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# STREAM Network Uganda Policy Brief 2024 -2029



## **INTRODUCTION**

STREAM Network Uganda (Stepping Stones Trainers Engaging with Activist Movements) is a network that was born out of a regional meeting held in Nairobi, Kenya, in 2022, hosted by Positive Young Women Voices. The network was formed after realizing that we all seek a common purpose in our work - to uphold and maintain SRHR for women and girls in all our communities in the context of HIV irrespective of their HIV status. The network therefore brought together male and female Stepping Stones trainers with extensive experience in the implementation of transformational social norms programs like the Stepping Stones programme on gender, HIV, and AIDS, together with activists on policy analysis, lobbying, and advocacy at national, regional, and international levels. The STREAM network Uganda activities shall be implemented by CFAR Uganda and the Jacqueline SSozi Foundation (JSF) and gradually bring on board other networks of persons living with HIV. CFAR Uganda and JSF will work with other development partners including key government ministries (Gender, Health, and Education), donor agencies, Local leaders, Civil society organizations, the private sector, and the community. The Uganda STREAM Network as embedded in its strategic plan 2024 -2029 has prepared a policy brief as an advocacy tool to enhance effective access to SRHR by women and girls and also to charter an opportunity to share gaps associated with ineffective implementation of key policies that affect the reproductive lives of women and girls in Uganda.

## **PURPOSE OF THE BRIEF**

To highlight the importance of sexual and reproductive health and rights of women, girls, and children in Uganda as well as to share gaps and challenges in effective policy implementation.

## **Sexual Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) Policy Status in Uganda**

The SRHR integrates the rights of all people, regardless of age, or gender to make informed choices regarding their sexuality and reproduction, provided that their rights do not trespass on the rights of others. The process, therefore, promotes reproductive decision-making, freedom from forced abortion, access to reliable health information, freedom from harmful traditional practices and gender-based violence, freedom to express one's sexuality, and access to appropriate reproductive health education and services.

The government of Uganda has endorsed and recognized the human rights of women, girls, and children including their reproductive rights and health which are recognized by international laws. These include; the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (1978) (CEDAW) which is relevant to the enjoyment of sexual and reproductive rights.

The Ugandan Government affirmed the 1948, Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) which is the general guide for governments on fundamental human rights and freedoms. It ensured that legal obligations are placed on States to respect the human rights of their citizens. In 1977, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights were signed and ratified by several member states of the United Nations.

These rights also include "the right of everyone to enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health." These declarations and documentations have enhanced the realization of the rights of women and girls to make informed decisions concerning their health needs, and sexuality which is free of coercion and violence. These policies to some extent have made some women, girls, and children demand their health rights and respond to issues of VAW/G and VAC.

However, with the availability of these policies, the journey so far to make women and girls attain their SRHR has not been effective due to several factors and challenges that limit women, girls, and children from making informed health choices, with consent and confidentiality. The STREAM Network Uganda therefore, aims to strengthen the ability of women, girls, and children to make informed choices and promote better access to effective Sexual Reproductive health and rights for happier lives.

### **SRH-related problems in Uganda**

It should be noted that in Uganda, policies have been put in place, however, their implementation level is ineffective due to several factors including corruption tendencies and limited resources. The norms of sexuality embedded in State laws and practices need to be revisited to ensure a conducive environment where women, girls, and children can assert their Sexual Reproductive Health and Rights.

- Most women are economically dependent on men and have limited power to claim their SRHR, therefore, due to unequal power relations based on gender, women are often unable to refuse sex negotiate safe sex, or access health services.
- Violence against women and girls leads to violation of SRHR. This is often realized as some traditional practices and beliefs also affect sexual health and access to health services.
- Sexual and reproductive health problems continue to affect the lives of women in Uganda, adolescent girls in the age group of 15 to 19 years (34%) already in formal marriage are twice more likely to die during pregnancy or childbirth which is associated with limited access to critical information on SRHR and related services, (UNFPA Issue brief 14, October 2020, Casey foundation).and
- Poverty and food insecurity limit women to assert their SRHR and force them into practices that violate their right to bodily integrity.

- 25% of women and girls of reproductive age in Uganda experience unplanned pregnancies and 43% of Ugandan girls are married before they are 18 years which has exposed them to the risk of unsafe abortion and has resulted in maternal deaths in clinics (UNFPA Issue brief 14, October 2020).

### **Sexuality and Rights**

Sexuality is very important in bringing rights into sexuality, and it needs to be understood in the context of power and social relationships and not just in terms of disease prevention or violence. Sexual rights entail not just legal equality, but the ability to exercise control and power over one's body according to one's choice. SRHR is a strategic tool to challenge social norms that discriminate against individuals who ascribe to different sexual behaviors and practices. Therefore, sexuality should incorporate aspects of "choice, pleasure, and dignity, as well as diverse understandings of desires, and sexual preferences.

### **SRHR, Poverty and Food Security**

- SRHR issues are overshadowed by persistent poverty levels amongst most women and girls in Uganda as a result of unmet basic needs such as food, education, treatment, and shelter. Food insecurity is one of the aspects that affect the well-being of vulnerable women and girls to the extent of not having control over their bodies. Poverty by nature denies women and girls access to education and control over resources as well as their individual health decisions.
- Scenarios that force women and girls to engage in unsafe sexual relationships are an indicator of unmet needs for urgent intervention for a woman or a girl who is trapped in a situation where she has no alternative against violence, sexual abuse, and discrimination. Therefore, SRHR should assure women and girls experiencing violence a possibility to access affordable justice. Policymakers need to integrate various ministries like agriculture and health for a holistic change that meets the basic SRHR of women and girls.
- Ineffective gender-sensitive laws and policies have increased the vulnerability of women, girls, and children to sexual exploitation which has caused most women and girls as well as children to be subjected to psychological and emotional problems.

## **Policy Recommendations**

- Policymakers need to take into consideration that, SRHR should incorporate sexuality which must be critically analyzed within the discourse of power that controls an individual's sexuality. This will help policy implementers and key stakeholders to understand sexuality by moving beyond the issues of reproduction, health, and violence to incorporate other dimensions such as the non-health-focused understandings of sexuality and rights to enable conditions for social and sexual freedom.
- Ensure access, availability, affordability, and quality of health services. Safe and accessible reproductive health services (safe abortion, maternal health services, pre-natal care, emergency obstetric care, safe delivery and post-natal care, and skilled birth attendants) and services need to be guaranteed throughout the life cycle.
- Ensure appropriate reproductive education, information, and services to all age groups that require this service and provide the necessary package of sexual and reproductive health information and services.
- Ensure adolescent-friendly approaches that respect the right to consent and confidentiality as well as specific approaches to address the needs of women.
- Increase awareness regarding SRHR in communities through the engagement of people from different groups to help change the dominant views that are detrimental to women. This requires efforts to involve; development actors such as women groups, persons living with HIV, males, elders, community leaders, and traditional and religious leaders.
- Ensure proper implementation of relevant laws and policies that guarantee women their social, cultural, economic, civil, and political rights while protecting SRHR of vulnerable groups (adolescents, unmarried young women and mothers, widows, single mothers, migrants, refugees, and those belonging to ethnic or sexual minorities, sex workers, and people living with HIV).
- Demand measures to end financial exploitation of vulnerable women and VAW. This has to be done through the proper implementation of various plans and policies while providing women and girls with effective protection, and access to justice and at the same time helping prevent VAW from occurring in the first place.
- SRHR is to be dealt with through a multi-sectoral approach to address the linkage of food security and poverty, proper linkage needs to be established with policymakers from various ministries like agriculture, health and education.

## **Conclusion**

The present context is the best time for us to advocate and demand access to effective Sexual Reproductive Health and Rights to break the deeply rooted silence around SRHR and create a conducive space for women, girls, and children to demand their Health and sexual rights in a just and fair way. As asserted by some activists, "The real change will not happen if we don't change the way society thinks".

## Reference

UNFPA Issue brief 14, October 2020, <https://www.caseyfoundationafrica.org/child-marriage-in->