



INITIATIVE FOR SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC RIGHTS

Statement by the Initiative for Social and Economic Rights (ISER) at the 43rd Session of the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACERWC). 15th– 25th April, 2024

Chairperson and members, the Initiative for Social and Economic Rights (ISER) is a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) that advances social and economic justice for all.

ISER together with World Vision UK, World Vision Zimbabwe and Education Coalition of Zimbabwe (ECOZI), World Vision DRC and Coalition Nationale de l'Education Pour Tous (CONEPT – DRC) has been implementing the Adolescent Mothers' Education Initiative (AMEI). This is a human rights advocacy and social accountability programme that seeks to ensure the right of access to education of pregnant girls and adolescent mothers, without restrictions. The programme is aimed at positively influencing the legal, policy, social, cultural, and religious norms and practices that undermine and exclude pregnant girls and adolescent mothers from continued access and retention in school learning.

In sub-Saharan Africa, 30% of teenage girls give birth before reaching the age of maturity (18), which is the highest rate of teenage pregnancy of any region in the world, and often, results in girls leaving school, whether through expulsion which is common in church schools or absence of supporting measures. In Zimbabwe, for example, according to official statistics in 2022, teenage pregnancy caused 12.96% of dropouts from secondary education among girls,² and in Uganda, according to the latest official data (2019-2020), teenage pregnancy accounts for 7.6% of all school dropouts by girls aged 6-24.

The dropout is also attributed to restrictive policies and laws regarding their continued access to learning. For instance, in 2020, the Government of Uganda issued the Revised Guidelines on Prevention and Management of Teenage Pregnancy in School Setting that provide for mandatory leave of one year – a pregnant learner is subjected to leave at 3 months of pregnancy and only returns after giving birth after the baby makes 6 months. This is counterproductive to promoting girls' access to education, especially the victims of pregnancy. In Zimbabwe, although the country's Education Amendment Act (2019) prohibits exclusion and discrimination based on pregnancy, the current policy that guides schools on how to deal with cases of teenage pregnancy is discriminatory and stigmatizing. In DRC, the law does not explicitly prohibit discrimination and expulsion of pregnant girls and adolescent mothers from school.

In all three countries, there is limited data on teenage pregnancy and parenthood and its impact on education. Where it is collected, it is often inaccurate, irregularly collected, incomplete, or inconsistent. This means that we do not know the true number of drop-outs due to pregnancy and other important statistics, such as re-entry and completion rates

ISER calls upon the Committee to recommend to the Governments of; Uganda, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Zimbabwe:

- Abolish the policy that requires pregnant school girls to take a year's absence from school as a pre-condition for returning to school and instead enact laws that prohibit the exclusion of all girls regardless of their status from school.
- Revamp their data collection policies and systems to implement a robust data collection and management system to track pregnant girls and adolescent mothers' continued learning, re-entry and completion of school.
- Ensure that religious organisations that operate schools comply with relevant laws and policies that ensure the right to education of pregnant girls and adolescents mothers.