

The survey indicates that female parents find it easier to talk to their adolescent girls and boys about sex compared to males.

BY IRENE ABALO OTTO

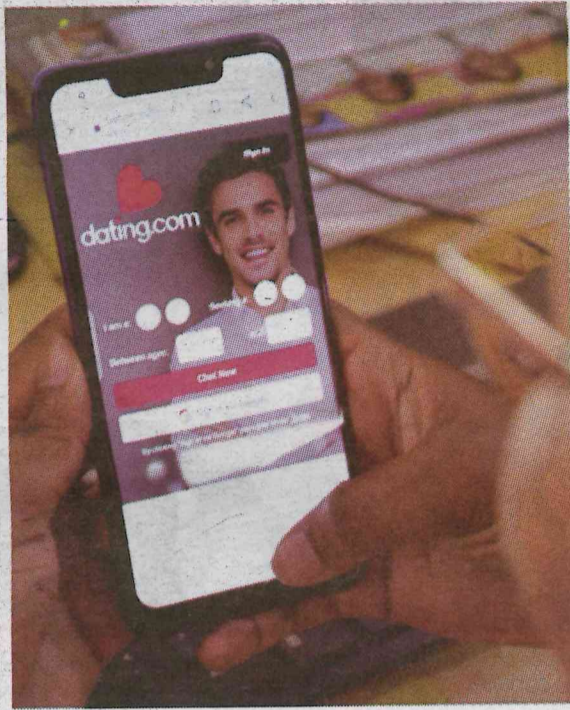
Makerere University has released a survey that shows that phones are spoiling girls and aiding communication that translates into risky sexual behaviours contributing to the high adolescent pregnancies in the country.

Several mini researches that came out during the coronavirus lockdown show a worrying trend of teenage pregnancies with no clear plans on how to tackle the problem.

During the dissemination of the "sexual and reproductive health information and determinants of adolescent pregnancy among adolescents in Wakiso and Kamuli districts" on Thursday last week, the lead investigators indicated that parents who had no or little time to speak to their children about sexual and reproductive health issues risked their adolescents engaging in unsafe sexual behaviour.

"Mobile phones are spoiling our girls and the use of pornography on these phones can be related to pregnancy. Because of the lockdown and the children being at home, the ones who are not doing anything are most likely to get pregnant," said Dr Nicolette Nabukeera-Barungi, one of the investigators from

Phones aiding teenage pregnancy - Mak survey



A girl browses a dating site on a smartphone in Kampala yesterday. PHOTO/ALEX ESAGALA

the Department of Paediatrics and Child Health.

The government sent more than 15 million children home in March to prevent the spread of coronavirus. However, some students were able to attend virtual classes using phones and

tablets during the lockdown.

Some schools that easily adapted and moved classes online have since inspired technology innovations in learning in what used to be a preserve for a few privileged learners who could afford internet bundles and computers.

With candidate classes back in class and the Ministry of Health recommending that pregnant girls be allowed to continue with class and sit for their final exams, stakeholders have worry on how to bring down the high rate of adolescent pregnancies during the school closures.

During the qualitative research data collection for the survey between July and August in Wakiso and Kamuli districts, the investigators found that "Of 600 adolescents, 337 had ever had sex, 139 had ever used a condoms and 39 reported sexual abuse".

The survey report was funded by the Government of Uganda under the Research and Innovation Fund of Makerere University.

106 girls, whose mean ages were 16.9 years, had ever used contraceptives while 323 said they had ever tested for HIV. This according to researchers is information that should be available to help stakeholders identify the adolescents at high risk of pregnancy so that they can be targeted with interventions that aim at reducing teenage pregnancy.

Uganda has an unacceptably high rate

SURVEY

The survey found that only 13 per cent of the 600 adolescents had access to accurate information about sexual and reproductive health. Those who talked to parents had more accurate information.

337

Numbers. Of the 600 adolescents interviewed, 337 had ever had sex in the two month survey

of teenage pregnancy rates with one in four adolescent girls getting pregnant before the age of 18, according to the Uganda Demographic and Health Survey 2016. This has been worsened by closure of schools.

The report shows that parents feared to tell their children the truth on what is right and when to engage in intercourse.

"Perceptions by parents that the adolescents will not listen to them since they have contemporary information from phones also discourages them from talking to the adolescents," reads the report.

Dr Joseph Rujumba, the only male investigator in the team, said, "Adolescents who communicate with their parents on sexual and reproductive health are more likely to make healthy choices. But there was a strong fear of being considered immoral when children asked about Sexual Reproductive health."

Dr Loraine Ariokot, a lecturer at Makerere University, advised parents to make time for their children.

"Whereas adolescents whose parents are tough are less likely to get pregnant, parents should also not be over authoritarian. It drives the adolescent away from speaking about their issues in life, especially on sex-related things," he said.

The WHO representative in Uganda, Dr Olive Sentumbwe, suggests that parents should be trained on parenting skills to foster parent-child communication.

The survey recommends that contraceptive knowledge alone is not enough to prevent adolescent pregnancy. There is a need to include a component of positive attitudes, keeping girls in school, empowering families economically and having more research on adolescent children.

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