

Universities should help pregnant students

Many Ugandan girls will be joining university next month for their very first semester. Awaiting them is the fear of getting pregnant and having to make a choice of keeping or aborting the baby

You've worked hard for this your whole life, this, your university career, your education and future, your dreams of a better life. Then it happened. You made a mistake. Now you're pregnant. You're pregnant while at a religious university.

You know what happens next. You get thrown out. Everything will be gone. Your hard-earned tuition and your honour and your hope for tomorrow too, all lost. So you got that abortion.

Now you fear maybe that was another mistake. For sure it was risky, even to your own life. And while it may be hidden and covered, sort of, it's all so very heavy too, that big secret behind your every smile.

You still go to worship services to praise God. What other choice is there? Yes, you always nod when you're expected and you always give reassurance that you are in sync with the entire programme, especially about the school's rules. But you need more. You need someone to trust.

Young women at universities, any university really, will get pregnant.

On the worst days you feel trapped and alone and abandoned. In the darkest times, you even think of suicide. The only thing that keeps you from it is another fear, the one that you would lose your very soul. You know plenty about so-called religion, sure, but what you really need is God with skin on.

This is how the stories go in Uganda, experiences with one variation or another, real-life stories now about to play themselves



Parents and students arriving for one of the recent graduation events at Uganda Christian University. Although many girls are now accessing university education, they endure numerous challenges with some being forced to make really hard choices

out across this country as tens of thousands of students return to university for a new semester. For many of these students, especially the ones blessed with the fortune of simply being female, school will teach them much more than with just papers and books. School will teach them survival.

One semester ago, the pages of this publication carried some of this material. At Bishop Barham University College, an affiliate of Uganda Christian University, a group of girls were expelled for being pregnant. At the Islamic University in Uganda, females afraid of random pregnancy tests were reported to be running to get false urine samples from boys willing to help them.

Voices weighed in: parents, politicians, university administrators, everyone realising, of course, that there are plenty of other disturbing stories from both secular and religious schools that never make it to public light. No, this painful issue won't go away. So it lingers, waiting for change, for a new way, a way that goes beyond just shame and punishment.

Otherwise young, bright Ugandan women will continue to abort their babies and carry that pain and anxiety and dishonesty, alone. Meanwhile, the Ugandan men who partner with them sexually will continue to skirt their responsibilities and stay protected, if not hidden, by the status quo of worn and patriarchal ways.

It's not that cultural shame comes only from being pregnant at a religious school. But there is a stunning irony when these sorts of stories unfold because true religion – the sort exemplified by Christ in his relationships with women – champions grace and gender equity.

"Where is the man?" was one obvious question when religious leaders of that day, from that ancient patriarchal society, brought to Christ a woman caught in the act of adultery. To this, we can add the question, in what other ways did Christ prod her accusers before



Thomas Froese

speaking to that woman personally?

Ugandan schools claiming to value true religion would do well to ruminate on this if they're interested in a more caring approach toward pregnant students, if they're interested in saving the lives of unborn children and teaching new parenting skills to the young mothers, and, right alongside them, the often-silent fathers.

This moves past saying "You've broken the rules and these are the consequences," to something more holistic, to "We don't condone extramarital sex, but we love you and your child and want to help you develop the life skills that you'll now need."

Even in a secular context this is in the spirit of Ugandans building community and strength through their women and children. The real

discussion on this issue, after all, goes past university life and into how women and children across Uganda's societal spectrum need a hand up.

For religious schools, to work for anything less is to allow them to carry a double standard that says they have a timeless faith, but the rules at their particular institution are more important. It's giving the message that while their own faith and canonical scriptures may even give clear light on issues like grace and gender equity, that light is not really, not fully, known. Or it's not lived in because the institutional rules are more important than the faith itself.

So helping, not shunning and shaming pregnant students is one critical help. This is even helpful to the goals of religious institutions because, in Uganda, these schools have plenty of students who have little interest in any particular faith or ideology. They attend for the simple reason that they desire a certain programme and, unlike some other parts of the world, Uganda has few secular options.

Of course, such lukewarm students need to know what they've signed-up for and work to respect any school's policies. They should know religious schools in Uganda can make invaluable contributions to culture.

Even so, certain campus halls and chapels will always have at least some head-nodding and façades from students who carry all sorts of legitimate doubts or indifferences or pains. This is an important part of the discussion.

Yes, it's a new school semester and young women at universities, any university anywhere really, will get pregnant. For plenty of Uganda's schools, it's also a suitable time for this deeper look and debate. When enough reasonable and helpful voices gather, they'll, in time, bring the policy changes, the breath of fresh air that's so needed to replace today's fears.

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THIS Week

1996

UWA ESTABLISHED

On August 18, the Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) was established by the Uganda Wildlife Statute, which merged Uganda's National Parks and Game and Fisheries Department. UWA is in charge of managing 10 national parks, 12 wildlife reserves, 14 wildlife sanctuaries and provides guidance for five community wildlife areas. It is governed by a Board of Trustees.

2005

OBOTE STEPS DOWN

In August 2005, Dr. Milton Obote, the Uganda People's Congress (UPC) leader, announced his intention to step down as leader of the party. This was the time when Obote was preparing to return to the country. After his second removal from power, Obote fled to Tanzania and later to Zambia. Unfortunately, in October 2005, Obote died in a hospital in South Africa.



1978

JOMO KENYATTA DIES

On August 22, President Jomo Kenyatta died. Daniel Toroitich Arap Moi, his vice-president, succeeded him. After Kenya gained independence on December 12, 1963, Kenyatta convinced Moi that KADU and KANU should be merged to complete the process of decolonisation. Moi was popular, with widespread support all over the country.