



16 year old Usha Yadab is a class leader for Choose your Future, a programme in Nepal that teaches girls about health issues and encourages the development of basic life skills. ©UNFPA

# Young People's Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights

Investing in young people's sexual and reproductive health and rights is crucial in order for young people to live lives of equality and wellbeing, reach their full potential and contribute to the sustainable development of their communities.

Of the world's population of over 7 billion, **1.8 billion are young people between the ages of 10 and 24**. Most of these young people live in developing countries. In the coming decades, this number is set to increase dramatically.<sup>1</sup> Investing in young people's sexual and reproductive health not only improves their wellbeing, it also increases their employability, productivity and earnings. Yet young people are often overlooked in discussions about sexual and reproductive health and rights. Many young women in particular face major barriers to the full realisation of their human rights:

- » In developing countries, **1 in 3 girls** will be married before they are 18; and 1 in 9 before they are 15.<sup>2</sup>
- » More than **15 million** adolescent girls under 18 become mothers each year.<sup>3</sup> Most births (90%) to adolescent girls occur within a marriage or union.
- » Girls who become pregnant are less likely to finish their education, which in turn increases their risk of living in **poverty and inequality**.<sup>4</sup>
- » Young people are among those most likely to have an **unmet need for contraception**.<sup>5</sup>
- » Complications such as obstructed labour, fistula, anaemia and haemorrhage are much more likely among 10 to 19-year-olds, and are the **second most common cause of death** among girls in this age group.<sup>6</sup>
- » Pregnancy and childbirth continue to be the second leading cause of death for adolescent girls aged 15-19. Among these, a significant number are due to **unsafe abortions**.<sup>7</sup>
- » Almost **half of all deaths** from unsafe abortion are amongst women and girls under 25.<sup>8</sup>
- » 3 million girls are estimated to be at risk of **female genital mutilation (FGM)** every year.<sup>9</sup>
- » In some countries, the first sexual encounter of almost half of young girls is coerced.<sup>10</sup>
- » **5 million** young people are living with HIV and each day another **2,400** become infected.<sup>11</sup>

## MAKING YOUNG PEOPLE'S SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND RIGHTS A REALITY

Ensuring adolescents have access to appropriate sexual and reproductive health information and services can have a significant impact across their life course.<sup>12</sup> Such information and services empowers young people to protect themselves against inappropriate sexual behaviour, unplanned pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections, including HIV/AIDS. If young people have the means to delay parenthood and plan the number and spacing of their children (if any), they will be better able to avail of training and education and participate in development of their communities and economies.

A rights-based approach to young people's health requires:

- » The removal of legal, social and other barriers to sexual and reproductive health and rights, such as regulations requiring consent by family members to access services.<sup>13</sup>
- » The provision of information and services that are accessible, of high quality and provided free from coercion, discrimination or violence.<sup>14</sup>
- » Equitable provision of education for all young people, including comprehensive sexuality education within and outside the formal education system.
- » Youth-friendly health services including accessible clinics, held at times when young people are able to attend. Modern contraceptives should be free or affordable.<sup>15</sup>
- » Elimination of harmful practices such as early, forced or child marriage and FGM.
- » Prevention of gender-based violence.
- » Meaningful participation of young people in decision-making processes that affect their lives.

## SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by the United Nations in 2015, includes a number of targets that have particular relevance to girls and adolescents.

- » **Goal 3 on Health** requires universal access to sexual and reproductive healthcare services, including family planning, information and education, and the integration of reproductive health into national strategies and programmes (target 3.7).
- » **Goal 4 on Education** requires that all learners be provided with knowledge and skills relating to human rights and gender equality (target 4.7).
- » **Goal 5 on Gender Equality** requires the elimination of violence against women and girls; the elimination of harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation; and universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights (targets 5.2, 5.3 and 5.6, respectively).

## WHAT CAN THE IRISH GOVERNMENT DO?

Ireland must take these actions:

- » Support policies and programmes in developing countries that prioritise young people's sexual and reproductive rights.
- » Increase funding to initiatives and organisations that provide sexual and reproductive health information and services to young people and that help young people advocate for their rights. (Currently, only 2 cent of every euro of overseas development assistance is channelled to adolescent girls).
- » Use its influence within the EU, the UN and other international forums to ensure that adolescents' and young women's sexual and reproductive health needs and rights are prioritised.

### Under the UN International Conference on Population & Development (ICPD, Cairo 1994),<sup>16</sup> governments must:

- Remove legal, regulatory and social barriers to reproductive health information and care for adolescents.
- Ensure that the programmes and attitudes of healthcare providers do not restrict the access of adolescents to appropriate services and the information they need. These services must safeguard the rights of adolescents to privacy, confidentiality, respect and informed consent.

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3. Countdown 2015 Europe: The need for family planning among adolescents. Fact Sheet 2012.

4. Countdown 2015 Europe: Family planning saves lives and improves health. Fact Sheet 2012.

5. IPPF/Guttmacher Institute (2010). Facts on the Sexual and Reproductive Health of Adolescent Women in the Developing World.

6. UNFPA (2014), as above.

7. UNFPA (2013). Motherhood in childhood: Facing the challenge of adolescent pregnancy. State of the World Population Report 2013.

8. WHO (2011). Unsafe abortion: Global and regional estimates of the incidence of unsafe abortion and associated mortality in 2008, 6th Edition.

9. World Health Organisation, 2008. Eliminating Female Genital Mutilation: An Interagency Statement.

10. Women Deliver factsheet series: Invest in adolescents and young people.

11. UNAIDS (2012) World AIDS Day Report 2012.

12. World Health Organisation, 2014. Health for the World's Adolescents: A Second Chance in the Second Decade.

13. UNFPA (2014), as above.

14. UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (2000), General Comment No. 14: The Right to the Highest Attainable Standard of Health; United Nations (1994) International Conference on Population and Development: Programme of Action.

15. Countdown 2015 Europe: The need for family planning among adolescents. Fact Sheet 2012.

16. ICPD, para 7.45

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The Irish Family Planning Association (IFPA) acts as the secretariat to the All Party Oireachtas Interest Group on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights and Development.

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