Florence dropped out of school last year after learning she was pregnant. She was only 16 years old. Her pregnancy came when she was only in senior one at a mixed public school in Kayonza district, in eastern Rwanda.

Unwilling to listen to anything, her poor parents struggling in extreme poverty promptly threw her out of their home as soon as they discovered the pregnancy, telling her “she had brought them shame”, and she should find the man who did it.

Left to fend for herself, and facing an uncertain future, Florence, whose full name is withheld to protect her full identity, told Rwanda Dispatch “I had to move in with my boyfriend, a 20 year-old mechanic in Kayonza town.”

While growing up, Florence wanted to become a teacher, but that changed along the way. Now she harbours ambitions of being a well-known master tailor. But she is currently a full-time housewife.

Under Rwanda’s national school policy, adolescent girls and teenage mothers are encouraged to attend school as long as possible. However, girls like Florence face hostility from the community perception, and toxic school culture forcing them to drop out of school.

“Due to the burden of childcare, I am unable to return to school. I wanted to continue my studies but I feel shame and embarrassment because of what other students will think and possible gossip calling me promiscuous. I have seen what happens to other girls who give birth and return to school,” she summarizes her precarious situation.

Florence is not alone. Alice, from the Mukarage sector in the same district of Kayonza got pregnant between April and May this year after being sexually tricked by her boyfriend. At 17, she dropped out of school. She looks tired, and worries about her life and that of her unborn baby are written all over her face as she sits at home with her single mother.

“He (boyfriend) seemed to care but did not use protection. I thought I had dismissed my periods” Alice, who finds it hard to sustain a long conversation, told Rwanda Dispatch, when asked if she would return to school after childbirth. She said, “I’m not sure, maybe I will but I don’t know. I can’t go back to that same school, I am afraid of the mockery of other schoolmates.”

“Word is already getting out at school that I am pregnant. There is so much gossip at school about me. There is no way I am going to return. I think a boarding school that is far away would be better, if I am to return to school after giving birth.” She explained.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), globally, unwanted pregnancies remain a major concern. Reports indicate that birth rates in 2022 for girls aged between 10-14 were estimated at 1.5 million with higher rates in sub-Saharan Africa.

Despite considerable progress, the need to prevent early pregnancy among adolescent girls in Sub-Saharan Africa has been increasing. In Rwanda for instance, previous efforts to combat teen pregnancies were successful however figures have now stagnated.

According to the most recent Rwanda Demographic Health Survey (RDHS 6), 5% of girls aged 15-19 have begun childbearing; 4% have given birth, and 1% are pregnant with their first child. The number of unwanted pregnancies has been on the rise for years, with 17,337 underage girls conceiving in 2017. In 2018, the figures increased by 2,495, and in 2019 the figure went up to 23,544. In 2020 the number was 19,701. Nyagatare district has the highest figures nationally.

UNFPA Representative, Kwabena Asante Ntiamoah has warned that the crisis of teenage pregnancy has gone on for too long and that it is now time to open our eyes, to see the unseen!

Amina Umuhoza, a founder of Kigali Menstruation Station, a not for profit organization which works in partnership with Swedish Agency to provide services to young people has observed that one of the reasons why some many teenagers are getting pregnant is due to a number of combined factors such as poverty and lack of information about the topic which they see as embarrassing for many families.

“We need to focus on topics that are not often discussed like female menstruation. It shouldn’t be a conversation that families have behind closed doors and windows. This should be a real-life conversation. Some people think if you take a paracetamol tablet you will not get pregnant after sex.” She explains noting that they have trained over 3,200 teenagers, and they face challenges such as attitudes from some parents that have not changed.

“There are parents who don’t understand it well. They feel that once their child learns this information, it will involve them in bad habits, thinking they are protecting them instead,” she adds.

The Covid-19 outbreak, which triggered a prolonged closure of schools and educational centres, movement restrictions combined with economic hardships for many families exposed girls to risks of unwanted pregnancies which in turn contributed to school dropout.

David Shema an obstetrician and gynaecologist at Kayonza health centre says that anecdotal evidence showed that there was an increase in teenage pregnancies during the pandemic. This was attributed to the schools closure during the lockdown.

He points out that without access to critical sexual and reproductive health information, comprehensive sexual education, as well as sexual and reproductive health services, including contraceptives, we will see an increase in unintended adolescent pregnancies.

“Many young girls in rural communities have also adopted “negative coping mechanisms” when they find themselves out of school and with little guidance on how they should spend their time. This can lead to infant mortality (death), depression, mood swings, and fatigue,” Shema added.

Jeanette is an 18-year-old mother. She found out she was pregnant while in senior three last year. In her ordeal, she would vomit, suffer from morning sickness as well as feel sick all day long.

At one point, she told Rwanda Dispatch, she thought about getting an “abortion”. “I remember struggling to keep my secret from my friends and teachers at school at the same time being mortified about my parents finding out. It was a tough period,” she said.

Unsure of how to proceed, Jeanette was physically and emotionally devastated, not concentrating in class. She abandoned her studies when she was three months pregnant, and her parents eventually learned about it from their neighbour who told them (parents) that the daughter was expecting.

“After delivering, I still feel ashamed to go back to school. I felt my classmates would call me “irresponsible” or “stupid,” and judge me in other ways. I can see them making comments about my poor moral choices. I don’t see myself walking into their classrooms. ” She said adding “Now that I’m a mother, my focus is on taking care of my baby, in order to give her a better life. I don’t get enough support from the baby’s father but my parents have been helpful.”

Benitta Uwamaliya, a social worker in the Murundi sector in Kayonza district says that adolescent pregnancy remains a cause for concern. Barely a month goes by without a report of a teacher, medical official, husband or businessman being found with a teenage girl in his house in Eastern Province.

“The problem is that families are not ready to come out. When their daughters become pregnant, they feel ashamed to seek help whether medical or legal. Sometimes they don’t know where to go to seek support,” she noted.

Francoise Batamuliza, a mother from Kayonza District told Rwanda Dispatch how her 15 year daughter was raped by a businessman, says that poverty is one of the biggest problems, because these girls are seduced by money and small things like a phone. She calls on parents to be friends with their children and stop busying themselves with other issues.

The social and economic costs of being a teen mother are high for girls from poor families who lack education and skills. They also find it hard to access healthcare. Some of the teen mothers say the problem comes when buying diapers and clothes for their babies.

Since giving birth, Jeanette who lives at her parents’ helps the mother to run a small business in the nearby local market. She has also joined a savings scheme with other teenage mothers. Every Saturday they meet to contribute to their scheme.

“Though not enough, I use the money I get from savings to buy food and clothes for the baby. When the baby turns one year old, I have to make a choice, because my parents have put pressure on me to either join a vocational training school to learn business skills so that I can start my own business or get married.” She added.

Further, teen mothers who do not return to school increase their vulnerability to negative long-term outcomes, according to experts. The lack of education severely

compromises their productivity and advancement in life, keeping many enslaved to poverty.

After giving birth to her first child at 16 years in 2019, Lilian, a single mother from the Rukara sector who deferred school, is expecting a second child in the coming months. Lillian underwent an operation while giving birth to her first child she told this media house that her second pregnancy wasn't planned either.

Left with no choice, she is now forced to work at a cleaning company where she earns meager pay to fend for her growing family.

Burdened with remorse and the embarrassment of living with her grandmother, Lillian's dreams of returning to school to complete a degree in law were dashed, admitting that now she faces an uphill battle raising two children with an unstable source of income.

"To be honest, talking about my second pregnancy is hard because I feel so disappointed in myself. It feels even worse to have disappointed many other people, especially those who helped me through my first pregnancy. People are already saying, "Didn't she learn anything from the first pregnancy?" She observes.

But Lillian is determined as she concludes.