

Are we aborting the future of our teenage girls?

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Pusat Jagaan Birthright administrator Eileen Sim says the shelter has room for more girls

EACH day, around the world, close to 40,000 children are born to both married and unmarried girls aged 15 to 19.

Tragically, some of these girls, who are children themselves, may not live to see the birth of their baby, as they are twice more likely to die from complications during pregnancy and child-bearing as women in their 20s.

A teenage girl may become pregnant as a result of varying situations. Many, especially in the developing world, become pregnant following an early marriage, some during a long-term dating relationship. Other girls become pregnant after hooking up. And, some girls may become pregnant as a result of rape.

While some of these pregnancies are heralded and celebrated with much joy by the community, rightly or wrongly, others especially those of unwed teen mothers are steeped in shame, prejudice and social stigma.

According to Unicef representative to Malaysia Youssouf Oomar, teenage pregnancies must be viewed with serious concern as it limits and can affect a girl's future.

"Pregnancy during teenage years can potentially rob a girl of her future. There is a lot of social stigma against unwed mothers that may lead girls to unsafe abortions, to backdoor practices that can threaten their lives," said Youssouf.

"It can have a huge emotional and psychological impact on a girl who feels she has no other choice but to destroy her

In 1968, world leaders proclaimed that individuals had a basic human right to determine freely and responsibly the number and timing of their children. This year's World Population Day, on July 11, reaffirms, among others, the importance of helping the young to plan their families and their futures, writes INDRA KUMARI NADCHATRAM

baby or give it up at birth."

While teenage pregnancies endanger a girl's future, opportunities for an education that can transform her life and her mental well-being, what is more disconcerting is the devastating harm to her health.

Clearly, all teenage pregnancies are the result of unprotected sexual activity, whether voluntary or involuntary. While pregnancy is one manifestation of such activity, other health risks such as sexually transmitted diseases and HIV, often ignored by teens and adults, pose a far greater threat on young lives.

In Malaysia, a country that celebrates its Asian identity and culture, most adults — parents and teachers — shun from speaking to their children and students about sex and sexuality, considering the topic taboo and out of bounds to young people.

Left on their own, and confronted with their burgeoning sexualities and a budding curiosity about relationships, teenagers resort to their peers, the Internet, movies

and magazines for the information they desperately seek on the issue. Most times, the information gleaned is sketchy at best, over romanticised and simply does not help young people make the right and safe decision.

"We cannot afford to ignore the challenges young people face. Growing up is not just about textbooks and passing exams. Children change not only physically as they go through adolescence, but also emotionally," added Youssouf. "As adults, we must be brave to be with them on every part of this journey, to hold their hands, and inform and educate to build their confidence so they can make proper decisions for themselves."

Promoting abstinence only to teen girls and boys ignores ground reality.

On the other hand, talking only about contraception and condoms may encourage high-risk behaviour among young people. So, how then do we approach this issue?

Unicef believes that a comprehensive reproductive health

education programme coupled with life skills is the way to go.

One that addresses puberty and relationships, explores gender norms that shape boys' notions of masculinity and equips teens with the skills to negotiate safer sex, if necessary.

Youssouf is quick to point out, however, that there is no "one size fits all" approach. To ensure success, strategies must be designed to suit all youth segments.

"We must take into account that not all teens and young people are in school or single. Some may have jobs and may be married. Some may live with parents, some with friends or on the streets. To reach each and every one of them, we need a range of programmes, delivered using a variety of platforms," he said.

While moving forward constructively may seem fraught with challenges given the social environment we live in, it is also clear that as we work to overcome these cultural obstacles, we will inadvertently help our young make decisions that will have a positive outcome on their lives as well as on our planet's future — not just the size of the world's population, but also its dynamics and well-being.

With these in mind, we need to ask ourselves if we can work bravely and creatively to give our young girls a chance for a bright future — or, do we allow our fears and prejudices to abort it now.

The decision is ours to make.

"There are many things that can go wrong in a pregnancy; teenagers need as much help as they can get, emotionally and physically," he said.

Kewaja is not the only shelter that houses pregnant teenagers. Pusat Jagaan Birthright is another. It provides counselling, medical and legal aid, and assistance for single, unwed mothers.

"We are neither condoning nor encouraging unwed pregnancy. But, if the mistake has already happened, these girls need to know that they have a second chance at a normal life.

"Our priority is to take care of the mother-to-be and the child. The shelter is in Klang and the location of the home is only disclosed to parents and immediate family," said Eileen Sim, administrator of Pusat Jagaan Birthright (one of the services under Grace Community).

At the shelter, each mother-to-be is provided a caregiver. The caregiver is someone with experience in motherhood.

"The caregiver follows the mother-to-be for her prenatal check-ups and provides emotional support. The mother-to-be can call her whenever she needs someone to speak to.

To date, the shelter has suc-

cessfully aided 60 unwed mothers between the ages of 15 and 25 from various races and religious backgrounds.

More than half of the babies were given up for adoption.

"We encourage the mothers to carry the baby to full term, to keep and raise the child.

"But, in the end, the decision is left to the mother. If she does not want to raise the child, we will match the baby with suitable parents."

The shelter, Eileen said, was a loving home environment.

"The girls live in a big house with all the comforts of a home. There is a full-time worker who cooks, cleans and takes care of the girls.

"The living conditions are comfortable and the girls are taught to take care of the house through daily activities like cooking."

Eileen said Pusat Jagaan Birthright had the facilities to take in more girls and hoped more pregnant girls would take advantage of this shelter to give their babies a birth right.

HELP LINES

**Kewaja: 013-3384868
Pusat Jagaan Birthright:
603-26942433**