

Household Sexual Abuse and Girls' Educational Discontinuation in Uganda: A Narrative Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

Household sexual abuse represents an important but insufficiently examined dimension of girls' educational vulnerability in Uganda. Although existing literature has documented the effects of teenage pregnancy, early marriage, poverty and other barriers to girls' education, less attention has been given to how sexual abuse occurring within household environments may intersect with these factors to shape educational trajectories. This paper examines the relationship between household sexual abuse and girls' educational discontinuation in Uganda through a qualitative narrative literature review. Literature published between January 2010 and December 2025 was identified through searches of Google Scholar, JSTOR, PubMed and relevant institutional repositories using combinations of terms relating to household sexual abuse, sexual violence, teenage pregnancy, early marriage, school dropout, educational discontinuation and girls' education in Uganda. Sources were screened for relevance and credibility and synthesized thematically. The review indicates that household sexual abuse may be associated with educational disruption through multiple potential pathways, including psychological and social consequences, school absenteeism or disengagement, teenage pregnancy, early marriage and family disruption. These pathways do not operate uniformly and may be shaped by poverty, gender norms, family and community responses, school environments, institutional practices and access to protection and support services. The review therefore cautions against treating sexual abuse as a deterministic or singular cause of school dropout. Instead, it positions household sexual abuse within a wider system of interacting vulnerabilities that can influence whether educational disruption develops into discontinuation. The paper recommends integrated responses combining child protection, psychosocial support, educational continuation and re-entry mechanisms, socioeconomic assistance, community engagement and multisectoral coordination.

Keywords: Household sexual abuse; educational discontinuation; girls' education; teenage pregnancy; early marriage; child protection; Uganda

INTRODUCTION

Sexual violence against children remains an important child-protection concern because its consequences may extend beyond immediate physical harm to psychological well-being, social relationships and participation in education. Uganda's Violence Against Children Survey provides important national evidence on physical, emotional and sexual violence against children and provides an important foundation for understanding the problem within the Ugandan context (Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development [MGLSD], 2018).

The educational consequences of violence cannot, however, be understood in isolation. Girls' educational trajectories in Uganda are shaped by interacting socioeconomic, reproductive, household, cultural and institutional conditions. Teenage pregnancy and child marriage are particularly important in this regard. The World Bank (2017) identifies important relationships among child marriage, early childbearing and girls' educational attainment in Uganda and notes that early marriage and early childbearing can interrupt girls' schooling.

Similarly, UNFPA Uganda and the National Planning Authority (2022) document substantial educational and socioeconomic consequences associated with teenage pregnancy. Their analysis indicates that teenage pregnancy has implications for girls' educational completion, household welfare and broader national development.

Within this broader literature, household sexual abuse warrants greater analytical attention. Abuse occurring within household environments may be particularly difficult to disclose where the perpetrator is known to the child or occupies a position of authority or dependency. Fear, stigma, family disruption and limited access to protection may influence both disclosure and subsequent educational participation.

The issue is therefore not simply whether sexual abuse occurs, but how its consequences interact with other conditions to shape girls' educational trajectories. Existing literature frequently examines related issues separately. Research on girls' education commonly focuses on poverty, parental involvement, school environments, teenage pregnancy or early marriage, while research on sexual violence often concentrates on prevalence, health consequences and child protection. This fragmentation leaves an important analytical gap concerning the ways in which household sexual abuse may intersect with educational vulnerability.

Recent Ugandan evidence makes this issue particularly important. Ndibalekera et al. (2025), using data from the 2018 Uganda Violence Against Children Survey, examined the association between childhood sexual violence and low educational attainment among young people aged 18–24. Their findings did not show a uniform significant association across all forms of childhood sexual violence; attempted forced sex among females was significant in bivariate analysis, while child marriage was significant in the multivariate model. The authors consequently point to the need for further investigation of the relationship rather than assuming a simple deterministic effect. This evidence is important for the present review because it cautions against presenting sexual abuse as an automatic cause of school dropout. Instead, the relationship requires examination through multiple possible pathways and the contextual conditions within which those pathways operate.

Accordingly, this review asks:

How does existing literature explain the relationship between household sexual abuse and girls' educational discontinuation in Uganda, and what contextual conditions shape this relationship?

The review contributes to the literature by bringing together evidence that is often considered separately and by providing an integrated conceptual framework that positions household sexual abuse as an important source of educational vulnerability while recognizing multiple pathways and contextual influences.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study employed a qualitative narrative literature review design. A narrative review was considered appropriate because literature concerning household sexual abuse and girls' education spans multiple disciplines and includes different forms of evidence, including peer-reviewed empirical studies, national surveys, policy documents and institutional reports. The purpose was not to calculate a pooled statistical effect but to identify recurring patterns, compare explanations, critically examine differences across sources and develop an evidence-informed interpretation of the relationship between household sexual abuse and educational discontinuation.

The review covered literature published between January 2010 and December 2025.

Information Sources and Search Strategy

Literature was searched through Google Scholar, JSTOR, PubMed and relevant institutional repositories.

The search strategy used combinations of terms relating to the central concepts of the study. Search terms included:

- "household sexual abuse";
- "sexual abuse" AND education;
- "child sexual abuse" AND girls;
- "sexual violence" AND girls AND Uganda;
- "school dropout" AND girls AND Uganda;
- "educational discontinuation" AND girls;
- "teenage pregnancy" AND school dropout AND Uganda;
- "early marriage" AND girls' education;
- "girls' education" AND Uganda; and
- "school re-entry" AND pregnant girls AND Uganda.

The search strategy was deliberately broader than the exact phrase *household sexual abuse* because relevant Ugandan literature frequently uses related terms including childhood sexual violence, sexual abuse, defilement, sexual exploitation, teenage pregnancy and early marriage.

Eligibility Criteria

Sources were included when they:

1. addressed sexual abuse, sexual violence, teenage pregnancy, early marriage, girls' education, educational discontinuation or closely related issues;
2. focused primarily on Uganda or provided relevant comparative evidence;
3. were published in English;
4. were peer-reviewed studies, official national reports, policy documents or publications from credible institutions; and
5. provided information relevant to one or more pathways or contextual conditions examined in the review.

Sources were excluded where they were unrelated to the research question, lacked sufficient bibliographic information, duplicated stronger evidence, or could not contribute meaningfully to the thematic synthesis.

Screening and Selection

The literature was screened progressively. Titles and abstracts or available summaries were initially examined for relevance. Potentially relevant sources were subsequently assessed according to geographical relevance, methodological clarity, credibility and contribution to the research question.

Because the study was designed as a narrative rather than systematic review, unsupported numerical claims regarding the number of records identified, screened or retained are not presented.

Quality and Credibility Appraisal

The review did not treat all sources as equally authoritative.

Peer-reviewed empirical studies were prioritized when discussing empirical relationships. National surveys and official institutional publications were given greater weight for national prevalence, policy and contextual claims.

Particular attention was given to:

- methodological clarity;
- research design;
- study population;
- geographical relevance;
- credibility of the publisher or institution;
- consistency between evidence and conclusions; and

- directness of the evidence to the claim being supported.

This approach was important because evidence concerning sexual violence, teenage pregnancy, early marriage, poverty and educational discontinuation does not automatically establish a direct causal relationship among all of these factors.

Data Extraction and Thematic Synthesis

Information was extracted around four central questions:

1. What evidence exists concerning household or childhood sexual abuse?
2. What educational disruptions or consequences are reported?
3. What pathways may connect abuse or related vulnerabilities with educational outcomes?
4. What contextual conditions may influence these pathways?

The evidence was synthesized into interconnected themes concerning:

1. household sexual abuse and educational vulnerability;
2. psychological and social consequences;
3. teenage pregnancy and educational disruption;
4. early marriage and household responsibilities;
5. socioeconomic and cultural conditions; and
6. institutional protection, school environment and educational re-entry.

These themes provide the basis for the conceptual framework and subsequent analysis.

Conceptual Framework and Thematic Analysis

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework guiding this review positions household sexual abuse as a central source of educational vulnerability while recognizing that its potential effects on girls' educational trajectories may operate through multiple and interacting pathways.

Rather than assuming a fixed sequence in which sexual abuse inevitably leads to pregnancy, early marriage and school dropout, the framework considers psychological, social, reproductive, household and educational processes that may contribute to educational disruption.

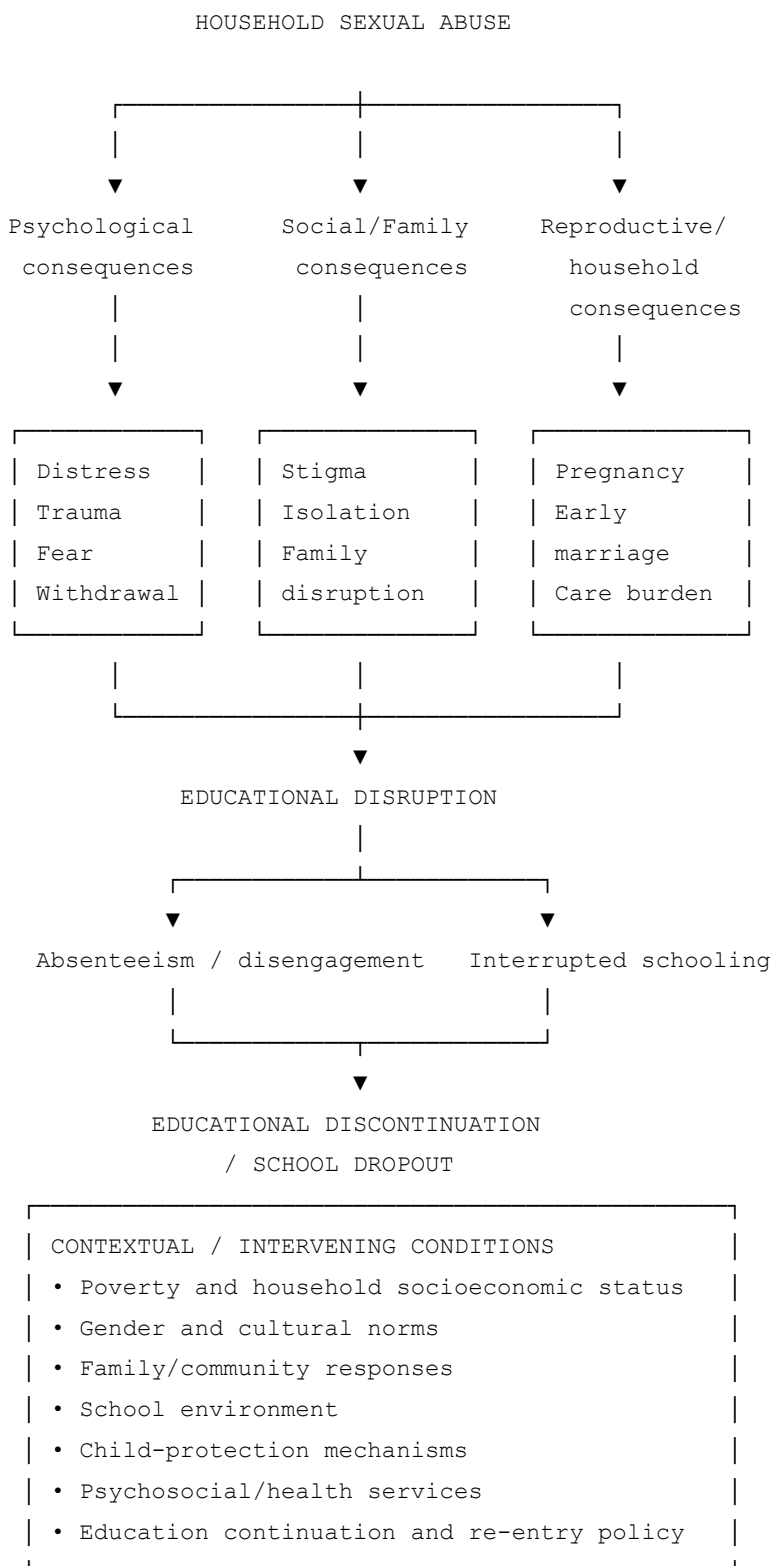
Household sexual abuse may be associated with psychological consequences such as distress, fear, trauma, withdrawal and difficulties with social interaction. It may also generate social and family consequences, including stigma, isolation, family conflict and disruption of relationships. In some circumstances, sexual abuse may be associated with pregnancy or other reproductive and household consequences, which may subsequently contribute to educational interruption. These potential pathways may manifest through absenteeism, disengagement, interrupted schooling and, in some cases, educational discontinuation or school dropout.

The relationship is further shaped by contextual conditions, including household socioeconomic circumstances, gender and cultural norms, family and community responses, school environments, child-protection mechanisms, access to psychosocial and health services, and educational continuation and re-entry arrangements. The framework is therefore analytical rather than statistically tested. It does not suggest that all girls who experience household sexual abuse follow the same pathway or that the identified processes

necessarily occur in a fixed chronological order. Rather, it provides an organizing structure for interpreting the evidence reviewed in this study.

This interpretation is consistent with Ugandan evidence showing that the relationship between childhood sexual violence and educational attainment is not uniform across different forms of violence and that other factors, including child marriage, may be important in explaining educational outcomes (Ndibalekera et al., 2025).

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework



Source: Researcher's conceptualization based on the reviewed literature.

Source: Researcher's conceptualization based on the reviewed literature.

Uganda's Violence Against Children Survey provides an important national evidence base concerning physical, emotional and sexual violence against children (MGLSD, 2018).

The educational significance of household sexual abuse lies partly in what may happen after the abuse. A girl may experience fear, stigma, psychological distress, family conflict or withdrawal from normal social activities. Where these experiences interfere with attendance, concentration or engagement, educational disruption may follow.

However, evidence from Uganda does not support a simple claim that every experience of childhood sexual violence produces low educational attainment. Ndibalekera et al. (2025) found that most forms of childhood sexual violence examined were not significantly associated with low educational attainment, although attempted forced sex among females was significant in bivariate analysis and child marriage was significant in the multivariate model. This finding supports a pathway-based rather than deterministic interpretation.

Psychological and Social Pathways

Psychological and social consequences represent one potential pathway between sexual abuse and educational disruption.

Fear, shame, anxiety, social isolation and difficulties concentrating may affect a girl's ability to participate consistently in school. However, the presence and severity of these consequences can vary considerably between individuals.

The educational implications may therefore depend partly on whether girls have access to counselling, family support, protection services and supportive school environments.

Consequently, psychological distress should be regarded as a possible intervening mechanism, rather than as an inevitable consequence that automatically produces school dropout.

Teenage Pregnancy and Educational Disruption

Teenage pregnancy represents a particularly important potential pathway. The 2022 UNFPA Uganda and National Planning Authority report identifies substantial educational and socioeconomic consequences associated with teenage pregnancy. The report indicates that approximately 64% of teenage mothers would not complete primary education if no action were taken to address teenage pregnancy (UNFPA Uganda & National Planning Authority, 2022).

Importantly, teenage pregnancy should not be treated as synonymous with sexual abuse. Pregnancy may arise through different circumstances.

The relevant pathway for this review is therefore:

sexual abuse → possible pregnancy → educational disruption

rather than:

sexual abuse → pregnancy → dropout

This distinction prevents the analysis from attributing every pregnancy or educational interruption to sexual abuse.

The Government of Uganda and UNICEF's formative research on child marriage and teenage pregnancy further identifies underlying factors associated with these problems across ten Ugandan districts (Government of Uganda & UNICEF, 2015).

Early Marriage and Household Responsibilities

Early marriage is another potential pathway through which girls may discontinue education. Delprato et al. (2015), using evidence from 36 countries in Sub-Saharan Africa and South West Asia, found that delaying marriage was associated with increased schooling and reduced likelihood of secondary-school dropout.

Ugandan evidence is consistent with this broader pattern. The World Bank (2017) reports important relationships among child marriage, early childbearing and low educational attainment and notes that both child marriage and early childbearing can interrupt girls' schooling. However, early marriage should not automatically be attributed to sexual abuse.

A more defensible pathway is:

sexual abuse → possible pregnancy/social crisis → family/community response → possible early marriage → educational disruption

This formulation recognizes that early marriage has multiple determinants, including socioeconomic and cultural conditions.

Socioeconomic and Cultural Conditions

Socioeconomic circumstances can influence girls' educational participation independently of sexual abuse and may also shape how households respond to abuse, pregnancy or educational interruption.

Mugenyi et al. (2023) examined family factors, school environment and conduct problems among primary school pupils in Kampala District. Their work demonstrates the relevance of family and school environments when examining children's educational experiences.

The evidence should nevertheless be interpreted carefully. Poverty is not itself evidence of sexual abuse, nor should socioeconomic disadvantage be presented as a universal cause of school dropout. Rather, poverty may increase vulnerability and reduce the resources available to girls and families when educational disruption occurs.

Similarly, cultural and gender norms should not be treated as a single explanatory variable. Their influence may operate through expectations concerning marriage, pregnancy, gender roles, family responsibility and the value placed on girls' education.

Institutional Protection, School Environment and Re-entry

The educational consequences of abuse are also influenced by institutional responses. The Uganda Violence Against Children Survey emphasizes the need to address violence against children through coordinated protection responses (MGLSD, 2018).

The question of what happens after educational interruption is equally important. Ahikire and Madanda (2011) examined the re-entry of pregnant girls and child mothers into primary and secondary schools in Uganda. Their work provides evidence concerning the reintegration of girls following pregnancy-related educational interruption. This supports an important proposition:

Educational disruption does not necessarily have to become permanent discontinuation.

Where supportive re-entry mechanisms exist and are effectively implemented, some girls may resume their education.

Critical Synthesis

Taken together, the evidence indicates that household sexual abuse and educational discontinuation should be understood through multiple interacting pathways.

Three conclusions emerge.

First, household sexual abuse can represent a significant source of educational vulnerability, but its effects are not necessarily direct.

Second, psychological distress, pregnancy, early marriage, absenteeism and family disruption may overlap without occurring in a fixed sequence.

Third, socioeconomic conditions, gender norms, family responses, school environments and institutional protection mechanisms can influence whether educational disruption becomes permanent.

The conceptual framework therefore provides an analytical map of possible relationships, not a statistically tested causal model.

DISCUSSION

The reviewed evidence suggests that household sexual abuse deserves greater attention in discussions of girls' educational vulnerability in Uganda. However, the evidence does not justify describing sexual abuse as an automatic or universal cause of school dropout.

The stronger interpretation is that sexual abuse can create or intensify conditions under which educational disruption becomes more likely.

The evidence concerning childhood sexual violence and educational attainment is particularly important here. Ndibalekera et al. (2025) did not find a uniform statistically significant association across all forms of childhood sexual violence, demonstrating why a deterministic interpretation would be inappropriate.

At the same time, evidence concerning teenage pregnancy and early marriage demonstrates their substantial implications for girls' education in Uganda (UNFPA Uganda & National Planning Authority, 2022; World Bank, 2017).

The analytical challenge is therefore to understand when and how these factors become connected.

For example, pregnancy may follow sexual abuse, but pregnancy may also have other causes. Early marriage may follow pregnancy or family pressure, but it may also occur independently of sexual abuse. Poverty may intensify educational vulnerability but does not by itself establish a causal relationship with sexual abuse.

The relationship is therefore better conceptualized as:

exposure → potential pathways → educational disruption → possible discontinuation

within a context shaped by:

family + socioeconomic + cultural + school + institutional conditions.

This interpretation also gives greater importance to institutional responses.

The evidence concerning school re-entry demonstrates that educational interruption need not automatically become permanent. Ahikire and Madanda (2011) provide an important Ugandan perspective on the reintegration of pregnant girls and child mothers into education.

Similarly, the World Bank (2017) emphasizes the importance of keeping girls in school while also addressing the circumstances that prevent girls who have left school from returning.

Thus, the educational outcome following abuse, pregnancy or marriage is partly shaped by what families, schools and institutions do afterwards.

The framework therefore moves the analysis beyond an exclusively individual-level explanation and recognizes the role of social and institutional environments.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Conclusion

This narrative review examined how household sexual abuse may relate to girls' educational discontinuation in Uganda.

The evidence indicates that sexual abuse represents an important source of educational vulnerability, but it does not support a deterministic relationship in which abuse inevitably leads to school dropout.

Instead, educational disruption may emerge through multiple pathways, including psychological distress, social isolation, absenteeism, teenage pregnancy, early marriage and family disruption. These pathways are influenced by poverty, gender norms, family and community responses, school environments and institutional protection mechanisms.

Evidence concerning teenage pregnancy and child marriage demonstrates their substantial implications for girls' education in Uganda (UNFPA Uganda & National Planning Authority, 2022; World Bank, 2017).

The review therefore concludes that household sexual abuse should be understood as a significant but context-dependent source of educational vulnerability, rather than as a singular or inevitable cause of educational discontinuation.

Policy and Practice Implications

Strengthening Child Protection

Protection mechanisms should provide accessible and confidential avenues through which girls can disclose abuse and obtain appropriate support.

Strengthening School-Based Support

Schools should strengthen counselling, referral and safeguarding mechanisms so that girls experiencing abuse or related vulnerabilities can remain connected to education.

Supporting Educational Continuation and Re-entry

Girls whose education is interrupted by pregnancy or related circumstances should be supported to continue or return to school. Evidence from Uganda demonstrates the relevance of re-entry mechanisms (Ahikire & Madanda, 2011).

Addressing Socioeconomic Vulnerability

Interventions should consider the economic circumstances that may make it difficult for affected girls to remain in or return to education.

Addressing Gender and Cultural Norms

Community interventions should address norms that constrain girls' education or encourage early marriage following pregnancy.

Strengthening Multisectoral Coordination

Education, health, child protection, social welfare and community institutions should work together rather than addressing these problems independently.

Implications for Research

Future research should investigate household sexual abuse and girls' educational trajectories directly using Uganda-specific empirical data.

Longitudinal research would be particularly useful because it could establish how educational trajectories change over time following experiences of sexual abuse, pregnancy or early marriage.

Future studies should also investigate the role of:

- family responses;
- school responses;
- psychosocial support;
- socioeconomic assistance;
- child-protection mechanisms; and
- school re-entry policies.

Contribution to Knowledge

The main contribution of this review is the integration of literature that is often treated separately.

Rather than presenting sexual abuse, teenage pregnancy, early marriage, poverty and educational discontinuation as independent issues, the framework demonstrates how they may interact through different pathways.

The framework therefore provides a basis for future empirical research while avoiding the unsupported assumption of a single causal chain.

Limitations

This study is limited by the nature and availability of existing literature.

First, it is a narrative review rather than a systematic review or meta-analysis.

Second, relatively few Ugandan studies directly examine household sexual abuse and educational discontinuation together.

Third, several relationships identified in the framework are supported by evidence concerning related phenomena rather than direct longitudinal evidence connecting household sexual abuse to later educational discontinuation.

The conceptual pathways should therefore be interpreted as evidence-informed propositions requiring further empirical testing.

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