

# **The youth-led research giving voice to teen mothers in Uganda**

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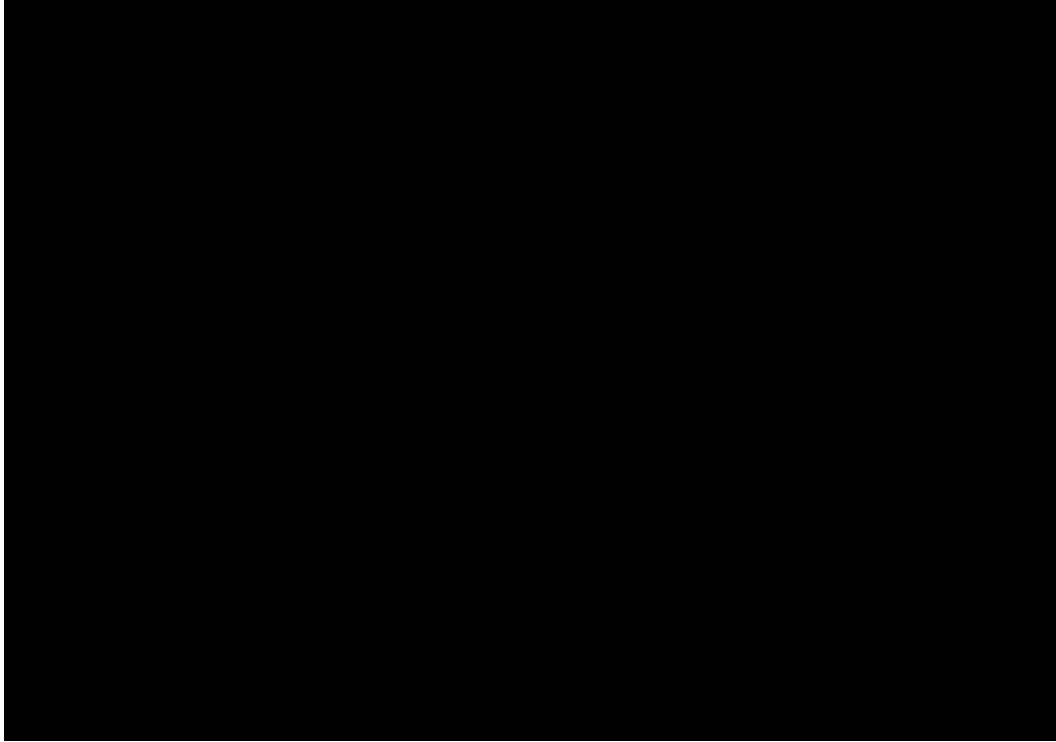
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Pregnancy can be a stressful enough time for any expecting mother, but it can be even more so for teenage girls navigating the added challenges they face. (Shutterstock)

## The youth-led research giving voice to teen mothers in Uganda

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The global rate of teen pregnancies has been decreasing in recent decades. [According to the World Health Organization](#), worldwide adolescent birth rates have decreased from 64.5 births per 1,000 women aged 15–19 years in 2000 to 41.3 births per 1,000 women in 2023.

However, those numbers can differ significantly by region. Every year, around 21 million teenage girls in developing countries become pregnant, and around 12 million give birth.

In Uganda, the teenage pregnancy rate remains among the highest in Sub-Saharan Africa, [at 25 per cent](#). Cultural and religious norms often make adolescent sexuality a highly sensitive subject. Many girls can be ostracized or face marginalization if they become pregnant. And the long-term impacts on their lives can be significant. [Almost 60 per cent](#) of school dropouts in Uganda are due to pregnancy, and many never return to the education system.

Pregnancy can be a stressful enough time for any expecting mother, but it can be even more so for a pregnant teenager in places where engaging in sexual relations is taboo, especially for girls.

Along with colleagues in Uganda and Canada, we are conducting a community-engaged research project to understand the experiences of young mothers. Our project, Centering Marginal Voices, aims to build research and advocacy skills for young mothers in Uganda.

## Introduction - Centering Marginal Voices (CMV) Research project



A clip outlining the Centering Marginal Voices project.

### **Community-engaged research**

Community-engaged research has emerged in social work as an important approach that empowers communities experiencing particular issues to make decisions concerning those issues. This approach cultivates long-term relationships and promotes the development of sustainable solutions for community problems.

One form of this approach focuses on engaging youth in researching about their experiences with the issues affecting their lives. This can boost our understanding as researchers and make young people feel heard and empowered.

Engaging young people in research requires clear communication, the use of appropriate channels of communication, constant feedback and listening. It can also mean providing logistical support like transportation or food, among other things. It is vital for researchers to listen to young people when they describe what they need to be participants in the research process.

Many adolescent girls already face vulnerabilities and challenges when it comes to their reproductive health. Pregnancy can often add another layer of complexity to those challenges.

While there is much discussion about teenage pregnancy in Uganda, rarely are young mothers given platforms to speak their truths to help policymakers understand and address the root causes. Their voices are muted and their lived experiences are not represented in policy.

Teen motherhood presents girls with numerous challenges. They must navigate parenthood while still at a young age. They must figure out ways to support their children while still being dependents themselves. They also have to make important decisions and provide child care with limited experience to draw from, and manage their health needs alongside maternal care, among others.

Their ability to conduct research may be influenced by a combination of these factors and by the skills they have, how they navigate relational dynamics, and the stigmatization they face being teen mothers.

### Live Recorded Webinar - Launch of the Centering Marginal Voice...



A webinar with the researchers and young mothers on the Centering Marginal Voices project.

### **Centering young mothers in research**

As we began the research process, we held consultative meetings with community leaders who identified 40 young mothers from urban and rural parts of Uganda. We engaged the young mothers in discussions about their life journeys and in team building exercises. We later divided them into groups based on their villages. Each group then selected two peers to continue on the project as 12 youth peer researchers.

When conducting this kind of community-engaged project, it is important for researchers to consider the ways they approach and include youth participants:

**Consent** — Our first aim with the 12 selected young mothers was to seek consent from their parents or guardians. The young mothers also told us to speak with their live-in partners, whom we had not initially considered. They spoke to their parents or guardians, who were already expecting our team and eased the consent process for us.

**Communication** — Young mothers in the capital Kampala preferred phone calls, WhatsApp and physical meetings. However, those in the rural areas did not all have smartphones or understand social media. This posed a challenge as our project entailed them conducting surveys using smartphones. We therefore revised our training to include basics on how to use the smartphone.

**Designing tools** — We further engaged the youth peer researchers to refine our research tools. They helped us rephrase questions in local languages, especially those related to sexual relations.

**Mutual support** — The youth peer researchers were trained to lead a survey and collect quantitative data from 766 participants in total. They prioritized teamwork and support, with some collecting more data than others. They also requested autonomy in scheduling their data collection to balance their research activities with their maternal duties and caring for their families.

**Navigating environments** — The young mothers provided us with a descriptive tour of their environments. They advised us on where to go and how to behave when visiting. They always accompanied us within their community, acting as our guides.

Young mothers know best about their own experiences, and this accords them a legitimate space in research as researchers. Practitioners and planners should be intent on being open to meaningfully engaging them while learning from them.