

Now Is the Time to Address the Sexual and Reproductive Health Needs of Youth



There are more young people in the world today than at any other point in history. In 2014, the world's population reached 7.2 billion people—more than 40 percent are under the age of 24, and approximately one quarter are under the age of 15.¹ The majority of these young people, who are entering reproductive age, live in developing countries where access to modern contraception and other reproductive health services is limited.

Barriers to Reproductive Health Care

Adolescents often face steep, social, logistic, economic and legal barriers to exercising their sexual and reproductive rights and accessing the health care they need. Social and cultural norms around adolescent sexuality may discourage young people from seeking services, particularly if they are concerned that their confidentiality and privacy won't be maintained at health facilities. Young people often face provider bias, making it difficult to receive the comprehensive care they need. In addition, the location and hours of operation of facilities and the cost of services may further hamper young people's ability to access needed services.²

In many regions, contraceptive use among youth and adolescents remains low. Unmet need for contraception among adolescents is as high as 60 percent in some areas of sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia.³ Low rates of contraceptive use among youth can be attributed to a number of factors—including lack of information, concerns about side effects, social pressures such as the need to prove their fertility, and difficulties in procuring contraceptives.

Young People At Risk

Nearly one in five girls in the developing world becomes pregnant before the age of 18 and nearly two million girls under the age of 15 give birth each year. Adolescent pregnancy comes with high risks. Girls between the ages of 15-19 are twice as likely as older women to die from pregnancy-related causes due to physical, social, and economic factors.⁴ In fact, maternal mortality is the second leading cause of death among girls in this age range.⁵

Young women are disproportionately affected by HIV. Today, there are more than 4 million young people living with HIV in developing countries. HIV prevalence rates among young women, ages 15-24, in sub-Saharan Africa are twice as high as they are for their male peers.⁶ Young people often lack the comprehensive and accurate information that they need in order to protect themselves from HIV. Few know their HIV status, which increases their risk of transmission. In sub-Saharan Africa, only 10 percent of young men and 15 percent of young women ages 15-24 know their HIV status.

For many girls, childhood comes to a sudden end with marriage. Although it is a severe violation of girls' rights, child, early and forced marriages remain common practice throughout many parts of the world, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia.⁷ It is estimated that worldwide nearly one-third of girls will be married before their 18th birthday. In some countries, like Niger and Bangladesh, more than 70 percent of girls experience child marriages.⁸ Child marriage often means the end of a girl's education and significantly increases her risk of having an early pregnancy and contracting HIV or other sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

Why We Should Support Youth Access to Reproductive Health

Young people's access to contraceptives and reproductive health is a fundamental right. Youth and adolescents have the right to access comprehensive, accurate and youth-friendly reproductive health education, information, services, and supplies. The 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) Programme of Action endorsed by 179 countries recognizes young people's reproductive rights as a priority. Since that time, these rights have been reaffirmed in numerous other regional and global documents.

Comprehensive sexuality education ensures that young people both in and out of school have the information and skills to make informed decisions about their reproductive health. Adolescent boys and girls often lack sources of reliable, unbiased information about their sexual and reproductive health and rights. Accurate, scien-

ADOLESCENTS

YOUNG PEOPLE

AND

YOUTH

WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

According to the United Nations

Youth

refers to people between ages 15-24

Young People

encompasses people between 10 and 24 years old and

Adolescents

comprise the 10-19 age group.

Source: United Nations Youth Social Policy and Development Division. Definition of Youth. Retrieved from <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/documents/youth/fact-sheets/youth-definition.pdf>.



tifically based and age-appropriate comprehensive sexuality education empowers young people to adopt safer behaviors. It also helps lower the incidence of unplanned pregnancies, reduces the spread of HIV and other STIs, and empowers them to make decisions about their own lives.

Young people hold the potential for development and economic growth in many countries.

Investing in young people through education and through access to quality, comprehensive, youth-friendly reproductive health services can be extremely beneficial for countries. Young women and girls who experience unintended pregnancies are less likely to finish their education and are only half as likely as adult mothers to earn a salary. Reducing unintended pregnancies by improving access to information, contraception and other reproductive health services would allow more girls and young women to stay in school and eventually contribute to economic growth.

Policy Recommendations

The United States should invest \$1 billion annually in reproductive health and family planning and safeguard the sexual and reproductive health and rights of people of all ages. Donor countries—especially the U.S.—must increase funding for family planning and reproductive health programs internationally, particularly those that address the unique needs of youth. Additionally, the U.S. should foster a positive policy environment for these programs by permanently repealing harmful restrictions on its family planning and reproductive health funding, like the [Global Gag Rule](#), and opposing efforts to limit funding and impose new restrictions.

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) must work to fully implement its Youth in Development policy.

The policy, launched in 2012, recognizes that meeting the health needs of young people, particularly in the areas of reproductive health and HIV, is a critical component of meeting USAID's goals of achieving gender equality, reducing maternal mortality, improving child survival, and reducing the spread of HIV. The core objectives of the policy call for the strengthening of youth programming, participation and partnership and greater integration of youth throughout the agency.

The United Nations' post-2015 development agenda must also engage young people, especially young women, through participatory decision-making. Youth and adolescents should be included in the creation and implementation of the framework, and their needs addressed under the goals and targets. This is especially important in:

- **Health**, by specifically highlighting the unique sexual and reproductive health and rights needs of young people;
- **Education**, by including comprehensive sexuality education for young people both in and out of school and recognizing the economic benefit of educating young people; and
- **Gender equality and human rights**, by explicitly referencing the rights of young people.

POPULATION ACTION INTERNATIONAL

1300 19TH STREET NW,
SECOND FLOOR
WASHINGTON, DC 20036 USA
(202) 557-3400

E-MAIL: PAI@POPACT.ORG
POPULATIONACTION.ORG

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