

PREVENTING EARLY PREGNANCY: A CALL FOR ACTION

Nearly 16 million 15- to 19-year-old girls give birth annually, almost all of them in developing countries. Although adolescent pregnancy rates have been dropping globally, there are significant disparities at the regional level and within countries. Early pregnancies are more frequent among the poorest and least educated adolescents. For some young mothers, pregnancy and childbirth are both planned and wanted. But for many others that is not the case. Frequently, young women get pregnant under pressure, either because they do not know how to prevent it, or because they are forced to have sexual relations. Pregnant adolescents have less access to safe abortion and to skilled medical care before, during and after childbirth.

IT'S TIME FOR ACTION

We know how to do it. Let's work with youth to improve their health and wellbeing. It is urgent that we join efforts to implement comprehensive and complementary measures in the following areas:

- HEALTH
- EDUCATION
- LIFE SKILLS
- SAFETY

In developing countries, pregnancy- and childbirth-related complications are the leading cause of death among adolescents. Furthermore, early motherhood also has a negative impact on their babies' health. Adolescent pregnancy contributes to maternal and child mortality rates and to the vicious cycle of poverty and poor health. Therefore, addressing early pregnancy is critical to achieving the MDG goals related to maternal and child mortality and poverty reduction.

Early pregnancy is the result of many factors at individual, social and legal levels. Improving adolescent health will only be possible if all three levels are addressed, and young people themselves become actively involved.

This publication urges policy makers, civil society groups and activists to take action to reduce early pregnancy and pregnancy-related morbidity and mortality. This report presents guidelines based on the most current evidence to design effective public policies and reproductive health programs

INTERVENTIONS MUST AIM TO:

Prevent early pregnancy:

1. Reduce marriage before age 18
2. Reduce early pregnancy before age 20
3. Increase the use of contraception among adolescents
4. Reduce coerced sex among adolescents

Prevent adverse reproductive outcomes

5. Reduce unsafe abortion among adolescents
6. Increase access by adolescents to skilled prenatal, childbirth and postnatal care

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1 PREVENT EARLY MARRIAGE TO ENSURE THE GREATEST POTENTIAL OF ADOLESCENTS.

Thirty percent of girls in developing countries get married before the age of 18, and close to 14% do so before they turn 15. Early marriage leads to early pregnancy and poor health. Moreover, it perpetuates a cycle of illiteracy and poverty.

Prohibit early marriage. In many countries, laws prohibiting marriage before 18 years of age are either non-existent or not enforced. Consequently, early marriage is very frequent. We must ensure that the laws preventing marriage of girls before the age of 18ⁱ are enacted and enforced.

Educate and empower girls. Girls are often conditioned to accept their families make decisions on their behalf. We can implement interventions to educate them on their health rights, wellbeing and self-determination. We can promote interventions to help them strengthen their knowledge of the world and their own sense of self, as well as developing social skills. Briefly put, we can provide them with tools to empower them to defend their own rights.

Influence cultural norms that support early marriage. In some parts of the world girls are expected to marry and start having children in early adolescence. Parents feel pressured by existing norms and traditions or by economic hardships. Delaying the age of marriage requires working with communities to question, challenge and change such norms. An empowered and informed girl needs a favorable family and social environment to attain her maximum potential.

ⁱ Patton GC, Coffey C, Sawyer SM et al. *Global patterns of mortality in young people. A systematic analysis of population data.* Lancet. 2009; 374: 881-892.

2 PREVENT EARLY PREGNANCY TO ENABLE GIRLS TO MAKE THE MOST OF THEIR OPPORTUNITIES.

Although births by adolescent mothers have been reduced, the rates are still high. In the world's most postponed regions, one out of three women bear a child before the age of 18 yearsⁱⁱ. Adolescent pregnancy is more prevalent in poor, education-deprived and rural environments.

Advocate for pregnancy prevention among adolescents. In many countries, adolescent pregnancy is sown by social norms, traditions and economic conditions. This is further worsened by people's resistance against sexual education, despite the evidence supporting it. Society, including policy makers, educators and community leaders must strengthen efforts to prevent adolescent pregnancy, specifically through sexual education, information and sexual and reproductive health services.

Improve the education of girls under age 18. More girls go to school every day. This has a beneficial impact on their own health, and that of their children and communities. In addition, girls postpone marriage while they are attending school. Unfortunately, registration rates drop dramatically after 5 or 6 years of schooling. We must increase formal and non-formal educational opportunities for girls, both in primary school and high school.

Educating girls (and boys) on sexuality is essential. Many adolescents start their sexual life at an early age, at a time at which they do not know how to prevent unwanted pregnancies or sexually transmitted infections. Environmental factors, like the pressure to meet their peers' stereotypes and norms, increase their vulnerability. To ensure a healthy sexuality, we must promote sexual education at schools and facilitate access to contraception methods—together with counseling. Likewise, we need to advocate for programs that strengthen life skills.

Work with communities to promote early pregnancy prevention. In many places there is a huge reluctance to admit that the young have sex before marriage and to debate on how to approach the topic. Families and communities are key players and should be involved and engaged in the efforts to prevent early pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases.

ⁱⁱ World Health Organization. *Women and Health. Today's evidence. Tomorrow's agenda.* Geneva: WHO, 2009.

3 INCREASE THE USE OF CONTRACEPTION BY ADOLESCENTS TO ENSURE GOOD SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH.

Even in the places where contraceptives are readily available, adolescents find it difficult to access themⁱⁱⁱ. Access and use of contraception are essential in making healthy decisions and preventing unwanted pregnancies.

Create laws that promote access to contraception services and information. In many places, laws and policies prevent the provision of contraceptives to adolescents, particularly if they are not married or under age 18. Laws and policies need urgent reform to eliminate barriers and facilitate access to information and user-friendly sexual and reproductive health services, including emergency contraception.

Reduce costs and simplify access of contraceptives among adolescents*. We must advocate for more affordable prices and promote user-friendly and appropriate sexual and reproductive health services.

Educate adolescents on the use of contraception. Frequently, young people become sexually active and do not even know where to get contraceptives or how to use them properly. We must promote access to sexual education and information on contraceptive methods, inside and outside school premises.

Increase community support for contraceptive provision to adolescents. In many places, there is social resistance to the provision of contraceptives to adolescents, particularly if they are not married. We need to raise awareness among communities, stressing the importance of contraception access.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.; *Conditional recommendation.

4 COMBATING COERCED SEX IS PARAMOUNT.

A large number of girls worldwide are forced to have sex, frequently by relatives and close friends^{iv}. In some countries over one third of the girls reported that their first sexual encounter was forced. Forced sex raise the risk of unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections and physical trauma..

Prohibit forced sex. In many places, rape is neither prosecuted nor punished. Moreover, shame and social stigmatization make it very difficult for victims to seek justice. This needs to be changed. We must demand laws that prohibit coerced sex and permit punishment of the perpetrators in an expedited manner.

Empower girls to resist coerced sex. In many contexts girls feel incapable of resisting forced sex. We must demand measures to prevent harassment and sexual coercion. We need to empower them so they can protect themselves, seek and obtain assistance when unable to control the situation on their own.

Influence social norms that condone forced sex. The social norms that prevail in many places accept violence and sexual coercion. In addition to the empowerment of adolescents, we need interventions to challenge and change the norms that condone such actions: societies should not tolerate this violation to the rights of adolescents.

Engage men and boys to challenge gender norms. In many contexts, gender violence is accepted as a norm. This must change. Men should be actively involved in programs that may help them to be critical about gender-related norms and stereotypes and their negative impact.

^{iv} Ibid.



5 THE REDUCTION OF UNSAFE ABORTIONS IS KEY TO DECREASING MATERNAL DEATHS.

Many adolescent pregnancies are terminated through abortions which are often unsafe^v. In Africa, for instance, one out of four unsafe abortions occurs in adolescents from 15 to 19 years of age. Thousands of women die as a result of unsafe abortion and many are crippled for life.

Enable access safe abortion and post-abortion services. Very few countries provide safe abortion to adolescents. We must demand laws enabling adolescent's access to appropriate legal and safe abortion and post abortion services, regardless of whether abortion is legal there or not. All the adolescents undergoing an abortion should receive post abortion counseling services and contraception.

Inform adolescents on the risks of unsafe abortion, and how to access a safe abortion. Adolescents are frequently unaware of the risks of unsafe abortion, or fear going to health centers. All adolescents and their families must receive information on the risks of safe abortion, and on where, how, and under what conditions to obtain a legal abortion.

Educate the community on the risks of unsafe abortion. Many people are unaware of the tragic implications of denying adolescents access to safe and legal abortion. We must create awareness among communities of these serious consequences in order to create demand for policies that increase adolescent access to safe abortion and post abortion services.

Identify and eliminate barriers to safe abortion services. All adolescents must be ensured access to safe abortion and post abortion services, as well as family planning methods.

^v Ibid.

6 ACCESS TO SKILLED ANTENATAL, CHILDBIRTH AND POSTNATAL CARE IS A NEGLECTED RIGHT.

One third of the women in developing countries give birth with no skilled medical care^{vi}. Adolescents, in particular, face significant barriers to a risk-free pregnancy and childbirth.

Expand access to skilled care before, during and after childbirth. Skilled care saves the lives of pregnant women and their babies. Law-makers should promote laws that ensure access to all pregnant women, including adolescents, to quality services before, during and after childbirth.

Increase the access to basic and comprehensive care. Basic and comprehensive emergency obstetric care is essential for risk-free pregnancy and childbirth. Access to these services should be expanded to all pregnant women, including adolescents.

Raise awareness among adolescents, their families and communities on the importance of receiving skilled maternal care. To ensure the use of services, awareness must be raised among the public, on the fact that quality obstetric care before, during and after childbirth saves lives

Ensure that adolescents, their families and communities are prepared to respond to obstetric emergencies. Pregnant adolescents must receive the information required to know how to act in the event of an obstetric emergency. This preparedness must be systematically offered to all adolescents as part of their antenatal care, from their homes, communities and health centers.

Be sensitive and meet the needs of the pregnant adolescents and young mothers. All women must have access to skilled medical care, before, during and after giving birth. Emergency obstetric services must be available in the event of complications. Service providers must treat young girls with respect and be sensitive to their specific needs.

^{vi} United Nations Population Fund. *How universal is access to reproductive health? A review of the evidence*. New York: UNFPA, 2010.