



moedernacht

Driving back maternal mortality and morbidity figures: Focus on teenagers!

Why do teenagers merit attention?

Annually, nearly 13 million young women below the age of 20 give birth. Ninety percent of the infants are born in developing countries. Regrettably, many of these pregnancies are not problem-free. Pregnancy- and birth-related complications are often the primary death cause among young women. Pregnant teenagers in developing countries are confronted with sexual violence, repudiation and disownment, gender inequality, unsafe abortion, complications and maternal mortality. Pregnancy-related health risks double for young girls as compared to women that become pregnant at a later age. Young mothers require special care, but only have limited access to these services. As a result, nearly 70,000¹ young women die annually.

Annually, 2.5 million young women decide to have an abortion. In countries where abortion is illegal or difficult to gain access to, these abortions tend to take place under unsafe conditions. As a result, 30,000 young women die annually².

Young people merit attention. Freedom to choose with whom, when and if to have children, and how many, directly contributes to a healthy sexual and reproductive life. Proper prevention of unwanted pregnancy and care before, during and after pregnancy increases the likeliness of personal development and contributes to the health of mother and child. In this light, the presence of sufficient health care professionals is absolutely essential.

Prevention, care during and after pregnancy, and meaningful youth participation

To prevent unwanted teenage pregnancy and improve young mothers' health, it is important to focus on three core issues: (1) guaranteeing meaningful youth participation, (2) prevention, and (3) youth friendly care and counseling during pregnancy, child birth and after pregnancy.

1. Young people, particularly young women, are generally not involved in the decision making that affects their lives. However, the reality and perception of young people often differs very much from that of (adult) policy makers. Therefore, meaningful youth participation is necessary. Young people have the right to be involved in the design, implementation and evaluation of policy. After all, young people are the experts on being young! This right is established in international conventions³. Nevertheless, many youth organizations meet with difficulties when attempting to be acknowledged as full-fledged partners and when applying for institutional funding.

2. Specific emphasis on the prevention of unwanted teenage pregnancy is essential: the provision of information should be comprehensive, such that both boys and girls are in a position to make healthy and free choices with regard to their sexual and reproductive lives. Comprehensive sexuality education for young people (both boys and girls) should include—among others—accurate information and skill training with regard to reproduction and sexuality, contraception and its uses, ambivalences with regard to the desire to have children, unintended or unwanted teenage pregnancy, and emotions, communication and negotiation methods related to safe and pleasant sex. Additionally, the availability of reliable contraception to both boys and girls is essential.

¹ Children having children, State of the World's Mothers 2004. Save the Children.

² World Health Organization 2007.

³ Convention of the Right of the Child 1990 (article 12.2) en Program of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development 1994 (article 7.47).





moedernacht

3. In the case of pregnancy, wanted or unwanted, a girl has the right to proper pregnancy counseling by a midwife, proper counseling on the decision making process related to abortion, adoption or young motherhood as well as youth friendly care during pregnancy, child birth, after child birth and after unsafe abortion. During and after the pregnancy, girls continue to have the right to education: a girl should be able to continue and finish her education, also when she is a mother.

What the Minister for Development Cooperation should do:

1. **Invest in (youth) organizations that are working on the issue of sexual and reproductive health and rights and that make an effort to decrease maternal mortality among teenagers:**
 - a. Involve youth organizations in policy making
 - b. Create an accessible long term fund for youth organizations in the Netherlands and in developing countries
 - c. Organizations and projects that receive funding for work on youth sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) should be demanded to explicitly include youth participation in their policy
2. **Prioritize proper sexual and reproductive health programs for youth by investing in:**
 - a. Comprehensive sexuality education for boys and girls, inside and outside of schools; access to reliable and affordable contraception for young people and access to affordable and safe abortion for young women⁴; youth friendly sexual and reproductive health care, free of stigmatization, and respectful of privacy
 - b. The preservation of the pioneering role and advocating the progressive approach of Dutch formal policy in its cooperation with partner countries bilaterally and in international assemblies of the EU, UN and other multilateral organizations
3. **Strengthening health care systems in order to promote the decrease of teenage pregnancies and maternal mortality by:**
 - a. Strengthening the role of local communities (men and women, boys and girls) in demanding accountability of their government with regard to the use of funding for the benefit of health care facilities for mother and child care
 - b. Funding programs that aim to improve communication and transportation systems that will offer the opportunity to give birth timely and in a safe environment in the presence of a midwife
 - c. Investing in additional training positions, improved working conditions and increased salaries for a greater number of paramedics, for example by abandoning funding restrictions for health care personnel and by playing an active and creative role in the search for alternatives to control the human resource crisis

⁴ Cordaid and her Catholic partners do not adhere to these points of view.

