



Because everyone counts

UNFPA, the United Nations Population Fund, is an international development agency that promotes the right of every woman, man and child to enjoy a life of health and equal opportunity. UNFPA supports countries in using population data for policies and programmes to reduce poverty and to ensure that every pregnancy is wanted, every birth is safe, every young person is free of HIV/AIDS, and every girl and woman is treated with dignity and respect.

FAMILY PLANNING AND YOUNG PEOPLE

THEIR CHOICES CREATE THE FUTURE

HALF THE PEOPLE ON EARTH are under 25. Some 1.8 billion are aged 10-25, history's largest generation of adolescents, and about 85 per cent live in the developing world.

Their decisions about sexual behaviour and childbearing are critical to the planet's future population size, dynamic and well-being.

Although most people become sexually active during adolescence, young people often have no access to the family planning services and education they need. Some of the biggest barriers are cultural taboos about young people's sexuality.

If we want to address population issues, combat maternal deaths and give young people a good, healthy start on their lives, their right to reproductive health and family planning information and services must be promoted, and changes in policies and regulations encouraged.

THE CURRENT SITUATION

- **Most people become sexually active before their 20th birthday.**

- Many societies disapprove of premarital sex and consider reproductive health care for young people inappropriate. As a result, parents, educators and health care providers often are unwilling to give young people the information and services needed.

- Modern contraceptive use among adolescents is generally low, and decreases with economic status. Fewer than 5 per cent of the poorest young use modern contraception.

- **Young women consistently report less contraceptive usage than men,** evidence of their unequal power in negotiating safer sex or restrictions on their access to services (such as lack of information, shame, laws, health provider attitudes and practices, or social norms).

- The highest rates of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) worldwide are among young people aged 15 to 24. Some 500,000 become infected daily (excluding HIV).

- **Two in five new HIV infections occur in young people aged 15 to 24.**

- Surveys from 40 countries show that more than half their young people have misconceptions about how HIV is transmitted.

- Nearly half of all young people live in poverty, and about one in five lives in extreme poverty, on less than \$1 per day.

- Community studies suggest that 10 to 40 per cent of young unmarried women have had an unintended pregnancy.

- Teenage girls account for 14 per cent of the estimated 20 million unsafe abortions performed each year, which result in some 68,000 deaths.

- Forty-nine per cent of women in least developed countries marry before they turn 18.

- Worldwide, some 14 million children are born every year to young married and unmarried women aged 15 to 19.

- **Complications during pregnancy and childbearing are the leading causes of death for girls aged 15 to 19 in developing countries.** They are twice as likely to die in childbirth as women in their 20s.

- Young women under 20 face a higher risk of obstructed labour, which if Caesarean section is not available can cause an obstetric fistula, a tear in the birth canal that creates leakage of urine and/or faeces. At least two million of the world's poorest women live with fistulas.

- Married adolescent girls generally are unable to negotiate condom use or to refuse sexual relations. They are often married to older men with more sexual experience, which puts them at risk of contracting STIs, including HIV.

- In Kenya and Zambia, married girls are more likely to be HIV-positive than their unmarried counterparts.

- Young people may hesitate to visit clinics because of lack of privacy and confidentiality, inconvenient locations and hours, high costs, limited contraceptive choices and supplies, and perhaps most importantly, negative or judgmental provider attitudes.

- **Laws and policies also may restrict adolescents' access to information and**

services, for example, by limiting family planning to married people or those over 16, or requiring parental or spousal consent.

- A basic challenge in advocacy, especially in traditional societies, is the taboo on public discussion of sexual issues, including the fact that many young people are sexually active before marriage.

BENEFITS OF ACTION

- Adolescents' access to family planning can increase their opportunities throughout their lives, starting with longer education, fewer pregnancies, a later and healthier start to childbearing, and more opportunities to engage in income-producing activity.
- **Enabling young women to postpone child-bearing and to space births is key to slowing the momentum of population growth.**
- Researchers estimate that universal access to family planning could save the lives of about 175,000 women each year.
- Family planning programmes help prevent STIs, including HIV, by promoting condom use. Preventing unwanted pregnancies among HIV-positive women averts mother-to-child transmission.

WHAT MUST BE DONE?

Advocates must promote the rights of young people to reproductive health and family planning information and services, campaign for changes in policies and regulations, and lobby for funding for programmes for adolescents.

Effective strategies vary according to circumstance: some young people are single, others newly married; some attend school while others have jobs; some live with parents while others live with peers or on the street. Messages need to reach and be relevant to the different groups.

Successful strategies include reproductive health education in the schools; programmes for out-of-school youths and early married girls, social marketing of condoms; using mass and entertainment media to disseminate messages; telephone hotlines to provide anonymous counselling; peer educators in the community or workplace; and care at multipurpose youth centres.

Programmes should also address issues of puberty and relationships, the skills to negotiate sex and condom use, and gender norms that shape boys' notions of masculinity and limit girls' control over sex.

Promoting abstinence alone ignores reality and the family planning needs of married people but promoting condoms as total protection may encourage high-risk behaviour.

Young people must be active participants in programme design, implementation and evaluation if any approach is to succeed.

WHAT IS UNFPA DOING?

UNFPA advocates greater attention to young people's needs and crafts educational materials to reach them and the groups that serve them. This includes helping parents communicate effectively with adolescents about sexuality.

The Fund works with many partners to:

- Uphold the rights of young people, especially girls and marginalized groups, to grow up healthy and safely and to receive a fair share of social investments.
- Encourage young people's leadership and participation in decisions that affect them, including their societies' development plans.
- Give young people skills to make healthy choices and fulfill their dreams.
- Connect young people to livelihood and employment programmes.

UNFPA works with reproductive health-care providers to make their services more youth-friendly and to reduce rates of early marriage and childbearing. UNFPA's global Campaign to End Fistula works in 40 countries to provide reproductive health care to women and empower young women and girls to delay marriage and childbirth.

LINKS

Supporting Adolescents and Youth

<http://www.unfpa.org/adolescents/index.htm>

Making Motherhood Safer

<http://www.unfpa.org/mothers/index.htm>

Family planning: so that every pregnancy is wanted.

<http://www.unfpa.org/rh/planning.htm>

Securing Essential Supplies

<http://www.unfpa.org/supplies/index.htm>