

Motherhood in childhood: Facing the challenge of adolescent pregnancy

The State of World Population 2013 and all related press materials and website content are embargoed for release until 1000 GMT on Wednesday, 30 October 2013.

Every day, 20,000 girls below age 18 give birth in developing countries. Nine in 10 of these births occur within marriage or a union.

Girls under 15 account for 2 million of the annual total of 7.3 million new adolescent mothers; if current trends continue, the number of births to girls under 15 could rise to 3 million a year in 2030.

The State of World Population 2013, published by UNFPA, the United Nations Population Fund, highlights the main challenges of adolescent pregnancy and its serious impacts on girls' education, health and long-term employment opportunities. The report also shows what can be done to curb this trend and protect girls' human rights and well-being.

In every region of the world, impoverished, poorly educated and rural girls are more likely to become pregnant than their wealthier, more urban, and more educated counterparts. Girls from ethnic minorities or marginalized groups, and those who have limited or no access to sexual and reproductive health, are also at greater risk.

Pregnancy has major consequences on a girl's health, says the report, since health problems are more likely if she becomes pregnant too soon after reaching puberty. About 70,000 adolescents in developing countries die annually of causes related to pregnancy and childbirth. Adolescents who become pregnant tend to be from lower-income households and to be nutritionally depleted.

The report shows that girls who remain in school longer are less likely to become pregnant. Education prepares girls for future jobs and livelihoods, raises their self-esteem

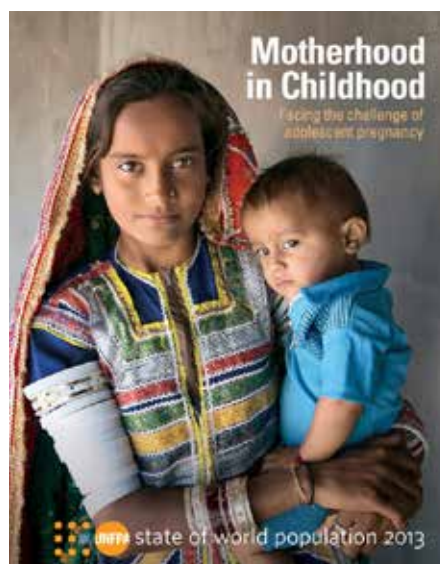
and their status, and gives them more say in decisions affecting their lives. Education also reduces the likelihood of child marriage and delays childbearing, eventually leading to healthier birth outcomes.

The report applies a multilevel ecological framework, which shows that adolescent pregnancies do not occur in a vacuum. They are the consequence of a combination of factors, including poverty, communities' and families' acceptance of child marriage, and inadequate efforts to keep girls in school. Furthermore, such pregnancies, especially among girls under 15, are not the result of a deliberate choice, but rather of the absence of choices, and of circumstances beyond girls' control. Early pregnancies reflect powerlessness, poverty and pressures—from partners, peers, families and communities. And in too many instances, they are the result of sexual violence or coercion.

Girls under 15 have special vulnerabilities, and not enough has been done to understand and respond to their particular and daunting challenges, says the report. Efforts to prevent pregnancies among girls older than 15, or to support older adolescents who

are pregnant or have given birth, may not be suitable or relevant to younger adolescents. This particularly vulnerable group needs approaches that strategically address their unique situation.

Adolescent pregnancy is both a cause and a consequence of rights violations. Pregnancy undermines a girl's ability to exercise her rights to education, health and autonomy. Conversely, when a girl is unable to enjoy basic rights, she is more vulnerable to becoming pregnant.



For nearly 200 adolescent girls every day, early pregnancy results in the ultimate rights violation: death.

According to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, anyone under the age of 18 is considered a child. Children are granted special protections required by their age. Upholding these protections can help eliminate many of the conditions that contribute to adolescent pregnancy and mitigate the consequences to the girl, her household and her community. It would help end a vicious cycle of rights infringements, poverty, inequality, exclusion and adolescent pregnancy.

The report notes that some governments and communities have been able to reduce adolescent fertility through actions designed to achieve other objectives, such as keeping girls in school, preventing HIV infection, ending child marriage, building girls' human capital, empowering girls to make life decisions, and upholding their basic human rights.

Many countries have taken action aimed specifically at preventing adolescent pregnancy, and in some cases, at supporting girls who have become pregnant. However, many of these measures have been primarily about changing the behaviour of the girl, without addressing the underlying causes, including gender inequality, poverty, sexual violence and coercion, child marriage, social pressures, and negative attitudes and stereotypes about ado-

lescent girls. Strategies have frequently neglected to take into account the role that boys and men can play to address and prevent adolescent pregnancy.

The State of World Population 2013 calls for a shift away from interventions targeted at girls towards broad-based approaches that build girls' human capital, help them make decisions about their lives, including matters of sexual and reproductive health, and offer them real opportunities so that motherhood is not seen as their only destiny. This new approach must target the circumstances, conditions, norms, values and structural forces that perpetuate adolescent pregnancies on the one hand and that isolate and marginalize pregnant girls on the other. Girls need to have access to both sexual and reproductive health services and to information. They need to be released from the economic and social pressures that too often translate into a pregnancy, as well as the poverty, poor health and unrealized human potential that come with it.

Tackling unintended pregnancy among adolescents requires holistic approaches. Because the challenges are great and complex, no single sector or organization can face them on its own. Only by working in partnerships, across sectors, and in collaboration with adolescents themselves, can constraints on their progress be removed.

For more information contact

UNFPA, the United Nations Population Fund
Information and External Relations Division
Media and Communications Branch
605 Third Avenue
6th Floor
New York, NY 10158
Tel. +1-212 297-4992
E-mail: kollodge@unfpa.org

The full report in Arabic, English, French, Russian and Spanish, along with feature stories, video, photographs and other resources for journalists are online at www.unfpa.org.