

12,424 'missing' candidates are more than just numbers

According to Education Cabinet Secretary George Magoha, 12,424 candidates missed the 2020 Kenya Certificate of Primary Education (KCPE) examinations. The figure is double the number of those who missed the 2019 KCPE exams, who were then said to be 5,530.

While Professor Magoha alluded that the number was inconsequential compared to the 1.18 million candidates who sat the exams, the persistent question remains as to why the more than 12,000 candidates failed to sit for their exams.

Education stakeholders have highlighted various reasons for the high number of school drop-outs, including negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic that led to a surge in the number of teenage pregnancies, early marriages, deaths and drug and substance abuse amongst school-going children. While we cannot certainly account for each of the candidates who missed their exams, we are convinced that a significant number of these 'missing' candidates were exposed to various forms of Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV), including child labour, subsequently being forced to drop out of school.

In Narok County alone, the Ministry of Health recorded 15,542 cases of teenage pregnancies across various health facilities in 2020. A desk analysis conducted by COVAW from February to April 2021 revealed that some of the key factors contributing to the high number of teenage pregnancies includ-

ed lack of access to information on Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH), Female Genital Mutilation leading to early marriages, lack of parental guidance, and poverty. The analysis showed that teenage girls preferred to terminate pregnancies through procuring unsafe abortion services out of the fear that they would be stigmatised by community members and also because they still had the desire to pursue their education. About 67 percent of the community members COVAW interviewed in Narok North and Narok South said they were aware of girls from their communities who had procured abortion services. Traditional herbs and use of over-the-counter abortion pills were the most mentioned methods that girls used to terminate unwanted pregnancies.

According to the World Health Organisation, complications relating to teenage pregnancy and childbirth are the leading cause of death amongst girls aged 15-19 globally. In addition, 3.9 million girls aged 15-19 years procure unsafe abortion services each year.

The complications arising from unsafe abortion cannot be overstated. On September 25, 2020, WHO reported that three out of four abortions that occurred in Africa and Latin America were unsafe. Girls and women who procure unsafe abortion services experience life threatening complications, including excessive bleeding, infection, injury of internal organs and incomplete abortion.

The Narok County Reproductive Health Coordinator, in a recent phone interview, stated that either safe and unsafe abortion, the risk of complications, including death, will always be there, yet this can be mitigated through adopting effective Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights Education that is context appropriate.

"The cost of treating complications arising from unsafe abortion is more than the cost of providing age-appropriate sexual and reproductive health information and services that will prevent unplanned pregnancies that often result in unsafe abortion," says the Narok County Reproductive Health Coordinator, Mr Toroitich Chesang.

To reduce the maternal mortality and morbidity resulting from early pregnancy and childbirth, we have to first address the rising numbers of teenage pregnancies. It is important that the major investment in addressing teenage pregnancies is in mitigation rather than response. It is equally important to appreciate that we shall not fully mitigate all cases of teenage pregnancies, but appropriate response strategies are important.

COVAW calls for the full implementation of the National Adolescent Sexual Reproductive Health Policy of 2015 to address rising numbers of teenage pregnancies and the establishment of youth friendly centres where adolescents and youth can access various SRH services, including age appropriate sex education, guidance and counselling



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and for the full implementation of the school re-entry policy to ensure teenage mothers are supported to enrol back to school.

Referring to the so-called 'inconsequential number' of candidates that failed to sit their exams and could not be accounted for, COVAW's executive director Wairimu Wahome, reacted that "the failure to address the causal factors for the missing candidates is what undermines the desired outcomes in development interventions, especially those related to Health and Education. Living up to the spirit of leaving no one behind calls for deliberate, inclusive interventions to mitigate such drop-out incidents so that we have less cases of missing candidates in 2022, meaning less cases of SGBV meted out on our school-going children."

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15,542

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Coalition to Violence Against Women