

# Gold's tarnished glow: Kakamega miners trap minors into motherhood and cycle of poverty

Beneath the glittering allure of gold mining in Kakamega lies a grim reality: teenage girls, lured by promises of quick wealth, are left to face the harsh consequences of exploitation and abandonment.

With education halted, and justice elusive, the toll on these girls—and their communities—grows heavier by the day.



A teen mother with her child in Kakamega. [PHOTO: Jael Musumba]

JAEL MUSUMBA

In the midst of the glittering promise of gold in Kakamega, a stark reality unfolds for young mothers who left with little support, are struggling to provide for their children.

Mostly still in their teen, these girls are impregnated while searching for a better life in the mine fields where preying gold miners take advantage of their situation.

With the promise of money, the teenagers easily fall into the trap of the miners who sexually exploit and abandon them once they become pregnant.

Abraham Butichi, chairman of Lirhembe mining site, disclosed that many young girls are lured into relationships with miners, only for the gold "diggers" to abandon them once they become pregnant, leaving the girls to care for themselves and their children.

Some even end up contracting diseases. According to Butichi, between June and July of this year, an outbreak of STIs affected six mining sites.

"Most of the miners couldn't come to work, and the impact was severe; we had to temporarily close the site while the outbreak was managed," he reveals.

Poverty plays a huge role in fueling

the situation. While miners earn quick money, the high poverty levels in the surrounding area drive young girls to form relationships with them to meet their basic needs.

Meet 14-year-old Beverly Indabuha, a teenage mother. Just a year ago, she was filled with hope, but today, the calluses on her hands tell the story of the hardships she has faced in raising her daughter.

Beverly, a child now raising a child, lives in a run-down metal shack with her grandmother. She reflected on how her life changed and her dreams shattered.

"It all started when I was sent home to collect school fees. At that time, we hadn't had a meal for two days, and I was starving. I needed money, but I knew my parents couldn't help. That's when I met a gold miner who offered to pay for my fees," explains Beverly.

#### Life regrets

In her innocence, she accepted the money and took care of her needs. That's how the relationship began. "From then on, he started making advances. Sometimes he would bring me food, and slowly, I got trapped. Before



Workers at Lirhembe mining site. Inset: One of the girls during the interview. [PHOTO: Jael Musumba]

I knew it, I was pregnant," she says tearfully, regretting how her dream of becoming a surveyor slipped away. "When my mother found out, she kicked me out, and that's how I ended up living with my grandmother," she adds.

Helpless and distraught, Beverly turned to the mining site to provide for her one-year-old daughter after the child's father abandoned them.

"I wish I could go back to school, but who would pay for my fees? My mother sees me as a disgrace and wants nothing to do with me," Beverly yearns, her voice trailing off.

Patience Ondisa, another teenager, shares a similar tragic story. Forced to care for her one-year-old son after a gold miner abandoned her, Patience's story dates back in 2022 after her parents separated and life turned sour.

"My mother returned to her parents, after separating with dad, leaving us with him. I'm the eldest of four siblings. Sadly, my father fell into depression after life became too overwhelming, and we ended up living on the streets," recounts Patience.

When street life became unbearable and her father lost his sanity,

she moved to the village and stayed at her grandmother's house. She describes how, due to her grandmother's advanced age, she had to focus on survival while ensuring her elderly grandmother was not burdened.

"I came here with my three siblings, even though my mother had already left for town to find work as a housekeeper. The responsibility of caring for my siblings and my elderly grandparents was overwhelming," she shares.

In her second year of high school, struggling with inadequate food and lack of basic necessities like sanitary towels, she fell prey to a gold miner who abandoned her after making her pregnant.

"I worked at the gold mine after school. I had been there for several months before I met a man from Kisumu. At first, he seemed genuinely concerned about my welfare, but his true intentions became clear after he left me as a single mother," says Patience.

The man partially paid for her school fees, stood in for her basic needs but later became a disap-

## How GBV tracker is fighting teenage sexual violence

hoped would transform our family's situation, is now here with a baby. I'm a deeply disappointed parent. If I had the power, I would have shut down these mining sites long ago," he laments.

Similarly, her grandmother, Rosemary Khalisa, voiced her frustration with the mining sites and their impact on young girls. She called for urgent action to protect the futures of girls at risk.

#### Beacon of hope

"The daughter I had high hopes for became the mother of these children after her marriage failed, and now the granddaughter who was once a beacon of hope is in a dire situation. I'm at a loss for whom to turn to. I'm too old to care for these children. People of my age are cared for by their grandchildren, but for me, it's the other way around," she says sorrowfully.

Teenage pregnancies among adolescents aged 15-19 years in Kenya was 23 per cent in 2003 according to Kenya Demographic and Health Survey (KDHS).

Since then, various efforts by the government and stakeholders were put in place to reduce the prevalence. By 2009, the prevalence had come down to 18 per cent with Kakamega being at 16.8 per cent making it the county with the highest prevalence in Western followed by Vihiga at 14 per cent.

According to Kennedy Shikuku, a court user committee member, and a child protection officer, between 2021 and 2024, Butali Law Courts registered 146 defilement cases, yet only seven have been prosecuted and concluded. This highlights the significant obstacles survivors face in their pursuit of justice.

He further revealed that Malava sub-county recorded 1,603, teenage pregnancies in 2,023 while Shinyalu recorded 1,233 teenage pregnancies in 2023. 146 cases of defilement were recorded in courts and only seven cases have been concluded.

#### TEEN PREGNANCIES IN KAKAMEGA (2023):

1,603  
CASES  
MALAVA SUB-COUNTY

1,233  
CASES  
SHINYALU SUB-COUNTY

#### Defilement Cases (2021-2024):

146  
CASES  
REPORTED

7  
CASES ONLY  
CONCLUDED

pointment.

"Right now at 16, my education is halted, my future is doomed and I have a son and siblings to look after," decries the girl.

Facing a bleak future, Patience returned to gold mining, risking becoming a mother for the second time.

Her grandfather, Eliud Khalisa,

expressed deep disappointment, describing the mining sites as traps that destroy the dreams of many young girls.

#### Heartbreaking reality

"If you walk through these villages, you'll see the heartbreaking reality girls as young as 12 are already mothers. My granddaughter, whom I had

In an interview, Betty Okero, the team leader of the Civil Society Organization (CSO) Network, and developer of the GBV tracker software piloted through the Haki Mashinani Alliance, shared her commitment to ending sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) among teenagers.

Equipped with a web-based application that plays a vital role in reporting and tracking GBV cases at the grassroots level, Betty is confident on reducing the prevalence of such cases.

Her efforts focus on raising community awareness and training human rights defenders to use the tracker for documenting cases and ensuring that victims receive the justice they deserve.

"This innovative tool is currently being used in Kisumu, Kakamega, Vihiga, and Homa Bay counties, where CSO Network is implementing its projects.

The Haki Mashinani Alliance, comprising human rights defenders, paralegals, chiefs, and other stakeholders, operates the tracker. Each member has an account and secure credentials to report violations," explains Betty.

When a violation is reported, the system captures key details, including the victim's name, contact information, and guardian contacts for children.

It also records the location and date of the incident, type of violation, a brief summary, and actions taken. Notifications are then sent to the designated CSO Network officer for follow-up.

The tracker supports ongoing case management, allowing

updates such as perpetrator arrests, court proceedings, and case outcomes.

With the support of Doris Anjawa, a champion for Vihiga women in business and a finance manager at a Community-Based Organization (CBO) funded by the Embassy of the Netherlands, Patience says efforts to encourage teenage mothers to return to school are gaining momentum.

Confident in the impact of the tracker tool she uses, Doris believes significant progress will soon be evident.

#### Collaboration

"We are tasked with addressing issues of sexual and gender-based violence involving children. I'm certain that by collaborating with court users and addressing the influence of informal 'kangaroo courts,' which often obstruct justice for survivors, we can achieve our goals," she asserts.

Doris noted that, based on data collected through the tracker, SGBV is prevalent among teenagers, particularly Luanda, Sabatia, and Amisi sub-counties. She recalled a distressing case she recorded recently involving a baby who was defiled by a neighbor.

Disappointed but upbeat that the war against SGBV will eventually be won,

Doris is calling for abandonment of Kangaroo courts she says are hampering justices for survivors as they can only heal when justice is served.

[Jael Musumba]

## Teen pregnancy fuels social, economic inequities

According to the National Council for Population and Development (NCPD), the root causes of teenage pregnancy are multifaceted include family issues, drug and substance abuse, sexual abuse and violence, cultural practices, peer pressure, poverty, gender inequality, and lack of employment opportunities.

Inadequate parenting and a dysfunctional home background have been identified by experts as among key risk factors which can lead to teenage pregnancy.

"Studies have shown that children who have suffered parental neglect or who come from broken families are more likely to become teenage parents. Further, those who themselves are children of teenage mothers have a higher chance of giving birth before they reach age

20," says NCPD in its Advisory Paper Three titled 'Impact of Teenage pregnancies on women empowerment in Kenya.'

Teen pregnancy is linked to poverty with low income levels associated with higher teen birth rates. Due to poverty, some girls are compelled by circumstances, and in some cases by their parents, to engage in sexual activities as a source of income for the family to cater for their basic needs. In the course of this, some become pregnant.

The 2014 KDHS revealed that women aged over 24 who had their first child during their teenage years attained much lower levels of education compared to those who became mothers after their teenage years.

In terms of wealth status, the re-

sults of the survey show that those with a teen birth are more likely to have a lower status compared to those who had their first birth later in life.

Further, women who gave birth while still teenagers have an average of one or two more children than those who gave birth for the first time after their teenage years.

The 2014 KDHS also showed that experience of emotional, physical, and sexual violence among women who had a teenage birth and those who gave birth for the first time later in life is slightly higher among the former group.

These findings reaffirm that teenage pregnancies have a negative effect on women empowerment.

[Hudson Gumbihii]