

School ban on pregnant teens divides Equatorial Guinea

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"Pregnancy is neither a crime nor a mental illness," insists Imelda Bosuala, a 15-year-old who was turned away by her school in Equatorial Guinea after falling pregnant.

When the school term began last month, the government had put in place a new rule—in order to enrol, all [teenage girls](#) must take a pregnancy test.

And a positive test means no more education.

Speaking on state television, deputy education minister Maria-Jesus Nkara said the tough new measure sought to encourage schoolgirls to protect themselves against unwanted pregnancies.

A month into the new term, it is still too early to tell how many girls have been affected by the ban in a country where teenage girls come under heavy pressure to start a family.

World Bank figures show that in 2014, the birth rate among Equatorial Guinean adolescents aged 15-19 was 110 in 1,000.

The figure is substantially higher than the global average of 44 per 1,000, but lower than in other African nations such as Niger (204), Mali (175) and Angola (167).

Rights organisations have criticised the authorities for violating the right

to education, slamming the measure as another example of repression in this tiny oil-rich nation whose president, Teodoro Obiang Nguema, has ruled with an iron fist since seizing power in a 1979 coup.

Illegal abortion fears

But opinions within the country are divided.

"This is a good decision," said 13-year-old Sabina in the playground of Bioko Norte high school in the capital, Malabo.

"Coming to class while you're pregnant shows a lack of respect."

Even Bosuala herself is in two minds. "Pregnancy is also not a good example to set in the school environment," she admits.

But French teacher Gerardo Ndong believes the decision was "foolish".

And Trifonia Melibea, a sociologist and teacher at the National University of Equatorial Guinea, was also dismayed by the decision.

"These adolescents are being deprived of the fundamental right to education. That's an insult," she said.

She also warned that the measure could push teenagers into seeking abortions in "inhuman conditions".

In the former Spanish colony of 800,000 people, pregnancies can be legally terminated only if there is a threat to the health of the mother and with the authorisation of the spouse or parents.

Daughters as 'trade items'

Efua, whose 14-year-old daughter is expecting a baby, believes the government should open a dedicated school "especially for young pregnant girls" so they can keep up their studies.

Early pregnancies are most common in poor families, where adults might even consider sending a daughter out as a sexual offering.

"Some parents use their daughters as items of trade, asking them to go out with rich men to help the family survive," said 19-year-old Ana Rita.

Sociologist Martin Ela pointed to increasing pressures from consumerism since oil production began in the 1990s.

"These little girls go out with someone who is able to give them a smartphone because they want to be on Facebook or WhatsApp," Ela said.

Melibea said teenage girls were particularly vulnerable to pressure.

"In Equatorial Guinea, if a girl reaches the age of 18 without having a child, everybody starts saying she's barren," she said.

The high number of teen pregnancies can also be linked to the absence of legislative protection for minors against sexual harassment, meaning abusive men can operate with impunity.

'Devastating consequences'

Sierra Leone introduced a similar ban on pregnant teens last year, prompting a sharp reaction from Amnesty International.

"Excluding pregnant girls from mainstream schools and banning them from sitting crucial exams is discriminatory and will have devastating

consequences," the London-based rights group said in a study released in November 2015.

"Education is a right and not something for governments to arbitrarily take away as a punishment."

The report said the prohibition, which was sometimes enforced through "humiliating physical checks", was likely to affect an estimated 10,000 young girls and risked destroying their future life opportunities.

The ban has yet to be lifted.

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