

Teen pregnancy — early warning sign for inequality

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IN Latin America, almost 30% of women become mothers during adolescence. As a region, Latin America and Caribbean only follows Africa in terms of teenage fertility, and our region is well above the world average.

Although the trend in recent years has been downward — between 1990 and 2010 — the percentage of adolescents who are mothers increased in most countries with available data (12 out of 18 countries). Also, although motherhood was concentrated in the 18 to 19 years age group, the increase was relatively larger among teenagers aged 15 to 17.

The number of early pregnancies is systematically higher in the countryside than in cities. There also persists a strong link between the educational level of young women and motherhood. In almost half of the countries with available data, pregnancy among teenage girls with only a primary school education is more than three times higher than among those that had reached secondary school. There are also gaps based on ethnicity and levels of income.

Household surveys show that the percentage of teenage mothers living in homes belonging to the poorest quintile is five times higher than those living in the richest quintile.

A large proportion of teenage pregnancies are unplanned, and it is worrying that, again, in almost all of the countries with available data, the percentages are rising.

This presents a paradox for the region, information on contraception is well disseminated, yet unwanted teenage pregnancies continue to rise. Some causes point to the socio-economic, cultural and institutional barriers young people face in accessing suitable and high-quality services on sexual and reproductive health (including specialised counselling and access to contraceptives).

The development prospects of young mothers are affected by adolescent pregnancies. Besides, when pregnancies are unplanned, young women are not exercising their reproductive health care rights, which are part of the universally recognised human right to health.

Although there is an increasing amount of knowledge on early pregnancy, the thousands of still-growing adolescents who become mothers need concrete actions to be taken by their Governments, namely robust public policies that can influence the social and structural determinants behind this phenomenon.

Guaranteeing the exercise of sexual and reproductive rights and broadening access to relevant services, with an emphasis on pregnancy prevention, remain as cornerstones to reducing teenage pregnancy. It is also vital that children and adolescents be offered comprehensive sexual education.

But also, and as fundamental axes, Governments must implement public policies to: increase options and opportunities; promote social inclusion; break the inter-generational reproduction of exclusion and inequality; and guarantee the full exercise of the rights of adolescents and young people.

We consider teenage pregnancy as an early warning sign of inequality: The reproduction of our society in poor households and without an investment in public goods will lay the seeds for future challenges.

In August, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, with support from the United Nations Population Fund, and in conjunction with governments, civil society and international agencies, will hold the first session of the Regional Conference on Population and Development in Latin America and the Caribbean in Montevideo, Uruguay. It will provide an opportunity to make an assessment of this phenomenon and the many other issues relating to young people.

We know that new generations will be left with the challenge to build societies that grow with equality and environmental sustainability. It is imperative to start now to pave the way towards this future for all.

