

[AS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY]

Voice of Youth – Paulini Turagabeci

The UNFPA State of the World Population 2013 reports that 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.

These statistics are more than just numbers. They reveal the realities that a gross number of adolescent girls live in; from their inability to negotiate sex and the use of contraceptives, their vulnerabilities to HIV/AIDS, STI's and complications in childbirth, marginalization from society, harmful cultural practices that discriminate against young women inclusive of early and forced marriage, the lack of comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) and the hindrance to the attainment of the highest level of education, to name a few.

Thankfully, it is not just development partners, Governments, NGO's and CSO's that are becoming aware of this societal challenge and taking proactive steps to address it, but young people, many of whom are young women themselves are providing concrete solutions that affect their bodies, their lives, their future and that of their peers.

In a publication compiled from online dialogue discussions by the Pacific Young Women's Leadership Alliance (PYWLA), young women divulged their thoughts, concerns, and answers to many of their lives' issues.

In regards to adolescent pregnancies young women of the alliance highlighted that government and development agencies must strengthen access to information and services on family planning in order to better address teenage pregnancies in the Pacific.

The high rates of teenage and unplanned pregnancies and low contraceptive prevalence rates re-affirm the need to re – examine the way sexual and reproductive health and rights information and services are delivered to young people in the Pacific.

Ongoing stigmatization, lack of support from communities, religious and cultural beliefs, exposure to violence in intimate partner relationships,

inadequate service providers, lack of education and awareness are some of the barriers young people face throughout the region.

A young woman and member of the alliance from PNG stated ‘Whatever choice we make must be an informed decision, today a lot of us make the mistake of making a decision thinking we do not have a choice. But that is due to lack of information, resources, services and the power to make that decision’.

Young women recommend that awareness campaigns in the Pacific be focused on sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) being understood as a shared responsibility, thus balancing the power dynamics and responsibilities in relationships. In most cases young women are blamed for unplanned pregnancies. An inclusive education and awareness campaign for both young women and men emphasizing sexual and reproductive health and rights as a shared responsibility is an important and critical part of advancing SRHR. Young women also concur that a strategy that has not been properly addressed, and in some cases ignored, is the role that the Church can potentially play in the improvement of sexual and reproductive health and rights for young people. As one of the most influential institutions in Pacific communities, churches can play a pivotal role in helping generate awareness and mitigating issues around sexually transmitted infections, gender based violence and family planning.

Furthermore, most young women noted that governments do not need to construct a whole host of service centers, but instead recommend that SRHR be added to existing facilities by providing services that are youth friendly and training service providers who can offer counseling, maintain confidentiality, address the fears that young people might have and provide information about various forms of contraception in a professional manner.

Working together in partnership has never been more crucial than now, in a world of exhilarating birth rates and depletion of resources, of the disproportionate effects of violence and poverty faced by women and the countless social dilemmas we are facing. A better world safe for all and with equal opportunity for all is our motivation – let’s take a united front to help achieve it, and we can start by addressing adolescent childbirth.