

# Fighting against gender-based discrimination in schools :

## Guaranteeing the right to education of pregnant adolescent girls and unwed mothers in Kinshasa.

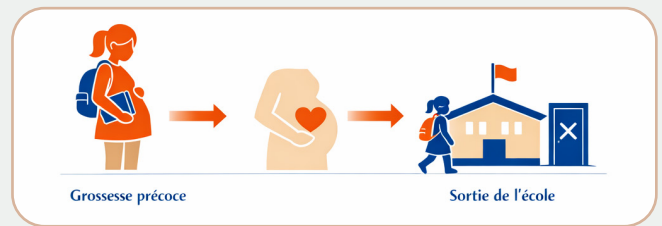
### I. Background and Rationale

In Kinshasa, as in other urban contexts in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), teenage pregnancy is a major public health, education and gender equality issue. Girls are already more likely than boys to drop out of school as preference for boys' education, cultural expectations and household responsibilities contribute to higher female school-leaving rates, even without the additional risks of pregnancy.

According to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), although the adolescent birth rate has declined over the past decade, it remains high. **Nearly 1 in 11 adolescent girls (15–19) gave birth in 2024, significantly impacting their education and livelihood choices.**

Regional and national data show that teenage pregnancies are among the **leading causes of girls dropping out of school at the secondary level.** In sub-Saharan Africa, UNESCO estimates that **less than 5% of girls who drop out of school due to pregnancy manage to re-enter the education system after stopping or pausing during pregnancy**, often turning early pregnancy into permanent exclusion from school. In the DRC, analyses converge to indicate that discriminatory social norms, stigmatization and the lack of educational support measures reinforce this phenomenon.

Faced with this reality, the Ministry of National Education and New Citizenship took a major political step by publishing, on **July 14, 2025**, an **official circular note prohibiting the exclusion of pregnant female students from schools.**



This circular (ref. **N° MINEDUNC/SG/80/DEVK/90/1245/2025**) recalls that *«nothing justifies the exclusion of pregnant girls from the education system as long as they have not expressed the desire to leave school»* and urges all schools, public and private, to guarantee their maintenance without administrative conditions or discriminatory sanctions.

Limited research has explored how school environments influence the safety, inclusion, and educational trajectories of pregnant adolescent girls and unwed mothers encouraging continuation or readmission after pregnancy.

This study fills this gap by exploring experiences of discrimination in schools, as well as the extent to which these students can continue their education during and after pregnancy. This qualitative study is based on one focus group discussion with 8 pregnant and teenage mothers and 20 additional In-Depth Interviews with pregnant and teenage mothers who were schools' leavers as well as 34 in-depth interviews with education staff and stakeholders. A thematic analysis was conducted to identify patterns of violence and discrimination, resilience strategies, and the impacts of school-level policies and practices.

## II. Experienced discrimination and it's effects

The testimonies collected highlight several forms of gender-based discrimination including stigma and mockery, exclusion from school, institutional discrimination and social and family pressures as being the most difficult barriers to navigate. The results are summarized in the following paragraphs :

- **Stigma and mockery** : Pregnant teens are subjected to accusatory looks, humiliating remarks and gossip from their peers, but also sometimes from teachers, that discourage them from staying in school while pregnant.

“That classmates stop making fun of others and teachers who remind you of pregnancy with every thing you do in class “you’re pregnant, did we send you”? Teachers should stop giving certain jobs to pregnant people without taking into account their pregnancy, in the same way as others, strong gymnastics in the same way as others even if you have pain.” (Former student, 17 years old)

- **Direct or indirect exclusion from school** : Some schools avoid creating policies or explicitly discourage school attendance during pregnancy, especially outside the final grades; others apply rigid rules (untolerated tardiness, lack of accommodations) that make it almost impossible to continue education.

“We see that only 6th grade students are privileged, we see 6th grade girls going to do the state exam with their pregnancy. Despite the mockery of colleagues, especially for those of the lower classes, if the school supports you it will allow you to continue your studies and if you give birth you will continue; when schools already limit pregnant girls, when they give birth they will not have the courage to come and continue the classes because you will have other tasks of taking care of the child; therefore that schools allow pregnant girls to attend classes in order to complete their school studies well”

- **Institutional discrimination** : Most participants described a lack of clear policies, inclusion programs, school catch-up or psychosocial support for pregnant adolescents and single mothers or ad never heard of these offerings.

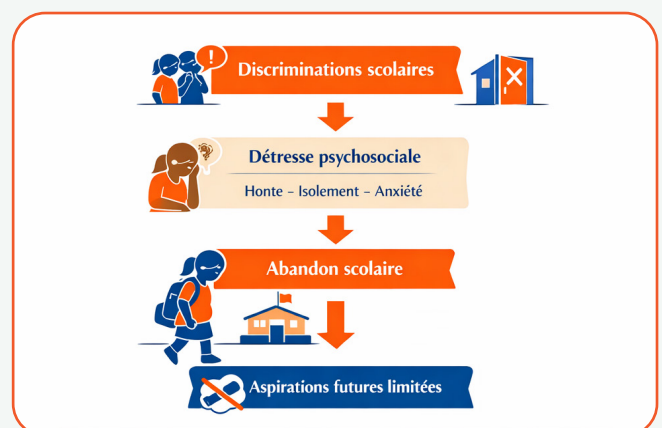
“First of all, that pregnant girls be considered, because if there was consideration, we were not going to drop out of school, we were going to continue in order to obtain the state diploma. It is the lack of consideration that makes us run away from school. For us unwed mothers, let them accept us as we are to give us the courage to continue our studies; If they don't accept us, we won't have the courage to continue because we will live with limitations, fear, insults, etc. In our school, pregnant girls are not allowed to study and for single mothers who must first take care of the children, tardiness is not tolerated; Once you arrive late, the door is closed and you go home. To be then to school you have to go early, I don't know how to wake the child up at that time to get him ready, it's not going to work. That they accept us and even if we arrive late, that they understand that we have children, to allow us to move forward. “ (Former student of 16 years old)

- **Social and family pressures**: Negative reactions from families (anger, withdrawal of financial support, temporary eviction from home) were common and increased adolescent girls' academic vulnerability, even when the school environment was trying to be supportive.

“Dad was also angry. He had said that he was not going to send me to school anymore and that I had to leave his house. I had to be left with the boy's family. I was left with the boy's family.” (Former student of 17 years old, single mother)

## III. Effects of discrimination on schooling and well-being

The discrimination experienced has multiple and cumulative impacts, most commonly including dropping out or interrupting schooling, often as soon as the pregnancy is revealed. However, several other girls described Decreased academic performance due to the stress, stigma, and lack of academic support. Others mentioned, Psychosocial distress such as feelings of shame, isolation, loss of self-esteem and anxiety about the future and suicidal ideation and fears and concerns about the Restriction of future aspirations, despite a strong desire expressed by adolescent girls to return to school or access vocational training.





## V. Policy and operational recommendations expressed by participants

### For education policy makers

- Develop and implement a clear national policy and encourage supportive services to ensure that pregnant and unwed adolescent girls and unwed mothers remain in and return to school, without discrimination.
- Adopt or strengthen legal provisions explicitly prohibiting mockery, exclusion and sanctions related to pregnancy in schools.
- Integrate the issue of adolescent pregnancy prevention and gender equality into education policies and sectoral plans.

Quote Always, we must start from preventive discipline. Preventive discipline is better than sanctions. Head of school

- Strengthening teacher training in inclusion, gender sensitivity, and management of diverse learners is key to improving educational outcomes for marginalized groups

### Attention Principals and School Staff

- Setting up reception and support mechanisms (referents, listening units, individualized follow-up).
- Authorise reasonable academic accommodations: tolerance of maternity-related delays, remedial classes, flexibility in assessments.
- Train teachers and education staff in non-discrimination, professional ethics and psychosocial support.

### To other stakeholders (communities, NGOs, partners)

- Raise awareness among families and communities to reduce stigma, cultural taboos and encourage support for pregnant adolescent girls and unwed mothers.
- Develop **complementary programs** : financial support, community childcare, vocational training and re-entry programs in informal and formal education.
- Strengthen partnerships between schools, social services and community organizations.

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*I would give as a suggestion to the school authorities to allow young mothers or pregnant teenagers to continue their studies. To be there as a pillar to support them, to strengthen them. Because what happened to me, I wouldn't want it to happen to other teenagers. To allow them to continue. It is said that pregnancy is not a disease. With pregnancy, you can do anything. To let them study normally, like any other person. Because when you chase them or downgrade them as teenagers, you have a hard time managing yourself. That's why it pushes us to go further. It even pushes us to have ulterior motives. It can also push someone to death because they couldn't bear the depression of the family, even of school. However, if school allows us to continue our studies with a pregnancy, it can also help us. It is also a courage on their part that will give us the strength to continue.*

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*I will give birth, the child will grow up, and I will go back to school. For the needs of the child and my schooling, I pray that God will touch Daddy's heart, that he will send me to school as he did with the little he earns, that I will study and that the child will be raised. I will go to school and if it is a question of selling, I will do it so that the child can be raised because he knows nothing. (16-year-old student)*

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*I could say that they could support us first with training. Not even having diplomas, but with training, it could help us to make our babies grow up too, and that they too can grow, how would I say, “na ba normes moko ya malamu”. Yes, what do we call it, “ba NGO” allow us to follow training to allow us to learn and take care of our little ones. (16-year-old student, was in the 2nd year of secondary school old system)*

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# Conclusion

The results show a persistent gap between this normative framework and actual school practices. Despite the existence of some policies to keep pregnant girls in school, many adolescent girls continue to face a hostile and non-inclusive school environment marked by stigma and lack of school accommodations. This situation contributes to early school drop-out and permanently limits the educational and socio-economic opportunities of these young girls despite their desire to continue their education and build a better future for themselves. This gender-based discrimination in schools is a major obstacle to the realization of this fundamental right to education for all and specifically for girls. Concerted action, based on inclusive policies, caring school practices and a change in social norms, is essential to ensure equitable and inclusive education for all.

## About Ipas DRC

Ipas DRC is part of the **Ipas network** and advances reproductive justice in the DRC by expanding access to contraception and safe abortion. Using a comprehensive approach that strengthens health systems, legal frameworks, and social norms, the organization supports a sustainable ecosystem grounded in bodily autonomy through local partnership efforts.

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The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent those of IDRC or its Board of Governors.



Learn more about our project :  
[www.ipas.org/YouthSafeSchools](http://www.ipas.org/YouthSafeSchools)

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