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*Construction of “pandemic pregnancy”*

A frame analysis on how the perception of teenage pregnancy shifted in Ugandan newspapers from pre-COVID to COVID period

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## **Abstract**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, there are many reports of an increase in teenage pregnancy in developing countries. The media portrays girls as more vulnerable to gender-based violence and forced marriage in times of crisis, leading to a worsening situation of early pregnancy. Yet, few studies have been done to explore how this development problem has been shaped and reconstructed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, this study aims to explore the framing of "teenage pregnancy" before and during the pandemic.

The position of this research is at the intersection of Development studies and Media studies. Frame analysis is used to identify how teenage pregnancy has been socially constructed before and during the COVID-19 pandemic in Ugandan newspapers. The results show a significant shift in the framing of teenage pregnancy, from a stagnated problem to an urgent issue. New framing such as the pandemic frame, victimization frame and equality frame were identified during the COVID period, portraying pregnant girls as victims of the pandemic and deserving the right to education. The findings indicate vulnerability can be reconstructed and perceived differently during crisis; in this case, the blame is shifted from individual choice to being forced by the circumstance (lockdown and school closure), and from a domestic issue to a social responsibility.

Keywords: Teenage pregnancy, COVID-19, Uganda, Crisis, Frame analysis, Vulnerability, Gender-based violence, Framing

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Appendix I: Theme tables generated from the codebook

Appendix II: Citation code list for news articles used in the Finding and Analysis

Acronyms and Abbreviations:

COVID / COVID-19	Coronavirus disease in 2019
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organization
MoES	Ministry of Education and Sports
MP	Member of Parliament
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NVivo	Qualitative data analysis computer software package
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
UDHS	Uganda Demographic and Health Survey
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Research purpose and contribution

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has ignited many concerns about how vulnerable groups, especially girls, are facing higher risks of gender-based violence and unintended pregnancy (Katikireddi et al., 2021, Musa et al, 2021, World Vision 2020). Though high rates of teenage pregnancy have long been an issue in Uganda, it has received even greater attention by the media during the COVID-19 pandemic. Local media presents a picture of a sudden increase in child pregnancy under the national lockdown and school closures, naming the phenomenon “pandemic pregnancy” (Daily Monitor, 2021). However, a report from United Nations Population Fund (2021) shows a slight decline in the number of teenage pregnancies from 2019 to 2020<sup>1</sup> in Uganda and this data is underreported by local newspapers. So, who is constructing the “pandemic pregnancy”? And how might teenage pregnancy be perceived differently between the pre-COVID and COVID periods?

With these questions in mind, this study aims to explore how the public perception of teenage pregnancy is being shaped in the media during a time of pandemic, and whether there is a change in the narrative of this issue. Therefore, this study is positioned in the intersection of Development studies and Media Studies, seeking to deconstruct a development issue (teenage pregnancy) through the tool and lens of communication theory. The concept of framing theory is applied in this research, based on the assumption that the media can shape how audiences think about an issue by “selecting

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<sup>1</sup> The outbreak of COVID in Uganda started in March 2020, as well as the COVID-19 lockdown measures, including school closures (APA News, 2020, Daily Nation, 2020).

some aspects of perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text.” (Entman,1993, p. 52). Teenage pregnancy is a multi-faceted development issue linked to several Sustainable Development Goals<sup>2</sup>. Pregnant teenagers face social exclusion at school and at home, stigmatization, vulnerability to violence, greater poverty, maternal death, and health complications (UNESCO, 2017). Examining the framing of teenage pregnancy in the Ugandan media during the pandemic can contribute to the understanding of how the public perceives this issue. Furthermore, the public perception of teenage pregnancy can influence the policy solutions that they accept and regard as compelling and suitable for pregnant girls (Gilliam & Bales, 2001). The framing of an issue may also predispose voters to reprioritize how public resources are allocated, such as favoring the provision of social support for teen mothers and programs on preventing teenage pregnancy (ibid.). In addition, studying how teenage pregnancy is being framed also has great implications for advocacy groups and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in pushing the development agenda through media outlets.

## 1.2 Research questions and findings

The purpose of this study is to explore the framing of teenage pregnancy in Ugandan newspapers during the pre-COVID and COVID periods. Thus, the research questions of this study are as follows:

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<sup>2</sup> SDG 1 No poverty, SDG 3 Gender equality, SDG 4 Quality education and SDG 5 Good health and Well-being (Rukundo et al., 2015).



*Research questions:*

1. How is teenage pregnancy being framed in the pre-COVID and COVID periods in local newspapers of Uganda?
2. If there is a difference in framing of teenage pregnancy between the pre-COVID and COVID periods, how does the framing shift?

The research method applied to answer these research questions is by inductive qualitative content analysis on news articles from Ugandan newspapers in pre-COVID and COVID periods.

*Finding of this study:*

The result of this study shows a significant shift of framing on teenage pregnancy from pre-COVID to COVID period. This issue is being framed from a stagnated problem to an urgent issue. The cause of teenage pregnancy is framed from a private matter to a social problem due to the pandemic measures such as school closure. The moral evaluation towards pregnant girls shifts from stigmatization to victimization. And the treatment towards child mother and pregnant girls also evolves from social exclusion from school to calling for their right for education. The finding indicates COVID has affected the perception of teenage pregnancy in media and vulnerability of girls are reconstructed and perceived differently under crisis. In this case, the blame of teenage pregnancy changes from individual choice to a force of the circumstance (lockdown and school closure), from a private issue to social responsibility.

## 1.2 Thesis outline

The overview of the study is as follows:

**Chapter 2 Contextual Background** presents relevant information about Uganda, such as demographics, the issue of teenage pregnancy, COVID-19 measures, and the media landscape.

**Chapter 3 Previous Studies** provides an account of general research on teenage pregnancy, crisis, and gender-based violence, and reports on the relationship of COVID-19 and teenage pregnancy in a regional context.

**Chapter 4 Theoretical Framework** introduces the concept of framing theory, frame variation and the operationalization of the framework in this study.

**Chapter 5 Methodology** applies framing theory in a methodological framework that guides the study design and approaches. The process of data collection, data analysis, limitations and positionality are presented.

**Chapter 6 Findings and Analysis** presents the frames identified in the pre-COVID and COVID periods, followed by detailed analysis of each frame.

**Chapter 7 Discussion** focuses on how the findings contribute to the understanding of the perception of teenage pregnancy and how the results relate to the theoretical framework and correspond to existing research.

**Chapter 8 Conclusion** summarizes the findings and answer the research questions while emphasizing their implications for future development research regarding COVID-19 and teenage pregnancy.

## 2. Contextual Background

In this chapter, the contextual background of Uganda is presented in the aspects of geographical and demographic information, teenage pregnancy, COVID-19 measures in Ugandan society, and the media landscape. This aims to situate the reader in the study context.

### 2.1 Overview of Uganda



*Map 1: Location of Uganda in East Africa*

*Source: Google Map 2022*

Uganda is a low-income country located in East Africa (World Bank, 2019) (See Map 1). The country has a population of 45.7 million with one of the highest population growth rates globally at 3% (World Bank, 2020a, UNFPA Uganda, 2017, National Population Council, 2021). Uganda has a high youth population, with more than one-third of people aged less than 15, which leads to a high dependency burden (ibid.). The high population in Uganda is attributed to high fertility, high teenage pregnancies, child marriages and an unmet need for family planning (NPC, 2021). Poverty is a challenging issue in Uganda, with around 40% of the population under poverty line, living on less than \$1.90 a day (World Bank, 2019).

Uganda has a strong tribal culture comprising 55 different tribes, making it a country with high diversity of ethnic, cultural, religious, and linguistic groups (Mewbaze, 2017). 40 languages are spoken from four main categories: Bantu, Western Nilotic, Eastern Nilotic and Central Sudanic (Singh & Chareka, 2018). Uganda's dominant ethnic groups are Baganda, Banyakole, Basoga, Bakiga, Iteso and each of them have their own cultures and customs (ibid.). Most of the Uganda's population lives in rural areas (World Bank, 2020b). The majority religion of Ugandan population is Christian, and around 12% of Ugandans identify themselves as Muslims (ibid.).

## 2.2 Teenage pregnancy in Uganda

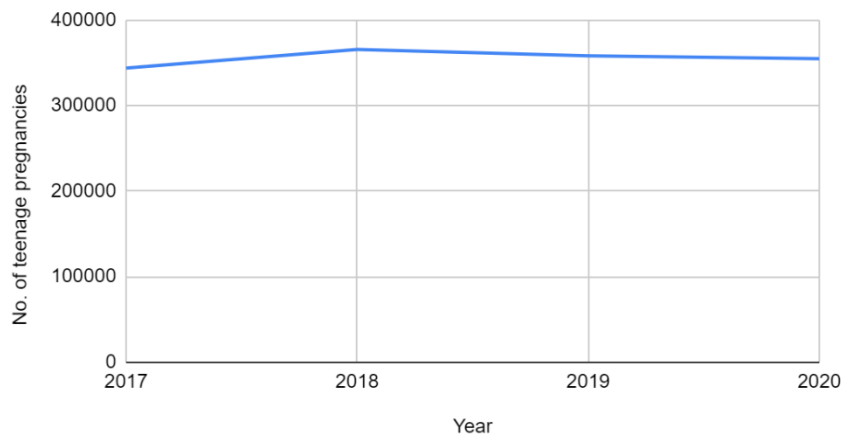
Teenage pregnancy has been an existing issue in Uganda for a few decades. The proportion of women aged 15 to 19 who have given birth or are pregnant with their first child account for 25% of the population of the same age group (UDHS, 2016). This

percentage was once as high as 31% in 2001, then declined to 25% in 2006, followed by a stabilization to around one quarter of the population at 24% in 2011 and 25% in 2016 (UNFPA Uganda, 2022). The rate of teenage pregnancy is higher in rural areas (27%) than urban areas (19%).

Amid COVID-19, UNFPA (2021) issued a report on the number of teenage pregnancies from 2017 to 2020 based on data from the district health information system (DHIS2) acquired by the Ministry of Health, counting the antenatal care visits of adolescents aged under 15 and between 15-19 years old. This report shows that annually, more than 340,000 teenage girls are pregnant, peaking at 365,530 in 2018 (See Graph 1). However, the number of teenage pregnancies dropped by almost 1% from 2019 to 2020, but regionally 67 districts registered an increase in teenage pregnancies from the same period, with three of them having risen by more than 25% (UNFPA, 2021). From January to September 2021, on average, there are 32,000 teenage pregnancy cases every month<sup>3</sup> (ibid). Assuming the average number does not change for the remaining months in 2021, there will be in total 384,000 cases, indicating an 8% increase from 2020 to 2021.

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<sup>3</sup> The outbreak of COVID-19 was officially confirmed in March 2020. This statistic indicates a decrease in teenage pregnancies during the earlier period of the pandemic.



*Graph 1 : The number of teenage pregnancy from 2017 to 2020*

Even though there is such a high number of teenage pregnancies in Uganda, it is illegal to impregnate a teenager. The age of consent for heterosexual sex in Uganda is 18 years old for males and females (Singh & Chareka, 2018). The country's Penal Code specifies that anyone who engages in a sexual act with a person under 18 years old is committing an offence (ibid.) The legal consequence can be as high as life imprisonment, and an offender who commits defilement against a child under 14 years old can receive a death sentence (ibid.). Despite being illegal under the Ugandan Constitution, child marriage remains prominent in the cultural setting and is a common practice throughout the country; teenage pregnancy is often attributed to this (Rukundo et al., 2015). Law enforcement is still weak in implementing strict measures against child defilement and child marriage (Buule, 2019).

### 2.3 COVID-19 spread and measures

The first case of COVID-19 was confirmed in Uganda on 22 March 2020 (APA News, 2020). In the same month, President Yoweri Museveni imposed a range of measures to curb the spread of coronavirus, including restriction on private vehicles, curfew at 7pm and closures of schools, big shopping malls and non-food shops (Daily Nation, 2020). The lockdown measures quickly extended to longer periods and greater dimensions. Many public services were limited and the restriction on public transportation also affected people's access to public facilities such as hospitals, clinics and legal services (The New Vision, 2020). The economy was officially completely reopened in January 2022 after almost two years of curfew measures. On 10 January 2022, all schools in Uganda reopened after 22 months of closure, which was the world's longest COVID-19 related lockdown, impacting 15 million children's education (Hayden, 2022). Apart from millions of children unable to go to school, lockdown measures also strongly affected people's livelihoods as economic activities were restricted and international tourism in Uganda was hugely impacted (The New Vision, 2020). Teenage pregnancy is also being described as "epidemic during the pandemic" (Olukya, 2021).

### 2.4 Media landscape in Uganda

Uganda has a vibrant and diverse media sector. Most people access the media through radios, TV programmes and newspapers (UDHS, 2016). English and Luganda are the main languages used by national media, but for regional radio stations other local languages are spoken (ibid.). There is a growing number of internet users in Uganda,

estimated to be 19 million (BBC, 2019). The users of social media such as Facebook amounts to 2.5 million, and almost 420,000 users for Twitter in 2022 (Kemp, 2022). The digitalization of newspapers available on online platforms and social media helps newspapers' content to be frequently shared and circulated for longer periods among people. The three main newspaper outlets in Uganda are *The New Vision*, a state-owned media outlet, *Daily Monitor*, owned by the Kenyan-based Nation Media Group, and *The Observer*, an independent thrice-weekly publication (Bompani & Brown, 2015). Particularly during COVID-19, these newspapers are shifting readers from a print to online format that may reach more readers as they are forced to stay home (Kyeyune, 2020).

This contextual background outlines different aspects of the study field in this research. It is conducted under the COVID-19 outbreak in a low-income country with strong traditional norms, diverse cultures, a vibrant media landscape and long-term issues of teenage pregnancy and child marriage.

### 3. Previous studies

This chapter reviews the existing studies that help to position this study in the field. The first part of the chapter will focus on the general research on teenage pregnancy and then research within the Development field. The second part focuses on studies related to crisis and gender-based violence, including more recent reports on COVID-19's impacts on teenage pregnancy. Finally, the position of this research in contributing to the Development field is presented.



### 3.1 Existing research on teenage pregnancy

#### *Multi-faceted issue*

Teenage pregnancy is a multi-faceted issue that can be deconstructed in a wide range of study fields and social contexts. In the political arena, it is linked to public policy towards the welfare of teenage mothers and their children, and financial burdens on tax players (Bute & Russell, 2012). Through an economic lens, teenage pregnancy can be seen as an economic drain on society with the assumption of lower career aspirations of teen mothers (ibid.). In feminist studies, debates may focus on who controls women, or teenage girls' rights to control fertility behaviors (Holgate & Francis, 2006). In the moral arena, the evolving discourses around teenage pregnancy in the public sphere, stigmatization and social exclusion of teen mothers are being studied (Cense & Ruard Ganzevoort, 2019, Bute & Russell, 2012). From a Gender Studies perspective, scholars may interrogate the ambiguous boundaries of sexuality behind the concept of teenage pregnancy, that is, the “conceptualization of children as sexually innocent opposes the increasing sexualization of, in particular, young women” (Holgate & Francis, 2006, p.15).

#### *Development Studies on teenage pregnancy*

In development studies, teenage pregnancy is an important subject that crosscuts multiple SDGs, hindering the Goals on ending poverty, gender inequality, quality education and health impacts on the girl child. Abundant research in development studies has been done in developing country contexts, aiming to find out the indicators,

risk factors (cause of teenage pregnancy), consequences (health and economic impacts) and solutions (development intervention). Some common factors associated with teenage pregnancy are peer influence, poverty, lack of sex education, insufficient and poor parental care, and inadequate basic needs (Manzi et al., 2018 , Odebode, 2016). Krugu (2016) and Salawu (2021)'s studies further explore how economic inequality towards females leads to the vulnerability of Nigerian and Ghanaian girls subject to unintended pregnancy. Krugu (2016) captured stories of girls who engage in sexual relationships driven by economic factors rather than love. However, different regional and social contexts, and the socioeconomic status of girls may affect the vulnerability of girls on different levels. Research has shown that female literacy rates, health expenditure, GDP per capita and contraceptive prevalence are all determinants of teenage pregnancy and have a significant inverse relationship to teenage pregnancy rates across Africa (Odejimi & Bellingham-Young, 2014).

### *Uganda and teenage pregnancy*

There are also rich studies about teenage pregnancy in Uganda focusing on the factors and predictors of early pregnancy, from qualitative methods such as interviews and focus groups to quantitative methods analyzing Demographic and Health Survey Data (Wasswa et al., 2021, Akanbi, 2016, Sekiwunga, 2009, Gideon, 2013). Research findings are multifactorial, ranging from individual behaviors and family backgrounds to cultural and traditional norms and religions (Anena et al., 2020). Low socio-economic status, low education level, higher accessibility to social media and pornography, and early sexual activity are all determinants for teenage pregnancy in Uganda (Bonell, 2005, Nour, 2006). Apart from the individual level, Ugandan cultural

customs also pressure teenage girls to get married and begin childbearing early, because girls are seen as a source of wealth for their families due to the bride (Sekiwunga & Whyte, 2009). Even though under the Penal Code Act of Uganda sexual intercourse with girls below 18 years is criminalized, its weak implementation is also considered a factor to teenage pregnancy (Anena et al., 2020). Research also shows that consequences of teenage pregnancy in Uganda include social costs such as dropping out of school, stigmatizations from the community (ibid.), health costs such as higher risk of maternal mortality, unsafe abortion, and other complications (Ayuba, 2012).

### 3.2 Crisis and gender-based violence

Previous studies have explored the connection between crisis and gender-based violence towards children, especially girls. During the Ebola outbreak in West Africa, a report from Save the Children (2015) showed an increase in violence against children, risk of defilement and teenage pregnancy. During the outbreak of the pandemic, girls were living in unprotected environments outside schools, which imposed an extra risk to violence. For example, girls needed to walk long distances to collect water, do trading work in other villages, and faced violence in the quarantine households (ibid). There is also research showing a strong correlation between increasing intimate partner violence and HIV and increase domestic violence in emergency circumstances following natural disaster (Mitchell et al. ,2016, Gearhart et al., 2018) During complex crisis when social order is disturbed, the most vulnerable groups in society such as women and children are prone to abuse and violence (Holmes & Bhuvanendra, 2014).

### *COVID impact on gender-based violence*

Since the COVID-19 pandemic broke out in 2020, social science and public health scholars have conducted studies related to the impact of COVID-19 on various aspects on vulnerable groups in society, including broadening ethnic and racial inequalities in health outcomes (Katikireddi et al., 2021), and how lockdown measures link with gender-based violence and increase the number of victims of sexual violence who are aged under 16 in specific regions, likely due to being left home alone during school closures (Mittal & Singh, 2020, Johnson et al., 2020). During the quarantine period, media from different countries reported on increase in domestic violence, reported as two-fold in India (Chandra 2020), three-fold in China (Ebrahimian, 2020), and 5% increase in Australia (Kagi, 2020). The narrative of how the pandemic worsening the already existing gender-based violence is recognized as a “pandemic within a pandemic” (Mutongwiza, 2020). The UNFPA (2020) projected more violence, child marriage and unintended pregnancies during COVID, and that 6 months of lockdowns may lead to an additional 31 million cases of gender-based violence and 7 million unintended pregnancies globally.

### *COVID impact and teenage pregnancy*

During COVID, much research emphasizes the potential increase in teenage pregnancy in developing countries. Musa et al. (2021) suggests adverse consequences of early marriage and teenage pregnancy in Nigeria during the pandemic due to economic hardship during lockdown, as girls are vulnerable to being married off and experience gender-based violence due to school closure. World Vision issued a report on COVID’s

aftershock, highlighting how teenage pregnancy threatens the access to education of 1 million schoolgirls in the Sub-Saharan region (Baker, 2020). The report estimates school closures can lead to 65% increase in teenage pregnancy because girls are exposed to men and boys for longer time periods than when they were able to go to school, leading to higher chances of risky sexual behaviors and increased dangers of sexual violence and exploitation (ibid). In the Philippines, the Commission on Population and Development predicts almost two million Filipino women aged 15-49 are expected to fall pregnant and 10% of these pregnancies are among girls below 20 as the lockdown denies thousands of teenage girls access to contraceptives (POPCOM, 2022).

### 3.3 Position of this study:

This study positions itself in the intersection of Development Studies and Media studies, applying a communication theory to deconstruct a development issue in times of crisis. COVID-19 is a new pandemic that drives new discussion on an “old” issue. The above literature shows that risk factors of teenage pregnancy seem to depend on COVID-related containment measures and increase the vulnerability of girls. In this context, this study of how teenage pregnancy is framed in public discourse in Ugandan newspaper can contribute to how COVID has changed people’s perception on teenage pregnancy and how vulnerability of girls is being reconstructed in time of crisis.

The abundant research on teenage pregnancy has laid solid ground for researchers to understand the complexity and uniqueness of causes of teenage pregnancy in respective social contexts. However, during the outbreak of COVID when the social order is being disturbed, we must ask how this may affect the public’s view on an existing issue, and

what are the elements forming the shape of teenage pregnancy. By analyzing the representation of teenage pregnancy in media, this study can contribute to understanding how a development problem is being perceived. Thus, by knowing how the public views a problem, this can determine which policy approach is likely to be compelling and accepted in society (Gilliam & Bales, 2001).

#### 4. Theoretical framework

This chapter demonstrates the theoretical framework that guides the research approach, methods, and analysis of this study. The theory and its operationalized definitions will also be presented.

##### 4.1 Framing theory

*Framing* is a communication theory “based on the assumption that how an issue is characterized in news reports can have influence on how it is understood by audience” (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007, p.11). It is recognized as a “refined version” or “second level” of the media theory *agenda setting*, which proposes that mass media’s emphasis on certain issues (indicated by the relative amount of coverage) can have a strong correlation to the level of importance audiences attribute to that issue (McComb & Shaw, 1972). While *agenda-setting* tells the audience what to think about an issue, *Framing* goes further to how the audience thinks about an issue (Arowolo, 2017). Under this context, *framing theory* has higher flexibility and capability to examine two

different levels of analysis: a) how news messages are generated, b) how they are processed and their effects are produced (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). The process of how news messages are being created is referred to as *frame building* (Scheufele, 1999), and the product of frame building is the *frames*. *Frame building* is a macroscopic mechanism to investigate message construction, such as how politicians, journalists and interest groups shape the *media frames* (Ganson & Modigliani, 1987). Thus, different social forces can participate in influencing the proclamation of frames in news reports. This process can be dynamic and nonlinear. For example, Zhou and Moy's (2007) article finds that the public and news media jointly shape frames towards politically charged issues and public framing of an issue has significant impact on news narratives.

Another level of *Framing* focuses on how recipients process news messages on an issue and the effects of it. These can be referred as the *framing effect*. When different frames are generated from news messages and presented to the public, how do the audience perceive it? Which frame is better “received” or “being ignored”? For example, Chong and Druckman (2007a)'s study found that the repetition of frames has more impact on less educated groups, while more knowledgeable groups are more receptive to a wider range of frames in competitive situations.

In this study, the research focus is on the *frame building* process, examining how “teenage pregnancy” is being framed in pre-COVID and COVID times in Ugandan news reports. With the grounding of *Framing theory*, analysis is based on what and how news content of this issue is framed, and the roles of actors that help to shape different frames in the two periods.

### *Sociological approach*

According to Borah (2011), there are two general foundations of framing, *sociological* and *psychological*. The *psychological approach* examines how various representations of identical decision-making scenarios affects people's choices and evaluations between available options (ibid). The *sociological* foundation is demonstrated by Goffman (1974), which assumes that individuals are not able to fully understand the world and continuously struggle to explicate their experiences in life and make sense of the world in their contexts. Goffman (1974) defines frames as "schemata of interpretation", a framework that helps people organize what they perceive in daily life and make events meaningful. Therefore, framing is a process of selection and salience, highlight an issue and make it "noticeable, meaningful or memorable to audiences" (Entman, 1993, pp. 52–53).

In this study, the theoretical framework is based on Entman (1993, p. 52)'s definition of *framing* as follows:

"to frame is to select some aspects of perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular *problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item* described."



With reference to this, an operationalized theoretical framework is developed to guide the methodology and analysis of this study. Further discussion is presented in the next Chapter of Methodology and Findings.

## 4.2 Framing and variation

As *framing* theory is suitable in offering a variety of perspectives on an issue and implications for multiple values (Chong & Druckman, 2007b), it is an invaluable tool to present a complex issue and apply a series of paradigms (McQuail, 2005). In addition, *framing* is also best conceptualized as an ongoing process that evolves over time, where traditional issues can be potentially transformed into new issues by reframing (Chong & Druckman, 2007). The dimension of time is an important factor to separate new issues and find distinct patterns of *frame differentiation*, especially in times of crisis (Greussing & Boomgaarden, 2017). Crises are recognized as exceptional and disruptive events that can disturb journalistic routines and create possibilities for engaging new perspectives and interpretations of an issue (Horsti 2008 , Nossek, 2008). For example, in Greussing and Boomgaarden (2017)'s research on the framing of refugees in Europe's refugee crisis in 2015 discovered that media coverage broadened their variety of frames about refugees during the most intense phases of the crisis. During the Zika epidemic in Brazil, Ribeiro et al (2018) found a "war frame" was constructed, which gives prominence and legitimacy to specific actions of disease management that mask the social and gender inequalities. Hence, *framing* is an ongoing construction process by which people can not only generate a specific conceptualization but also reorient their perception of an issue (Greussing & Boomgaarden, 2017). In this context, framing

is not stagnant as the same issue can be shaped differently overtime, especially during special political events or crisis, and in different media outlets, forms of communications and regional contexts (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000, Vincze, 2014).

Framing theory demonstrates a versatile ability in understanding multi-faceted issues and examining frame constructions across dimensions of time. In response to the study purpose of this research, frame analysis can be well applied to explore the social construction of teenage pregnancy in media outlets during pre-COVID and COVID times and interrogate the proposition that a crisis may create a frame variation.

#### 4.3 Framework approach and operationalization

Even though *Framing* is a widely useful theoretical concept, it faces critique for lacking clear conceptualized definitions and operationalization (Borah, 2011). In this study, it follows Entman’s (1993) definition of framing, in which he identifies four main elements of frames, which are to *define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgement, and suggest remedies*. Matthes and Kohring (2008) in their research on framing of the issue of biotechnology in The New York Times, further operationalized the above four frame elements in application of frame identification (Table 1). The frame analysis of this study is based on this framework of frame elements.

Frame element	Description
Problem definition	Consist of an issue and relevant actors that discuss the problem

Causal interpretation	Attribution of failure or success regarding specific outcome
Moral evaluation	An evaluation can be positive, negative, or neutral and can refer to different objects
Treatment recommendation	Inclusion of a call for or against a certain action

*Table 1: Matthes and Kohring's operationalization of Framing (2008)*

This theoretical framework helps to drive the analyzing process and explain how frames are generated. It further conceptualizes the characteristics of *frames* from numerous media content. According to Entman (1993), frames are highlighted information about a particular subject of communication that is made salient. The higher the level of salience, the higher the possibility that audience will perceive the information, recognize the meaning, and memorize it (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). Thus, *frames* represent a selection of some aspects of perceived reality. Matthes & Kohring (2008) suggests that a frame can comprise more than one frame element, and each frame element can be formed by several content analytical variables. When different variables are gathered together systematically and form a pattern that can be identified over several texts, these patterns are recognized as frames (Matthes and Kohring, 2008).

## 5. Methodology

This chapter presents the framing research approach that guides the methodology and

analysis. It includes the principle of data selection of news articles in Uganda, analysis tools, and the process of coding. The limitation of the data and methodology and the researcher's positionality are also presented.

## 5.1 Research approach

### *Inductive qualitative content analysis*

Qualitative content analysis is a set of techniques that yields systematic analysis of texts of various kinds, exploring not only manifest content but the themes and core ideas found in texts as primary content (Mayring, 2007). Moreover, qualitative content analysis does not apply any statistical analytic methods (Forman & Damschroder, 2007).

Sandelowski (2000) emphasizes that, in contrast to basic content analysis, researchers typically inductively generate codes from the data rather than apply deductively generated codes derived from prior theory and research. This allows data collection and data analysis to be undertaken simultaneously and flexibly to capture context and nuance.

There are various research methods available for framing analysis, both inductive and deductive, qualitative, and quantitative, and are used by different researchers according to the scope of the data and research approaches. In this study, an inductive qualitative approach of frame analysis is chosen to analyze the framing of teenage pregnancy in public narratives in pre-COVID and COVID times in Uganda. Firstly, due to time and resource limitations, inductive qualitative textual analysis is more suitable for small sample sizes that allows the author to delve into the data content to generate frames

(David et al., 2011). Secondly, this approach applies manual coding; in contrast to computer coding, this facilitates greater flexibility to uncover new frames that cannot be identified by certain keywords (Chong & Druckman, 2007b). Another crucial advantage of this method is that coders do not know which frame they are currently coding, as they are not coding frames as single units. Thus, the impact of coder schemata or coding expectations is somewhat mitigated. Moreover, new emerging frames can be easily detected (Matthes & Kohring, 2008)

## 5.2 Data Collection

### *Data selection criteria:*

The unit of analysis in this research is news articles that report on teenage pregnancy from local newspapers in Uganda. To ensure the collection of rich content related to teenage pregnancy, news articles with titles mentioning “teenage pregnancy” or similar terms were selected as the sample of this research. This is based on the assumption that news titles with “teenage pregnancy” are more likely to have in-depth information and discussions on this topic, which fits the qualitative content analysis approach of this study.

For the selection of newspapers, two daily newspapers and two weekly newspapers circulated in Uganda were chosen for this study to ensure a variety of data sources. *The New Vision* and *Daily Monitor* are the two dominant daily newspapers in Uganda (UNESCO et al, 2018). *The New Vision* is a state-owned newspaper distributed throughout the country with 44% readership and around 23,636 copies of daily

circulation (Vision Group, 2018, Uganda Business News, 2020). The *Daily Monitor* is published by an independent private media agency, with a daily circulation of 16,169 copies in 2019 (Uganda Business News, 2020). The two weekly newspapers are *The Observer* and *The East African*, which take on a more analytical and in-depth approach in producing news stories (UNESCO et al, 2018). In essence, both state-owned and private newspapers, daily and weekly newspapers are selected to create a more balanced data source and higher variety of news angles.

#### *Data collection platform:*

*Global newsstream* is an online database that allows users access to comprehensive worldwide news sources. It was chosen by the author as data collection platform based on the following reasons:

- It archives news articles from mainstream media outlets in Uganda for the time frame of this study (2017 to 2022).
- The advanced search engine allows author to search by keyword, dates, data source, document type and language.
- The platform enables a consistency of results yield from different years based on same set of criteria.
- The author has access to use this platform through Lund University student account.

#### *Data collection process:*

Below are the search criteria for data collection used on *Global Newsstream*.

Keyword in all subject heading: teenage pregnancy
Location: Uganda
Source type: Newspaper
Document type: Article
Langage : English
Publication date: 1 January 2017 to 28 February 2022

*Time frame:*

The research time frame chosen in this research is based on two time periods: pre-COVID and COVID. The pre-COVID period is set from 1 January 2017 to March 2020. The reason for dating from 2017 is based on the most updated statistic on the number of teenage pregnancies in Uganda from UNFPA, which also starts from 2017 (see Graph 1 in Chapter 2). The reason is to compare the public narratives from pre-COVID to COVID period with reference to the number of teenage pregnancies in the country. The research sets the beginning of time frame of the pre-COVID period to the same as this statistic. The COVID period is set from March 2020 to February 2022 since the first confirmed COVID case in Uganda was announced in March 2020. The author set the end of the time frame in February 2022 to allow enough time for processing data, as this research is due to be presented in May 2022.

*Search results:*

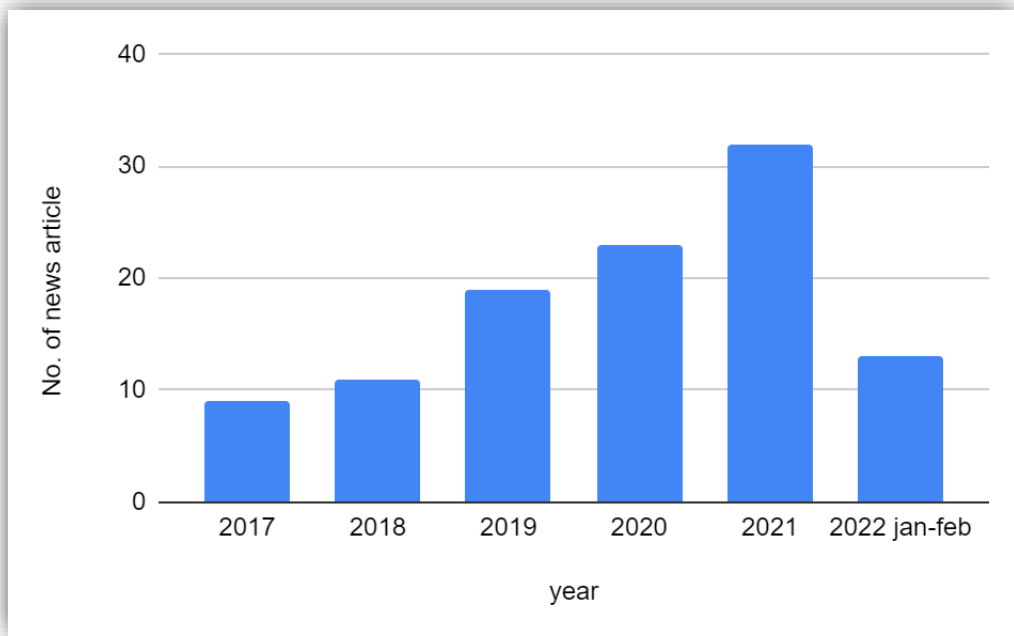
Based on the keywords displayed in Table 2, 227 news articles were retrieved. However, not all of these articles actually dealt with teenage pregnancies. After a qualitative screening, 107 news articles from *The New Vision*, *Daily Monitor*, *The Observer* and

*The East African* were deemed relevant and thus form the sample. Graph 2 shows the distribution of news articles by year. The time distribution is skewed to the right as the number of articles dealing with teenage pregnancies increased steadily since 2017. Graph 3 presents the distributions of news articles categorized by newspaper outlet. Most of the articles come from *The New Vision*, followed by *Daily Monitor*. *The Observer* and *The East African* reported comparatively little about this issue.

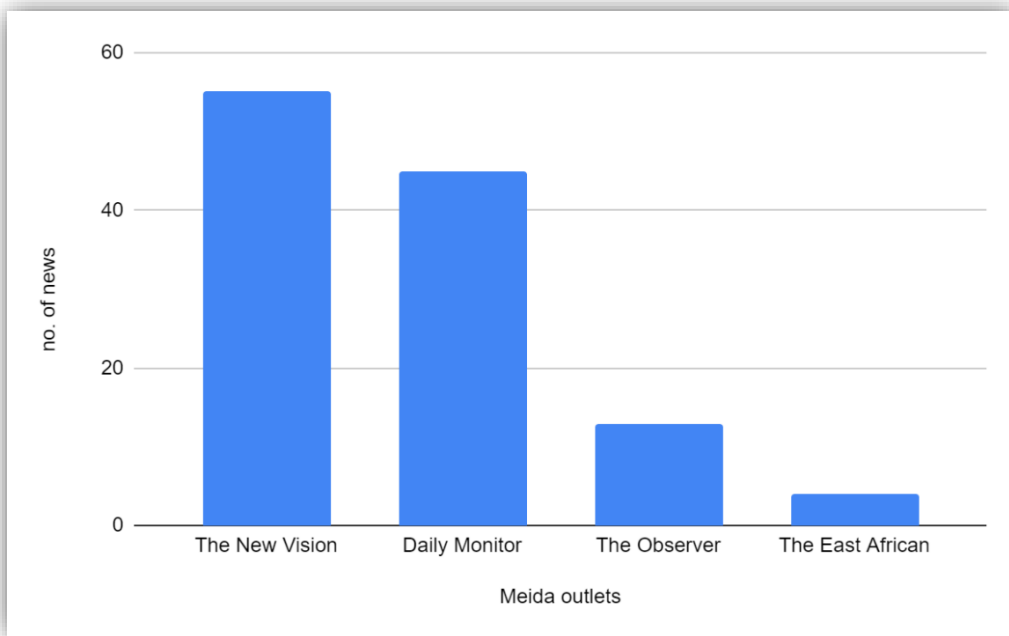
List of keywords chosen from the news titles:
Teenage pregnancy / teenage pregnancies / teen pregnancy
Child pregnancy / early pregnancy / school pregnancy
Teen mothers / teenage mothers / child mothers
Teenage girls got pregnant
Pregnant schoolgirls / School girls get pregnant / pregnant girls / pregnant students/ pregnant learners
25-year-old grannies
Teenage girls hit by pregnancy
Girls impregnated / impregnate schoolgirls / School girls conceive
Repeat teenage births
Breastfeeding girls

*Table 2: Keywords for selection of news articles*





*Graph 2 : The number of news article used in this study by year*



*Graph 3: Number of news articles collected from different newspapers*

### 5.3 Data Analysis

#### *Tool of coding*

The coding process of this research is facilitated by the qualitative data analysis software NVivo. It is available for the author to access through Lund University. All news articles were imported to the project file and coded line by line (Glesne, 2016). News articles in the pre-COVID and COVID periods were saved in two separate files for independent coding. The process of creating codes is guided by these principles: codes should be mutually exclusive, exhaustive, and independent (Matthes and Kohring, 2008). Coding was carried out inductively without predetermined frames. After detailed coding of each news articles, codes were categorized into themes (See Appendix I for the theme table) and later group into different frames and locates in different frame elements for analyzing process.

#### *Analyzing approach*

There are various framing approaches suggested by scholars based on the definition of frames by R. M. Entman (1993). According to Matthes & Kohring (2008), there are five framing approaches: *hermeneutic approach*, *a linguistic approach*, *a manual holistic approach*, *a computer-assisted approach*, and *a deductive approach*. These approaches are found commonly in content analysis of media frames, yet they are not mutually exclusive (ibid.) In this research, the hermeneutic and linguistic approach will be applied. The hermeneutic approach refers to a qualitative approach to interpret frames from media texts in an in-depth way with cultural elements without quantification. A linguistic approach identifies frames by analyzing the selection, placement, and structure of specific words and sentences in a text (ibid). Specific words

could be chosen as the formation of frames (Entman, 1993). These two approaches are chosen because the hermeneutic approach increases the possibility to see new and contextual frames and the linguistic approach enables exploration of the use of adjectives and metaphors from the media reports in framing the issue.

### *Frame identification*

Frames have been conceptualized into two genes: issue-specific or generic (Matthes, 2009). When frames are only applicable to specific topics and events, they are categorized as issue-specific frames (De Vreese, 2005). On the other hand, generic frames are limited themes that are pertinent over time and social contexts (ibid). One example is five generic frames: conflict, human interest, economic consequences, morality, and responsibility proposed by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000). As the topic of this study (teenage pregnancy and COVID) is relatively new and specific issues that may contain frames beyond generic frames, this study will apply the issue-specific frames.

This study uses the analysis process outlined by Matthes and Kohring (2008), where frames are not defined beforehand or coded directly with a single code. Firstly, codes representing certain frame elements (see Table 3) are grouped together, forming a certain pattern; if these patterns are present in multiple articles, they can then be interpreted as frames (Matthes & Kohring, 2008).

Based on the operationalized theoretical framework suggested by Matthes and Kohring (2008), problem definitions can consist of an issue and relevant actors that discuss the

problem. In the case of this study, the central issue is teenage pregnancy and related codes of this are for example, the scope of the issue and the description of it. For causal interpretation, the codes related to the causes of teenage pregnancy can be identified as the attribution to it. The frame element moral evaluation can be the attitude towards teenage pregnancy, pregnant girls, and teen mothers. The last element treatment recommendation contains the codes related to actions or policy towards pregnant girls and teen mothers.

Frame element	Matthes and Kohring method	Author's definition
Problem definition	Consist of an issue and relevant actors that discuss the problem	The scope of the teenage pregnancy, description of it
Causal interpretation	Attribution of failure or success regarding specific outcome	The causes of teenage pregnancy
Moral evaluation	An evaluation can be positive, negative, or neutral and can refer to different objects	Attitude towards teenage pregnancy, pregnant girls, and teen mothers
Treatment recommendation	Inclusion of a call for or against a certain action	Actions or policy towards pregnant girls and teen mothers

*Table 3: The frame elements applied in the data analysis*

Based on these aspects, relevant codes are placed under various frame elements and generated frames in the pre COVID and COVID periods. The result will be presented in the following chapter – Finding and Analysis.

#### 5.4 Limitations

##### *Limitation of the data:*

The data source of this research is limited to English-speaking newspaper articles, and mainly from two newspapers, *The New Vision*, and *Daily Monitor*. It may limit the varieties of perspectives from other non-English speaking newspapers, such as newspapers using Luganda or other local Ugandan languages. Even though most of the Ugandans get news from the radio (BBC, 2019), newspaper articles were chosen to be the unit of analysis due to the accessibility of texts. In addition, other media outlets such as social media posts or TV news are outside the scope of this study. Thus, there might be a greater diversity of frames existing in these media platforms about teenage pregnancy.

The language of texts is limited to English even though Uganda is a country with many local languages. This might confine the research to certain perspectives of teenage pregnancy from English speaking stakeholders and media outlets.

##### *Limitation of the research method:*

One of the weaknesses of frame analysis is the lack of reliability and non-transferability as there is no standardized way for different researchers to yield the same frames or research outputs (Matthes and Kohring, 2008). Furthermore, frame analysis has received criticism regarding the descriptive nature of the method (Hallahan, 1999). In this research, the focus is on frame construction instead of framing effect, which to some extent limits the explanatory power of the research. Thus, the consequence of framing cannot be proven.

### 5.5 Positionality and Reflexivity

Positionality refers to the researcher's chosen position to adopt in a study, which strongly influence the research area, design, process and the interpretation of outcomes (Foote & Gau Bartell, 2011, Savin-Baden & Howell-Major, 2013). Therefore, it is important for the researchers to reflect on their positions as they are also part of the social world and "that world has already been interpreted by existing social actors." (Holmes, 2020, p.3). They cannot be separated with the social processes they study (ibid). While reflexivity is the tool to help researchers find their positionality, by identifying the preconception of the subject of research, their personal and professional experiences that bring effects to the study (Malterud, 2001). Researchers should acknowledge these effects on the study and be transparent with it (Cohen et al., 2002).

The author took part in a three-month internship in a Ugandan NGO during the COVID time. The main work of the NGO is to empower girls in Uganda through various programs to prevent school dropout and teenage pregnancy during COVID. Throughout

this internship, the author had chances to interact with pregnant girls and teen mothers in the field and hear testimony from local colleagues on how COVID measures affect teenage pregnancy in Uganda. With a preconception of high teenage pregnancy under the pandemic, this may create the issue of bias when the author conducted the research design (Funder, 2005). Therefore, the author realizes the importance of engaging in continuous reflexivity, and actively sought a variety of data to get the whole picture of teenage pregnancy during COVID in Uganda (Tracy, 2010).

Even though the author has lived in East Africa, such as Rwanda and Uganda, she realizes her position is still an “outsider” who has limited intimate knowledge of the group being researched (Holmes, 2020), for example, her understanding of teenage pregnancy and the social context of the research field. Coming from a well-developed Asian city with a very different socio-economic development process than the Ugandan context, the author is aware that her background, education, and gender are all factors affecting her ability to produce “value-free” knowledge in this research (Carr, 2000, Holmes, 2020, Rose, 1997).

## 5.6 Philosophical assumption

The philosophical assumption of this study applies a social constructivist approach, which holds the belief that all our understanding and knowledge is socially constructed (Spencer et al., 2014). Reality is created through social interactions, relationships, and experiences (ibid.). From the ontological point of view, there are multiple realities

which is context- and socially driven (Gergen, 1996). If reality is constructed, then our knowledge and meanings are derived from social interactions. Berger and Luckmann (1966) defines social construction as reality being constantly in flux, as it is negotiated and renegotiated through experiences in social worlds. A social fact is therefore formulated via shared understandings and consensus among those different groups rather than an objective understanding of reality, and often requires human institutions to be sustained (Moses & Knutsen 2012).

Based on this assumption, this study explores the social construction of teenage pregnancy in Uganda in pre-COVID and COVID times and how different understandings of this issue is being negotiated and renegotiated in different periods.

## 6. Finding and analysis

This chapter presents the findings of frames derived from the operationalized framework in the Methodology chapter. Various frames are identified in the four frame elements in both the pre-COVID and COVID periods, and are presented in Table 4, followed by the detailed analysis on each frame and how these frames are shaped in the two periods. The citation of data sources in this chapter are presented in forms of codes to represent different newspapers, years of publications and different articles from the same year and sources (See Table 5), details of the code list of news articles can be found in Appendix II.



## 6.1 Overview of frames identified from the four frame elements

Frame element	Description	Pre-COVID time <i>Jan 2017- Feb 2020</i>	COVID time <i>Mar 2020- Feb 2022</i>
Problem definition	The scope of teenage pregnancy, description of it	Stagnation frame	Urgency frame
Causal interpretation	The causes of teenage pregnancy	Private matter frame	Pandemic frame
Moral evaluation	Attitude towards teenage pregnancy, pregnant girls, and teen mothers	Stigmatization frame	Victimization frame
	*Attitude towards male offenders	Leniency frame	Accountability frame
Treatment recommendation	Policy on education for pregnant girls and teen mothers	Stigmatization frame	
			Equality frame

*Table 4: Frames identified in pre-COVID and COVID time*

*\*New aspect discovered during the analysis*

Newspaper	Citation code
The New Vision	NV
Daily Monitor	DM
The Observer	TO
The East African	EA
E.g., Publication year is 2017	NV17
E.g., Same year, same newspaper	NV17a, NV17b, NV17c...

Table 5 : Citation codes for different news sources in this study

## 6.2 Problem definition

In this study, the frame element *problem definition* is referring to the scope of the issue-teenage pregnancy and description of it in Uganda. A *stagnation frame* is found during pre-COVID period, and an *urgency frame* is identified in COVID period. Teenage pregnancy is framed as a stagnant issue that has existed for a long time. However, this frame shifts to an urgent issue with a much worser magnitude in the COVID period.

### 6.2.1 pre-COVID period – *Stagnation frame*

The 2016 Uganda Demographic Health Survey was released publicly in March 2017, showing a 1% increase in teenage pregnancy rate, from 24% in 2011 to 25% in 2016

(DM17a). The publication of this report caught much media attention in the pre-COVID period, signaling a continuous stagnation of teenage pregnancy in Uganda. This statistic is widely reported by local media, using adjectives and metaphors such as “remained rampant and staggeringly high” (NV18a), “continue to plague” (DM18a), “teenage pregnancy still on the raise” (NV17a) to describe the scope of teenage pregnancy. This use of wording implies teenage pregnancy has been a long-term problem that remains stagnated in the country. The rate of teenage pregnancy (25%) is perceived as a negative progression of the issue, even though it increases slightly by 1%. The issue is described by one INGO worker as “nuisance to the society” (NV19), and the representative of the Ministry of Health claims it is a “national problem” that is worrying (DM17b). According to the UNFPA country representative, the rate of teenage pregnancy “jeopardize Uganda’s opportunity to harness the demographic dividend and to achieve its vision of becoming an upper middle-income country by 2040” (TO19a). Thus, teenage pregnancy is being framed as a “problem” that has been stagnated and imposes a burden on Uganda’s social and national development.

### 6.2.2 COVID time - *Urgency frame*

However, the stagnation frame shifts to an urgency frame during COVID. Most news articles describe the issue of teenage pregnancy as having worsened all over the country to a much larger extent and speed. In contrast, the discussion about seriousness of teenage pregnancy during the pre-COVID period was mainly driven and based on the national survey from UDHS (2016). The framing of early pregnancy emerges within a national crisis - the COVID-19 outbreak - after the government implemented a

nationwide lockdown and school closure to tackle the pandemic. Thus, the scope of the issue has been reframed to an urgent and more pressing problem.

Firstly, news report on a significant increase in teenage pregnancy in COVID period. News messages such as “teenage pregnancies have spiked” (DM21a), “a sharp rise” (DM21b), “reached a crisis phase” (DM21c), and “likely to double by the end of 2021.”(DM21a) proliferate in news reports. These create a sense of urgency of the issue, implying a sudden worsening situation of early pregnancy among teenage girls during COVID. The issue of teenage pregnancy becomes a serious matter as local media is signaling a “big change” in the magnitude of this problem.

Secondly, in this time frame, apart from taking one single source of data on the teenage pregnancy rate, newspapers present updated reports on the number of teenage pregnancies recorded in different regions since the lockdown. Some statistics are also presented in an eye-catching position of the articles – the news title (See Table 6). Table 4 shows the various sources of teenage pregnancies data during COVID lockdown from 2020 to 2021. Compared to the pre-COVID period, local newspapers quote many more data sources on the number of teenage pregnancies during the pandemic, creating a “highlighting” effect showing teenage pregnancy as a pressing issue in different regions. Table 4 shows different data sources that contribute to the news framing of the issue, which are from district level officials, health centers, NGO, and the church. This indicates these actors are involved in the agenda-setting of teenage pregnancy during the COVID time by offering updated information of the issue in their own communities.

Data	Newspaper and Publication date	Sources
*2,300 schoolgirls conceive, 128 married off during lockdown	Daily Monitor 27 July 2020	District health and education departments, the probation and social welfare departments
*Over 3,500 schoolgirls get pregnant	Daily Monitor 02 Nov 2020.	Different health centers around the district where pregnant teenagers go for antenatal care services
“1,519 teenage girls visited various health facilities in the district for antenatal care since the lockdown and closure of schools in March”	Daily Monitor 10 Nov 2020.	Community Development Officers and other stakeholders
“3,430 teenage girls between 14 and 16 years got pregnant between March and October 2020”	Daily Monitor 02 Mar 2021.	Diocese of Kitgum (Church in Uganda)
* 5,200 Butaleja teenagers impregnated in 2 years	Daily Monitor 05 Mar 2021	Butaleja District Health Office
* 1,833 girls impregnated in 90 days in Tororo	Daily Monitor 07 June 2021	District bio-statistician
* 23,000 girls impregnated in Lango in one year – NGO	Daily Monitor 05 Oct 2021.	Communication for Development Foundation Uganda (CDFU), (an NGO)

*Table 6: Sources of number of teenage pregnancies used during COVID*

*\*Used as title of news articles*

Even though teenage pregnancy has been a long-term issue that accounted for one fourth of the teenage girls' population, the media did not very actively reporting specific numbers of teenage pregnancies in pre-COVID time. Evidently, teenage pregnancy has gained much attention and salience in news content during the pandemic.

Apart from reporting on updated information about teenage pregnancies, the urgency frame of teenage pregnancy in the COVID time is further visualized in media through “story telling” from local witnesses.

“ ‘Teenage pregnancy rates in Kaliro are so high that if you move to the corners of the district, you will find a 15-year-old mother or a 20-year-old mother of three.’ Dr Katamba said... He recalled operating a 15-year-old pregnant girl who reportedly did not know the names of the father of her child or where he lived.” (DM20a)

“ ‘I anticipate that about half of the girls' population in schools may not report back once the schools officially open,’ Ms Muhumuza said last week. Mr Samuel Kyaide, the Uganda National Teachers Union (Unatu) chairperson in Kibuku, said about 200 girls of school-going age got pregnant in the district during the Covid-19 lockdown.” (DM21a)

These narratives together with the numbers of teenage pregnancies reports create a sense of presence and palpability of the problem that convince readers that teenage pregnancy is of urgent importance. This framing is persuasive as it adds details, stories, and “anticipation” of the consequence of the issue. This corresponds with Entman's (1993) definition of framing, “to frame is to select some aspects of perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text”. The media chooses to present and select this issue and makes teenage pregnancy become more salient under the COVID context.

Thirdly, the urgency of the teenage pregnancy problem is projected as an issue of “national importance” because of the potential consequences it will bring as a setback to national development. The issue is framed as an obstacle to increasing Uganda’s income level. The implication of an increase in teenage pregnancy elevated to an urgency level causes actors expressing “worries” on how this may hinder bigger social impacts.

“With the advent of Covid-19 pandemic, teenage pregnancy has reached a crisis phase in the country... Teenage pregnancy, if urgently not addressed will undermine girls’ abilities to realize full potentials, further posing dire health, social and economic consequences for the country” (DM21c)

Actors such as United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) representative also urge the government to prioritize in tackling teenage pregnancy:

“ It was bad for a developing country like Uganda as it could become a spark for other grave challenges in the future. but teenage pregnancy at this magnitude is bad. 15 or 20 years down the line, this issue will drive economic challenges, social challenges, and security challenges. The challenges that are present today will be further intensified by this phenomenon.” (NV22)

A local council chairman in Lango also commented on the role of the government to urgently act addressing teenage pregnancy: “we are having young girls from poor families getting pregnant and producing children, who will grow up in poverty. This is a time bomb in this country”. (DM21d)

In the COVID period, teenage pregnancy becomes an urgent issue by being framed as a sharp growing problem all over the country and a national development obstacle. It is

worth noting that even though UNFPA (2021) issued a report on the number of teenage pregnancies from 2017 to 2020, showing a slight decrease from 2019 to 2020<sup>4</sup>, this contradicts with the proclamation of high rise of teenage pregnancy since COVID outbreak. Only one article among all the news articles collected in this research writes about this report by quoting the numbers of teenage pregnancies in 2020 without mentioning the decrease (DM22). This indicates that the media may intentionally select to frame a narrative describing teenage pregnancy as a worsening and pressing issue during the pandemic.

### 6.3 Causal interpretation

The frame element of causal interpretation has been operationalized as the codes connected to the causes of teenage pregnancy, i.e. who is to blame for this issue? A *private matter frame* is identified in the pre-COVID period. With the outbreak of the pandemic, there is a new frame emerged under the lockdown measure - *pandemic frame*, which shows a shift toward blaming teenage pregnancy on COVID-related measures, such as school closures, teenagers having to stay home, and increasing domestic violence.

#### 6.3.1 pre-COVID – *Private matter frame*

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<sup>4</sup> The overall number of teenage pregnancies in Uganda decrease from 2019 to 2020 by 0.9%, but regionally 67 districts recorded increase in teenage pregnancies in 2020.



The causes of teenage pregnancy pre-COVID are found to be framed as a family issue and personal choice, such as child marriage imposed by the girls' families and the girls' decision to engage in transactional relationships. Thus, the author names this frame as *private matter*.

### *Family issue*

Parents' roles are often being blamed for causing teenage pregnancy in two ways, one is their absentee and negligence to their children, another is marrying off their daughters at an early age to receive a dowry. Absentee parents are blamed for not taking responsibility for raising their children and letting young girls mobilize at night in urban centers without consent (NV17b, NV19). Single parenting is also to blame, in cases where men abandon the families, leaving the children to the mothers who struggle to support the families and discipline them (NV17c).

Furthermore, child marriage is also a cause of teenage pregnancy frequently mentioned by the newspapers. The rate of child marriage is considered very high, with a national prevalence of 40% (TO18a, NV19b). This cultural norm has been reported as a common attribute for high cases of early pregnancies because parents tend to marry off their children to get a bride price (DM17a). "Some parents are forcing their children into marriage because they are money hungry, they don't want to pay school fees for their children but accept dowry", according to a program manager from Communication for Development Foundation Uganda (CDFU) (DM19a). A teenage girl from Nakapiripirit district also expresses her view of how families push girls to marry: "we still have many parents especially fathers forcing their teenage daughters to drop out of school and get married" (NV18).

### *Personal choice*

Another reason for teenage pregnancy is framed as a girls' personal choice, such as they get lured by men to receive benefits, have alcohol or substance abuse problems or are sexually active. Girls being tempted to engage in transactional relationship are presented to be leading to teenage pregnancy. For example, Moses Ntenga, a director from an NGO claimed, "in most cases, teenage girls are lured with gifts and money and they end up pregnant, after which the men run away" (NV17c). In a story of a pregnant girl, she mentions getting material needs from her boyfriend:

"while in school, he would give her what she asked for, including taking her out for lunch, giving her some money to use at school, but the day she broke the news of her pregnancy, he fled." (NV18c)

But these relationships appear to be not equal. One girl mentions she cannot negotiate sex with contraception, ending up getting pregnant.

"We had sex together only twice and the next thing I knew, I was pregnant. On those two occasions, I pleaded with him to use a condom, but he refused. He said I was so young to become pregnant," (NV18b)

Girls are presented to be easily lured by money when their parents fail to provide them; a district officer explained, "The boda boda<sup>5</sup> operators and other mature rich men are targeting young girls in secondary schools and they provide them with knickers and pocket money" (DM19b).

Furthermore, some comments focus on young girls' personal behaviors that cause early pregnancy. For example, a district education officer blames substance abuse and girls

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<sup>5</sup> A term for the "motorbike taxi", a common form of transportation in Uganda.

starting to consume alcohol at early age: “So many young girls hang out late in the night in trading centers where they get involved with older boys and men in disco halls and bars” (TO19b). In addition, media reports on statistic showing young people are becoming sexually active at younger ages (NV19b). Sexually active teenagers without adequate access and knowledge about contraceptive methods are attributed to causing teenage pregnancy (TO17, NV17b). The *private matter* frame is found to be salient during pre-COVID period as the attribution to the teenage pregnancy.

### 6.3.2 COVID period - *Pandemic Frame*

During the COVID period, there is a significant shift in perceiving the cause of teenage pregnancy. Newspaper articles draw a close causal connection between COVID lockdown measures and teenage pregnancy, such as how school closures exposed girls to more gender-based violence, redundancy, and child marriages. This frames the pandemic as a driving cause of increasing teenage pregnancy. Even though the *private matter frame* such as child marriage and the role of the parents still exist in COVID period, the focus moves from a private matter to a more collective blame on the pandemic.

#### *Pandemic pregnancy*

New terms such as “pandemic pregnancies” (DM21a) and “a pandemic within a pandemic” (NV22b) are used to frame teenage pregnancy during the COVID period. Newspapers report on government officers acknowledging how this issue accelerated

during the COVID lockdown. Representatives from the Minister of Health states that “teenage pregnancies in most of the districts were rising as a result of the lockdown.” (NV20a). A local district officer reflects on a worsening situation, “Amudat has been grappling with the challenge of teenage pregnancies for long but the number shot up during the COVID-19 lockdown.” (John Robert Adiamo, the Resident District Commissioner Amudat district, *ibid.*). This framing is being overwhelmingly used when one NGO Country director acknowledges, “In recent months following the COVID-19 lockdown, the media has been awash with stories and features of increasing cases of teenage pregnancies and child marriages” (Mr Moses Otai, the Country Director, Child Fund Uganda, DN20b).

#### *Enhancing gender-based violence and child marriage*

Under the *pandemic frame*, newspaper articles use COVID as an umbrella factor to cover a wide range of reasons leading to teenage pregnancy. It is perceived that the role of COVID intensifies the existing problem (DM 21e). The school closures in Uganda are blamed as a major intensifier to teenage pregnancy. Many girls are forced to leave schools, and they are depicted as unsafe at home, vulnerable to domestic violence, facing increasing exposure predators and tempted to try sex because of redundancy.

With the closing of learning institutions, news reports on an increase in vulnerability of girls to “physical and sexual abuse by peers and by older men as parents leave them unsupervised” (TO20). Schools are described as a “safety net” to protect teenage girls from pregnancy. As more girls are staying at home, newspapers report on increase of domestic abuse of girls by their relatives or guardians at home, but the lockdown leaves them nowhere to escape (DM20c, TO22). Apart from facing violence at home, children

are reported to provide forced labor, where girls take part in small business, exposing them to predators (DM20d). Child marriage is also described as enhanced during the COVID period. When teenage girls are forced to stay home, parents think of marrying off them to receive a bride price, especially if the family faces financial problem during the pandemic (DM20e, NV20b).

The redundancy of teenage girls also accounts for the reason of early pregnancy (DM20f). A resident in Lira district shares the story of her niece being sexually active since COVID lockdown:

“She was a responsible girl whose daily routine involved going to school, coming back home, and helping us with home chores. Amuge had no time to mess around. But when the government closed schools, she was made redundant and started spending time with the man who defiled her. She was only 14 years old, and he took advantage of her naivety.”  
(TO22)

When school is absent from teenagers’ lives, the role of school as a safe space becomes salient in COVID period, serving the function of avoiding domestic violence, redundancy and forced marriage (NV20c). “The longer the school remain closed, the more girls will get pregnant” (TO22), drawing a tight connection between the causal relationship of school closures and teenage pregnancy.

Under this context, teenage pregnancy is shaped as an “unavoidable” consequence under COVID measures, signifying a blame towards social or collective responsibility rather than a private matter comprising personal choices.

## 6.4 Morality evaluation

The frame element morality evaluation refers to either positive, negative or neutral judgment to different objects (Matthes and Kohring, 2008). In this part, frames are identified as two aspects: 1) Attitude towards teenage pregnancy, pregnant girls and teen mothers and 2) Attitude towards male offenders<sup>6</sup>. Regarding the attitude towards teenage pregnancy and pregnant teenagers, a *stigmatization* frame is identified during pre-COVID and COVID periods, but more notable during pre-pandemic time, viewing pregnant girls as social outcasts. However, the framing shifts from a *stigmatization* frame towards a *victimization* frame during COVID, with newspaper articles showing lower criticism and higher acceptance towards pregnant schoolgirls. Concerning the attitude towards male offenders, a *leniency frame* is identified to be salient in the pre-COVID time, whereas during the pandemic there are stronger messages towards holding male offenders accountable, generating an *accountability* frame in COVID.

### 6.4.1 Attitude towards teenage pregnancy, pregnant girls, and teen mothers

#### *Pre-COVID and COVID period - Stigmatization frame*

In the pre-COVID period, teenage pregnancy in Uganda is more prevalently regarded as a stigma inciting moral judgement rather than a neutral social or health care issue.

When newspapers report on the increase in teenage pregnancy rate in 2017 (UDHS,

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<sup>6</sup> This is a new aspect found through the process of inductive coding, which is not presented in Table 3 in the chapter on Methodology.

2016), negative adjectives and metaphors are used, such as a quote from the representative of State Minister of Health, “it is shameful for young girls to continue getting pregnant in this modern era. it is shameful for us to talk about teenage pregnancy in the 21st century. Such evil shouldn't be happening now” (NV17a). A journalist uses “evil” to portray teenage pregnancy, presenting it as “one of the biggest evils plaguing the lives of young girls in the country” (ibid.). The prolonged existence of teenage pregnancy is clearly perceived as a very undesirable and scary issue (TO18b). Thus, teenage pregnancy is framed not just as a social issue, but a moral problem in Uganda.

Moreover, pregnant girls and teen mothers are also being stigmatized and they face the exclusion from school and moral judgment in society. Newspapers report on the common practice by school administration to deal with pregnant schoolgirls of expelling them once found pregnant as a punishment for their behaviors (DM20g). A government officer describes teenage girls getting pregnant as an act of “morals and cultural integrity have gone too and have allowed accommodation of these practices.” (NV17a). Thus, the moral evaluation towards teenage pregnancy, pregnant girls and teen mothers tends to be negative in the narratives of newspapers.

#### *COVID period - Victimization frame*

On the contrary, the outbreak of COVID-19 has evolved a new frame - *victimization*, showing a higher acceptance towards pregnant teenagers. The public discussion on newspapers is more empathetic towards girls who get pregnant during COVID lockdowns. They are described as “victims of teenage pregnancy” (NV21, DM22b). During COVID period, newspapers depict a picture of thousands of girls obligated to stay at home, which is not safe (DM21f). They are subjected to domestic violence,

forced marriage, and forced labor that increase their risks of being preyed on by perpetrators (DM21g). Parents are blamed for not providing enough protection to their children against predators during lockdown (NV20c). In some narratives, as girls are not at school, their parents send them out to local markets every day to sell small products to support the families, a 30-mile walk that exposes girls to defilers (ibid.). Since girls are forced to stay home alone without adults during lockdown, “the home became a den where men and young boys preyed on girls” (DM21g). Girls are seen as not safe at home as predators are not only outsiders, but there are reported cases of incest where the offenders are fathers, brothers, uncles and grandparents (TO22).

All these narratives portray pregnant girls as victims of this crisis, who are extremely vulnerable towards sexual violence due to the trapped circumstances. One article describes the trauma of pregnant girl as, “trail of destruction and despair among teenage girls, who became victims of pregnancies and gender-based violence that have scarred their lives irreversibly.” (ibid.). The framing of victimization of pregnant girls during the pandemic has generated more empathy from different stakeholders. This reinforces lower moral judgement towards teenage pregnancy. Proclamations such as “every girl deserves a second chance after pregnancy” (DM21h) and “pregnancy is not the end of the world” (DM22c) can be found in newspapers, framing the issue as a more neutralized matter than a moral stigma.

#### 6.4.2 Attitude towards male offenders

*pre-COVID period – Leniency frame*



According to Ugandan law, the age of consent is 18 years old and those who commits sexual intercourse with anyone under 18 is liable to imprisonment, even a death sentence when it involves a child under 14 (Singh & Chareka, 2018). However, through the reporting about pregnant girls' stories and police interviews in the pre-COVID period, a *leniency frame* towards male perpetrators is found, showing a high acceptance towards their behaviors instead of imposing moral judgment on their illegal offences.

When news reports on early pregnancy cases, the blame regarding the perpetrators is placed on their financial responsibility on the girls and the babies rather than facing legal consequences or being condemned for their defilements. In the eyes of a grandmother, when she explains her grandchildren get pregnant, she focuses on the supporting role of the perpetrator,

"The men who were responsible for making my girls pregnant refused to support them. My grandchildren have also become my responsibility. If only my husband were around, he would have forced the men to take responsibility." (NV17c)

Even from the narrative of a pregnant girl, she emphasizes the "economic responsibility" to her rather than legal responsibility or moral blame:

"He (her husband) has not yet paid the bride price. When my father died, my mother could not afford to pay my school fees. She told me to leave school and get married. Loise says, adding that since her boyfriend cannot support her, she helps her mother, a charcoal burner, in her business." (DM18a)

On the other hands, police reports that parents of the pregnant girls cover up for the male offenders and negotiate a "deal" with perpetrators for dropping the prosecution (DM19a). A UNFPA programme coordinator comments on the high rate of teenage pregnancy in West Nile

said,

“The people impregnating these girls are at large, the matters are sorted out of court and the parents are given a goat to settle the case. What we have to do now is that, if we get a girl who is pregnant, we must investigate in trying to find out who is impregnating them so that we can **help that person** also, because some of them might be doing it ignorantly so that this person does not continue with the habit.”

These narratives towards male offenders show less moral judgement about their behaviors in impregnating a girl. Furthermore, the legal consequences of this sexual offence are not mentioned. This demonstrates the patriarchal social norm still dominant in society. A criminal behavior is being “neutralize” to a family dispute. Only if the men take a “responsibility” (economically) for “impregnating a girl child”, then the case can be settled. The female body is still treated as an object that is transactional but not protected by law. This implies the perception that men taking care of the pregnancy may weigh more than legal punishment of sexual violence against girl child.

#### *COVID period – Accountability frame*

Despite the fact that patriarchal norm still exists in Uganda, during COVID period there arises a new perspective on the accountability towards perpetrators from activists and gender experts, that male offenders should face moral judgement and punishment for their behaviors.

One example is the news messages generated from the new guideline of Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES, 2020)<sup>7</sup>, stating that all schoolboys who impregnate their

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<sup>7</sup> Under the new guidelines, pregnant schoolgirls who are pregnant for three months must go on

girl classmates have to take force “materiality leave” until the girls have delivered, signaling the government is taking steps to make male offenders bear the consequences (NV20d). On the other hands, activists demand stronger punishments towards perpetrators, suggesting putting offenders under 18 in rehabilitation centers, juvenile prison or therapy programs instead of letting them go home (DM22a). Activists are a new actor that appears in newspapers in the COVID period, and they take stronger stance on condemning male offenders and requesting the government to take actions on punishing them:

“They should learn that if they defile or rape girls, then they must serve some kind of punishment, including going to prison,” said, Ms Diana Nansumba, a programme officer at Center for Domestic Violence Prevention. (EA22a)

The emphasis on perpetrators’ responsibility is more noticeable during COVID. It shows a shift in attitude from a moderate tone towards male offenders to a stronger moral judgement of their criminal behaviors.

## 6.5 Treatment recommendation

The frame element treatment recommendation can be contextualized to the actions or policy approach towards teenage pregnancy. In this study, it refers to the school admission policy for pregnant girls and teen mothers<sup>8</sup>. Two frames are identified in this element. A *stigmatization frame* is found during the pre-COVID and COVID periods,

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mandatory maternity leave and return to school when the baby is at least six months old. (MoES, 2020)

<sup>8</sup> The school closures in Uganda lasted almost 2 years (Hayden, 2022). On 10 Jan 2022, the Ugandan government reopened all schools in the country, and it raised the discussions on how to deal with girls who get pregnant and those who become teen mothers while the school closed (ibid.).

but a new frame emerges in the pandemic – *equality frame* – which promotes the equal education rights of pregnant girls.

#### 6.5.1 Pre COVID and COVID period-*Stigmatization frame*

During pre-COVID period, the stigmatization on teenage mothers come quite visible when the MoES announced a guideline on giving three months maternity leave to pregnant students (NV18d). Criticisms are found on news, argue that is a “lack of respect” to other students, one 60 years old retired teacher Jonathan Oyako said,

“It is like you are giving them a reward for engaging in premarital sex. It is like you are saying it is okay to get pregnant. If you expel them, their peers will know that **it is bad** and they will not engage in sex.” (ibid.)

Another comment from a head teacher at a primary school said, “pregnant teenagers should not be handled with kid gloves for their carelessness. Young people should know there is a price to pay for their actions. That is the world we live in” (ibid.). This indicates a strong stigmatization towards teenagers getting pregnant, and they should not be allowed to go back to the school system. When newspapers report on the problem pregnant girls are facing, they express discrimination by peers: “Acora says she cannot go back to school because she faced a lot of stigmas. Her peers at school mocked her, forcing her to drop out of school” (DM20g).

During the pandemic, stigmatization can still be identified among some religious representatives and people from the education sector. The news about Bishop James Ssebagala of Mukono Diocese directs teachers in church schools to block pregnant or

breastfeeding girls from their institutions goes viral over the newspapers (NV22c):

“As the church, we not only focus on teaching English, Mathematics and Science but also norms, character and religion, for that matter, therefore, we cannot allow children who already **messed up themselves** to mix up with their colleagues who are still intact,” the bishop said.” (ibid.)

Even though the Bishop’s command goes against the government’s directive in readmitting pregnant girls, there are supporters who hold the same view as him towards letting pregnant girls back to schools. The chairperson of the education committee at the Uganda Muslim Supreme Council condemns the policy of allowing pregnant students in school:

“The government ought not to have accepted this decision because it is going to be a continuous practice in the future...the government should instead advocate for ‘special classes’ for pregnant students. If we are to allow them, it should be for a limited period of about two years only, but not an open window because men will keep impregnating young girls with a view that they will be allowed in school.” (TO22b)

This policy has created a moral dilemma in society; while the social norm still holds the stigmatization of child pregnancy, the government’s new directive is to support teenage girls and teen mothers back to school. However, the mindset that a pregnant girl is a bad “role model” is still strong, like the MP of Bulamogi saying, “Stopping a pregnant girl child from continuing with school is not a punishment. This serves to teach the rest that what she got herself into was not good at an early age” (DM20f).

These statements present a strong social exclusion towards pregnant girls or teen mothers to be back in a school setting. Despite the government’s initiative to let them

receive education during pregnancy and after they give birth, stigma from society still plays a strong role in blocking them from school.

#### 6.5.2 COVID period - *Equality frame*

Notwithstanding the continuation of the *stigmatization frame*, there is a new frame emphasizing girls' rights to be in school, the equality frame. There are significant discussions focusing on the education rights of pregnant girls or teen mothers, especially close to the date of Ugandan school reopening (10 Jan 2022) after almost two years of school closures.

Firstly, newspapers report on the government's initiative on promoting the education rights of all children, "the policy indicates that all children have a right to education and thus all obstacles to school completion should be removed to keep girls in the schools longer" (TO22b). Secondly, new actors gain exposure in newspapers such as human rights activists, gender experts, gender officers, and rights activists who express pregnant girls' rights to receive education, claiming "pregnancy should not be the end of you attaining education" (NV22c). NGO representatives express their accusation to people who are against the reentry policy for teen mothers:

"It is immoral and unethical for schools not to allow pregnant girls back to school. ...These young girls got pregnant but have a right to education because they have a bright future ahead of them that needs to be shaped." Said UNICEF representative in Uganda (TO22b).

“Education is a human right not a privilege that can be withdrawn as a punishment when a girl gets pregnant.” Said advocacy and communications officer for Women and Girl Child Development Association (NV20d).

Human rights activists and NGO representatives are keen to argue against religious leader’s stances in blocking breastfeeding girls in school (DM22d). The attitude of banning teenage mothers from going back to school is described as “corrosive cultural biases against girl child” from an editorial from The East African (EA22b) , titled “Just like boys, teen mothers have a right to education.” This demands equality for pregnant girls just like other children, stating “these girls deserve a fair shot at education and it is the duty of the state, religious leaders and all stakeholders to enable their aspirations” (ibid.).

Evidently, the formation of the *equality frame* in COVID period is reinforced by the MoES policy, activists, NGOs, and journalists, aiming at promoting the girls’ right to education and reentering schools.

## 7. Discussion

This chapter presents how the findings of this study contribute to the understanding of the perception of teenage pregnancy in Ugandan media and how the results relate to the theoretical framework of *framing*. In addition, discussions on corroboration with existing studies on the role of crisis in frame variation and the implication on the construction of vulnerability are presented.

## 7.1 The linkage between frame elements

Even though Entman (1993) defined framing as four different elements: *problem definition*, *causal interpretation*, *moral evaluation*, and *treatment recommendation*, these frames are found to be interconnected. The following part shows the interactions between different frames on teenage pregnancy to depict a dynamic picture of the process of *frame building*.

### *pre-COVID period*

During the pre-COVID period, teenage pregnancy is framed as a stagnated issue driven by individual or family matters, such as parents' decisions to marry off their daughters and the choice of the girl child herself in engaging in relationships and ending up getting pregnant. This *private matter frame* is connected to the *stigmatization frame* as it indicates that teenage girls "choose" to get pregnant, and thus they deserve to be punished and face consequences such as school expulsion and social discrimination. Moreover, the mindset of teenage pregnancy being a private matter may also connect to the *leniency frame* towards male offenders. As girls are still being treated as a "source of wealth" for the family to get a bride price, when men impregnate girls, the offenders are still treated as the ones who are just paying the price (of defiling the girl) rather than facing a legal punishment from the rule of law. Behind the *leniency frame*, it demonstrates the patriarchal norms of men still having power over women and girls, shifting the blame of pregnancy to the girls rather than the male offenders. Thus, the *stigmatization frame* is generated towards pregnant girls and teen mothers.

### *COVID period*



In contrast, during the COVID period, new frames about teenage pregnancy emerge, posing a strong relationship with the pandemic. The outbreak of COVID comes with lockdown measures such as school closures, giving rise to the *pandemic frame*, which connects school closures with increased gender-based violence towards girl children, both at home and in the community. Redundancy at home is perceived to cause young people to be more sexually active during this period. The framing of teenage pregnancy because of the pandemic and government measure shifts the blame of early pregnancy from a private matter to a social responsibility. Due to circumstances, girls are forced to be in a situation that is not safe and thus they are victims of COVID. This forms the *victimization frame*, placing less criticism on these girls because “pregnancy is not their choices” but the result of gender-based violence and redundancy.

Furthermore, the *pandemic frame* interlinks with the *urgency frame* when newspapers connect the COVID outbreak to teenage pregnancy by paying more attention to the scope of the issue. By reporting closely the number of teenage pregnancies in different regions and implying a sharp increase of early pregnancy in the country, the issue becomes an urgency that demands immediate government action. It is important to deal with high numbers of teenage mothers when schools reopen. As the level of urgency changes, this may imply a political and public pressure to the government to impose education policy to handle readmission of pregnant girls and teen mothers. The *equality frame* emerges under this context, advocating for the rights of the education of thousands of girls who get pregnant during school closures. They are also perceived as victims of the pandemic who deserve a second chance and equal rights as other girls and boys. In addition, the *accountability frame*, claiming the responsibility of male offenders, may be driven by the *pandemic frame*, *urgency frame* and *victimization frame*. While many girls are becoming so vulnerable in this crisis, predators are not

facing as many consequences on their behaviors. This might generate the mindset to hold male offenders more accountable to reduce the vulnerability of the girls and the rate of teenage pregnancy.

## 7.2 The shifting of frames in time of crisis

The findings of this study have proved a shift of framing on teenage pregnancy from pre-COVID to COVID times, corroborating the assumption that frame variation is likely to happen across time dimensions, especially in times of crisis (Greussing & Boomgaarden, 2017). In this study, the *stagnation frame* shifts to the *urgency frame*, *private matter frame* shifts to *pandemic frame*, and *leniency frame* shifts to *accountability frame*. New frames such as *equality frame* and *victimization frame* are located or become more salient during COVID time. According to Horsti & Nossek (2008), crises may disturb journalists' daily routines and give opportunities for new perspectives and interpretations of an issue to emerge (ibid.). The frame variation discovered in this study shows that COVID created new interpretations of teenage pregnancy, moving it from a private matter to a social responsibility, and give opportunities for human rights advocates to promote gender equality and destigmatized pregnant girls and teen mothers on media platforms.

## 7.3 Frame construction from social forces

*Frame building* is a mechanism involving different stakeholders such as politicians, journalists and interest groups taking part in shaping the media frames (Ganson &

Modigliani, 1987). This study reveals that the participation from various stakeholders all contribute to shaping the framing of teenage pregnancy. For example, the role of UDHS (2016) helps to increase media attention on the scope of the issue in the pre-COVID period. Journalists' play a role in constructing the seriousness of teenage pregnancy during COVID time, even though statistically the number of teenage pregnancies decrease slightly from 2019 to 2020 (UNFPA, 2021). Advocates and NGOs are pushing the government's agenda to support pregnant girls going back to school by promoting girls' rights to education, while religious leaders and conservative groups also take parts in upholding their moral judgement towards pregnant girls and teen mothers returning to school.

#### 7.4 Reconstruction of vulnerability

*Framing* is an ongoing construction process by which people can reorient their perception of an issue (Greussing & Boomgaarden, 2017). This study proves that vulnerability is not a stagnated perception. It can be constructed and reconstructed over time. COVID has reconstructed the perception of vulnerability of Ugandan teenage girls in time of crisis. The cause of change is due to the perceived "increase in vulnerability" of girls under COVID lockdown. Thousands of girls are seen as much more vulnerable to gender-based violence in an "inevitable" situation. By then, the vulnerability is reconstructed to a higher level in the pandemic, driving a key change in perception on teenage pregnancy from a private matter to a social responsibility.

## 8. Conclusion

This study finds the framing of teenage pregnancy in Ugandan newspapers has shifted from a stagnated issue to an urgent issue, and from a private matter to a social responsibility. It also shifts from describing pregnant girls and teen mothers as a stigmatized group to victims of the pandemic from the pre-COVID to COVID periods. Moreover, treatment towards this marginalized group going back to school has evolved from a *stigmatization frame* to an *equality frame*, showing much more social support towards pregnant girls and child mothers. The significance of this study is that girls' vulnerability can be reconstructed in times of crisis, which gives rise to new perspectives and opportunities on an existing development issue. In this case, the shift in perception of teenage pregnancy helps to promote gender equality and education rights for pregnant girls and teen mothers (*accountability frame* and *equality frame*). Is crisis also an opportunity? This study shows even though COVID brings severe health impacts, it seems to also open a window towards increasing awareness and actions towards a long-term issue in Uganda. Moreover, the findings indicate the power of the media in framing perceptions of a development issue, which can give insights on how advocacy groups or NGOs promote agendas through media platforms.

Though this research yields a distinct frame variation from pre-COVID to COVID times, the framing effect of these frame constructions on the Ugandans' readers is not tested. This leaves rooms for a variety of future research regarding this topic, for example on how the framing of victimization and equality may change the government policy on handling teenage pregnancy. Research may also investigate to what extent these frames can help increase gender-equality in school environments for pregnant

girls and teen mothers. This study creates implications of *framing effect* research and development studies about teenage pregnancy in Uganda. Moreover, further research can be done on the role of COVID in opening new opportunities for pushing various Sustainable Development Goals.

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## Appendix

### Appendix I: Theme tables generated from codebook

1. Actors
2. Attitude towards pregnant girls or child mothers back to school
3. Description of TP
4. Impact of TP
5. Narrative of girls' stories
6. National interest to deal with TP
7. Policy or actions to deal with TP
8. Statistic about TP
9. What is a safe space for girls
10. Who is to blame for TP

*Table 7: Themes generated from codebook of pre-COVID news articles*

1. Actors
2. Attitude towards pregnant girls going back to school
3. COVID's impact on education
4. Description of teenage pregnancy
5. Girls' right
6. Home alone is not safe
7. Impacts of TP
8. Narrative of pregnant girls
9. New guideline of re-entry of pregnant girls
10. Policy and actions of dealing with TP
11. School's role in protecting children
12. Statistic of TP
13. Who is to blame for TP

*Table 8: Themes generated from codebook of COVID news article*

Appendix II: Citation code list for news articles used in the Finding and Analysis

**The New Vision**

Citation code	News titles	Publication date	Author name
NV17a	Teenage pregnancy still on the raise	28 June 2017	
NV17b	Absentee parents blamed for rising teenage pregnancy figures	24 Mar 2017	
NV17c	Mayuge residents decry teenage pregnancies	24 Oct 2017	
NV18a	Govt wages war on teenage pregnancies	12 Feb 2018	
NV18b	Providing youth-friendly health services key in fighting teenage pregnancies	3 April 2018	
NV18c	Govt wages war on teenage pregnancies	12 Feb 2018	
NV18d	Pregnant school girls to get maternity leave	20 April 2018	
NV19a	MPs visit Arua to raise awareness on teenage pregnancy	19 Sep 2019	
NV19b	What next for child mothers?	21 May 2019	
NV20a	Amudat choking under teenage pregnancy	5 Dec 2020	
NV20b	Lock down leaves Amudat grappling with teenage pregnancies	23 Nov 2020	
NV20c	Early pregnancies escalate during COVID-19 lockdown	14 July 2020	

NV20d	Govt issues revised rules on school pregnancy	22 Oct 2020	
NV21	Speaker Oulanyah speaks tough on HIV, teenage pregnancies	19 Sep 2021	
NV22a	Tackle teenage pregnancies to avert crisis – UN rep	26 Jan 2022	
NV22b	Schools asked to support pregnant students	21 Jan 2022	
NV22c	Rights activists rumble over Bishop Ssebagala’s stand on pregnant students	11 Jan 2022	

### Daily Monitor

Citation code	News titles	Publication date	Author name
DM17a	Pay attention to teen pregnancy	16 Mar 2017	
DM17b	Oulanyah blames rising teen pregnancies on older men.	20 Jan 2017	Owich
DM18a	Teenage pregnancies continue to plague Pakwach	21 Dec 2018	
DM19a	4,900 girls impregnated in two years, says survey	23 July 2019	
DM19b	Teenage pregnancies, HIV rates soar in Mbale	6 Sep 2019	
DM20a	Govt wants health facilities remodeled to tackle teenage pregnancies	29 Oct 2020	
DM20b	Men’s leadership essential in stemming teenage pregnancy	1 Nov 2020	
DM20c	Teenage pregnancies expected to rise due to Covid-19 lockdown, experts warn.	1 May 2020	Wesaka, Anthony

DM20d	Early pregnancies escalate during COVID-19 lockdown	14 July 2020	
DM20e	2,300 school girls conceive, 128 married off during lockdown	27 July 2020	
DM20f	Are schools prepared to take in pregnant girls?	10 Nov 2020	
DM20g	Support teenage mothers to return and finish school	6 Jan 2020	Murung i, P.
DM21a	Girls fall to pandemic pregnancies as schools reopen	2 Mar 2021	
DM21b	Minister blames energy drinks for high teenage pregnancies in Uganda	27 Oct 2021	Ashaba, Alex
DM21c	Teenage Pregnancies in Uganda: A governance issue	10 Dec 2021	
DM21d	School reopening: Teen mothers face bleak future	15 Sep 2021	Ebong, Patrick
DM21e	Why are repeat teenage births on the rise?	20 Sep 2021	Aheebwa, Joyce
DM21f	Teen pregnancies a wake up call to parents	11 Oct 2021	
DM21g	Teenage pregnancies spike in Acholi as Covid lockdown bites	14 June 2021	
DM21h	Every girl deserves a second chance after pregnancy	20 Feb 2021	
DM22a	Activists demand action against men behind teenage pregnancies	03 Feb 2022.	
DM22b	How Covid-19 lockdown spiked teenage pregnancy	9 Feb 2022	Biryomumaisho, Sarah
DM22c	Teenage mothers in Kamuli struggle to resume education	16 Jan 2022	Opio, Sam Caleb
DM22d	Activists condemn cleric for barring pregnant, breastfeeding girls from school.	14 Jan 2022	Obiria, M.



## The Observer

Citation code	News titles	Publication date	Author name
TO17	High teenage pregnancies blamed on contraceptives	29 June 2017	
TO18a	A call for efforts to curb teenage pregnancies	3 July 2018	
TO18b	Teenage pregnancies worry Omoro district	23 April 2018	Nakabugo, Z.
TO19a	Netherlands pumps Shs 96bn into fight against teenage pregnancies.	19 Oct 2019	
TO19b	Arua blames UPDF soldiers for fuelling teenage pregnancies	19 Sep 2019	
TO20	Parental involvement key to preventing teenage pregnancies	13 July 2020	Pride A
TO 22a	How Covid-19 lockdown spiked teenage pregnancy	9 Feb 2022	Biryomumaisho, S.
TO22b	Are schools ready to welcome back the pregnant learners?	17 Jan 2022	Nangonzi, Yudaya

## The East African

Citation code	News titles	Publication date	Author name
EA22a	Men impregnating girls should be severely punished: Ugandan activists.	3 Feb 2022	
EA22b	EDITORIAL: Just like boys, teen mothers have a right to education	15 Jan 2022	