historical research methods and a literature review on historical change processes worldwide would shed more light on the basic drivers of change or the specific factors behind the changes experienced. A key challenge remains in trying to identify, distinguish, and assess the relative weight of the factors that affect the capabilities of adolescent girls that arise from changes in the social norms themselves; changes in the overall socio-economic context of communities; or changes in service delivery characteristics.
 - **Context matters.** One of the main lessons emerging from this research is that it is vital to ‘go local’ and build understanding from the ground up to gain any real understanding of socio-cultural norms, attitudes and practices. A whole range of factors will influence the specific experiences of adolescent girls and their resulting capabilities, from their household income to their ethnicity, and from their location to their religion. And all of these are influenced by socio-cultural norms, attitudes and practices. Care must be taken, therefore, in both research and policy, to uncover the dimensions that make a real difference, in order to understand them more fully, and to provide the support that offers the greatest potential for gender justice and the empowerment of girls.



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