Children should not give birth to children

On Tuesday last week, Uganda joined the rest of the world to commemorate the World Population Day. Worldwide, the day was marked under the theme: "Family planning, Empowering people, Developing Nations". In Uganda, the commemoration activities were held in Busia, under the theme: "Strengthen Youth Competitiveness for Sustainable Development". One major issue that both themes aim at addressing is teenage pregnancies. **Lillian N. Magezi** explains why everyone must join the fight against teenage pregnancies

GRAPHIC BY BRIAN SEKAMATE



At the age of 16, Mary Namutosi, who hails from Manafwa, gave birth to a baby girl in December 2011. However, Namutosi says she had no clue how to handle the baby and if it had not been for her mother, she would have abandoned the baby in hospital.

Namutosi says she was living with her parents at the time and the boy responsible for the pregnancy abandoned her.

"When I told him that I was pregnant, he requested me not to tell my parents. He said he would organise with his mother and I start living with them. However, after taking a week without seeing him, I went to his home to inquire about his whereabouts. His mother told me that he had gone to visit an uncle in Kenya and he would be back soon," Namutosi narrates.

With no one to confide in, Namutosi became desperate and with time, she became sickly. One day, her mother took her to a health centre, to test for malaria. Although Namutosi was scared, she could not resist.

After the checkup, her mother asked her whether she knew she was pregnant and before Namutosi could answer, her mother gave her folic acid tablets and told her to take one every day.

Her mother supported her throughout the pregnancy and after giving birth, she encouraged her to breastfeed her baby. When the baby turned two, Namutosi's mother told her to start thinking about a means of earning a living and to support herself and the baby. Namutosi's father refused to give her financial support to continue with her education.

At the beginning of 2014, Namutosi got work as a housemaid in Kampala, a job she still does. From the money she earns, she pays for her daughter's education and to send her mother money for upkeep.

Namutosi says she would like to get a higher-paying job, but she has no skills to do anything else. Namutosi is just one of the many girls in Uganda who have been affected by teenage pregnancies.

According to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), at a prevalence of over 25%, Uganda has one of the highest rates of teenage pregnancies in sub-saharan Africa.

Teenage pregnancy

Teenage or child pregnancy is a term used to refer to conception among girls who have not reached legal adulthood (those below 18 years of age), Dr Dinah Nakiganda, the assistant commissioner for reproductive health at the health ministry explains. Nakiganda was speaking at a public dialogue at Sheraton Kampala Hotel. The dialogue was one of the activities organised by UNFPA ahead of the commemoration of World Population Day on July 11.

Teenage sex

Dr Charles Kiggundu, a gynaecologist, says research has shown that the Ugandan population is highly sexually active.

- Fifteen years is the average age at which Ugandans start having sex. Girls start at an average of 15.6 years and boys start at an average age of 16.2 years.
- Many do not use effective/modern contraception (such as the pill, intrauterine device or condoms). Only 9% of young people who are sexually active use effective contraception. The commonest reason why they do not use is lack of knowledge
- Twenty-five percent of Ugandan girls less than 19 years old have had a baby or an abortion
- Teenage pregnancies are higher among uneducated girls. Girls who stay in school longer are less likely get pregnant early.
- Many girls are married off before the age of 18, despite the fact that the law does not support this. Early marriages lead to early pregnancies and usually lead to the girls having many children through their productive years, compared to those who start having babies later.
- Adolescent childbearing is more common in rural areas (at 27%) than in urban ones (at 19%).

Why you should fight teenage pregnancies

Teenage pregnancies come with health risks and complications to the mother and the baby, Prof. Florence Mirembe, an expert in maternal health and the vice-chairperson of the National Population Council explains. Mirembe and Nakiganda say the risks and complications include obstetric fistula, obstructed labour, infant mortality and maternal mortality.

Teenage mothers are more likely to experience adverse pregnancy outcomes, such as obstructed labour (failure of a baby to exit the pelvis during childbirth due to being physically blocked).

Obstructed labour can result in an obstetric fistula (a hole between the vagina and rectum or bladder, leaving a woman leaking urine or faeces or both) for the teenage mother. In addition, the teenage mother and her baby may die.

Prof. Mirembe noted that teenage pregnancies were a major contributor to the maternal mortality rate for Uganda, which stands at 368 deaths per 100,000 live births.

In addition, babies born to young mothers are at increased risk of sickness and death because they might not get the appropriate care, which predisposes them to conditions, such as diarrhoea and malnutrition, which could be fatal.

Youth-friendly services needed

Experts at the dialogue noted that the major challenge in fighting teenage pregnancies in Uganda was the lack of youth-friendly sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services. Many young people lack access to information and services, while others are put off by the poor attitude of the health workers who insult them when they seek services, telling them they should be focusing on their studies and not having sex.

Because of this, many teenagers who need help in terms of information and services on how to prevent pregnancies and protect themselves from sexually transmitted diseases are usually discouraged from seeking help.

Angella Akol, the leader of Family Health International 360, a non-governmental organisation that promotes human development, advised that boys should also be brought on board in the fight against teenage pregnancies, by providing them with information and sexual and reproductive health services. She noted that both girls and boys are responsible for teenage pregnancies and, therefore, both should take care to avoid them, in addition to sexually transmitted infections, including HIV/AIDS.



Teenage pregnancy may pose psycho-social and health problems



A counsellor talking to youth at Naguru Teenage Centre in Kampala. A research done on teenagers in Uganda has shown that they have many misconceptions about sex and they do not use effective contraception



Parents should give children the necessary information about sex

How to prevent early pregnancies

Dr Kisamba Mugerwa, the chairperson of the National Planning Authority, noted that youth should be urged to choose any of the available means. These include:

- Abstaining from sexual intercourse
- Consistent and correct use of condoms. He noted that this is the safest way to avoid teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections

The youth were encouraged to:

- Visit health centres to find out more about contraception
- Listen to and watch health talks on radio and television so as to get information to prevent teenage pregnancy and find out where to seek services.

Youth who are pregnant are encouraged to:

Talk to their parents, guardians or a trusted adult for advice. Ask them to support them to go back to school after delivery

- Visit the nearest health facility for antenatal care, at least four times during pregnancy and plan to deliver at a health facility where complications can be diagnosed early and managed
- Avoid drinking alcohol, smoking or abusing drugs because such habits could interfere with the development of their unborn babies and cause complications, such as low birth weight

If one is sexually active, use condoms to avoid STIs

- Take an HIV test and if positive, seek guidance from a health worker on how to protect the baby.

On the other hand, Francis Mondo Kyateeka, the commissioner for youth in the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, urged parents to:

- Give both girls and boys information on growing up and sex. This will help them avoid early sex and thus early pregnancies.
- Keep both boys and girls in school
- Support the girl throughout the pregnancy, for example, ensure that she attends all her antenatal visits to avoid any pregnancy-related complications and later encourage her to go back to school

Health workers were urged to:

- Be compassionate and friendly when teenage mothers go to the health facilities
- Provide young people (both boys and girls) with age appropriate sexual and reproductive health information so that they can prevent unwanted pregnancies and live productive lives
- Encourage those who are pregnant to keep going for antenatal care, until they are due for delivery
- Encourage teenage mothers to deliver at the health facilities so that any problems that occur can be managed immediately
- Encourage them to get postnatal care.

Teens at risk of unsafe abortions

Dr Dinah Nakiganda, the assistant commissioner for reproductive health at the health ministry, noted that teenage pregnancies are usually unplanned and unwanted. If girls do not get appropriate social support, they suffer psychological torture and some opt for unsafe abortions to terminate the pregnancy. This usually leads to a lot of complications, such as ruptures of the uterus, infections and death.

Mondo Kyateeka, the commissioner for youth in the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, noted that the psycho-social problems that teenage mothers face include girls dropping out of school and being chased away from home.

Therefore, as Prof. Florence Mirembe, an expert in maternal health and the vice-chairperson of the National Population Council explains, fighting early pregnancies will contribute to the prevention of maternal and infant deaths in addition to keeping children in school. This will make it possible for girls to achieve their dreams.

Dr Kisamba Mugerwa, the chairperson of the National Planning Authority, explained that by delaying to give birth, a girl will complete her education and get a job, and thus she can take care of herself and her family.



Teenagers should either abstain from sex or use any of the available family planning methods

Fighting teenage pregnancies is also on way of controlling population growth. Mugerwa explains that girls who start giving birth early end up giving birth to more children than those who start childbirth in adulthood. Therefore, ending teenage pregnancies means that women will start having children later, hence having fewer children and thus controlling population growth. Controlling the population is expected to reduce the pressure on the country's resources and make it easier to provide services.

Kyateeka urged communities to address cultural practices and barriers that have made it hard to fight teenage pregnancies. One such practice is marrying off teenage girls. Kyateeka noted that such marriages usually involve adult men with young girls. He urged parents and local leaders to fight against them. He also noted that there are several myths and misconceptions that have made it hard for them to fight teenage pregnancies. For example, the German World Population Foundation studies done in Uganda showed that teenagers believe

- Swallowing panadol after having unprotected sex will protect them from getting pregnant
- A girl cannot get pregnant if she is having sex for the first time
- A girl cannot get pregnant if she has sex before or after her menstrual period
- A girl cannot get pregnant if she has sex in a swimming pool
- A girl cannot get pregnant if she washes her vagina immediately after sex
- Washing the vagina with soda will prevent a girl from getting pregnant

Participants at the dialogue urged parents, guardians and health community workers to address all the misconceptions through giving the youth the necessary information.

EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

ANTENATAL CARE (ANC) VISITS

To ensure optimal child development during pregnancy, ALL pregnant women should attend at least four Antenatal Care (ANC) visits at a health facility, to ensure a safe and healthy pregnancy.

Why should a pregnant woman go for ANC visits?

- Completing at least four ANC visits will ensure the mother gets the necessary care and attention she needs for a healthy pregnancy.
- The baby will get the necessary care and attention s/he needs for his/her full development during pregnancy.
- During ANC visits, pregnant women will be supported by a health worker to prepare for a safe deliver at a health facility.

When should a pregnant woman go for ANC visits?

- After her second period is missed, an ANC visit in the first month will help to detect and manage complications and ensure the optimal development of the baby.
- At 5 or 6 months
- At 7 months
- At 8 or 9 months

What are the benefits of ANC visits?

- Receiving iron tablets to build the mother's blood.
- Preventing malaria, which is one of the leading causes of maternal death.
- Receiving vaccination to prevent tetanus.
- Ensuring adequate weight gain for the mother.
- Providing support for the physical and mental well-being of the mother.
- Getting tested for HIV to prevent HIV from being transmitted to the baby. It is important for pregnant women to know their HIV status in order to prevent HIV transmission to the baby.

CALL TO ACTION

Husbands and fathers, if you support your wives to attend ANC check-ups and delivery at health facilities, you will help to ensure the full development and safe delivery of your baby.

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