

# More teens becoming moms

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THE Philippines has the highest rate of teenage pregnancies among youths aged 15 to 19 compared to the other neighboring countries in the Asia Pacific that have a better record of 34 births per 1,000 women.

Studies conducted by various health and population organizations show that there is an increasing number of young ladies ending as moms as early as ages 15 to 19. According to the National Demographic and Health survey for 2008, 10 percent of the country's girls aged 15 to 19 become pregnant with their first child.

The United Nations Population Fund (UNFP), in its 2011 report, also revealed that out of 1000 women, there were 53 births recorded from women of the said ages. The same organization also reported that government statistics on female adolescent pregnancies indicate that the total number of annual births changed little over the preceding 10 years, but the number of teenage pregnancies increased by 70 percent in just one decade at a count of 114,205 in 1999 to 195,662 in 2009.

Teenage pregnancy refers to pregnancy in a female under the age of 20. A pregnancy can take place at any time before or after puberty, with the first menstrual period normally taking place around the ages of 12 or 13, the stage when female becomes potentially fertile.

Teenage pregnancy depends on a number of societal and personal factors. Teenage pregnancy rates vary in different regions because of the variety in levels of sexual activity, general sex education provided and access to affordable contraceptive options as well as the economic condition of the families from whom said age group belongs to.

Ugochi Daniels, UNFPA country representative, said the rising number of teenage pregnancies in the country is an area of concern that the agency is giving serious attention to especially considering that it poses a high risk among adolescent girls between the age 10 to 19. Daniels said a strong advocacy campaign is needed to educate and advise young Filipinas about the dangers posed by early pregnancies, and to inform them about reproductive health in general.

If not attended to, Ugochi said, can derail and affect the country's program targets with respect to its Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

At 53 births per 1000 women aged between 15 and 19, the teenage pregnancy rate in the Philippines is the highest among Asean's six major economies, the United Nations Population Fund's 2011 annual report says.

Based on data compiled from birth certificates in the latest review year, of the 1.75 million live births in 2009, more than 11 percent involved teenage mothers. The numbers have climbed steadily every year.

Ugochi Daniels, UNFPA country representative, said that the rate of teenage pregnancy in the Philippines is highest among six major economies in the Association of South East Asian Nations, and urged government to address the problem as this is part of the Millennium Development Goals.

A UNFPA 2011 annual report said there are 53 births per 1,000 women aged between 15 and 19 in the Philippines.

Data also show that one fifth of the country's population belongs to the 15 to 24 years old brackets or 16.5 million youngsters in 2000 and by 2030 it would reach 30 million.

The country is forced with the glaring truth that the young people of today have children of their own. 30 percent of all births belong to the 15 to 19 year age group and by the time they become 20, 25% of the youth are already mother.

Let us not go very far but focus on our own backyard, according to Young Adolescent Fertility survey in 2002, in the Cordillera, 13.9% of the girls have premarital sex with the mean age of 18 when they have their first encounter of sex. Additional information from the said survey also reveal that 92.3% of these girls have sex with their boyfriends or their "ka-on". Surprisingly also, it was revealed that 43.8% did not plan to have a sexual experience but such happened anyway while 25% of those who have sex at said age for the first time did not want to do it but went along with it.

With the Cordillera's incidence of teenage pregnancy, the Provincial Population and Sustainable Development Division has lined-up activities to address the high incidence of teenage pregnancy and early marriage among the youth in the province.

The PPSDD initiated activities which included adolescence and youth counseling and health behavioral change communication where it was found that the youth were generally uncomfortable discussing reproductive health problems with their parents and family members thus the need to have adolescence counseling services in different means.

Among the medium found to be effective were counseling services in schools and other concerned government agencies, establishment of youth centers with trained youth peer counselors, counseling on air through a local radio program, and with the use of modern communication gadgets.

PPSDD study shows that the total teenage pregnancies recorded in the rural health units of the different municipalities accounted to 385 and 374 in 2009 and 2010, respectively.

The municipality of Lamut recorded the highest incidence, followed by the Alfonso Lista then Kiangnan. Asipulo has the lowest teenage pregnancy incidence in 2009 and 2010.

The study also showed that the leading causes of teenage pregnancy are curiosity or experimentation, peer pressure, family-related problems, lack of information on reproductive health among the youth, and the influence of liberal views on sex. Records on marriages in the province also show that there were 375 with ages 20 and below who got married in 2010. Data shows that 82 percent are females and 18 percent are males indicating a greater tendency among females to marry at an early age.

Worldwide, teenage pregnancy rates range from 143 per 1000 in some sub-Saharan African countries to 2.9 per 1000 in South Korea. Pregnant teenagers face many of the same obstetrics issues as women in their 20s and 30s. There are however, additional medical concerns for young girls who become mothers at 14 or younger. For mothers between 15 and 19, risks are associated more with socioeconomic factors than with the biological effects of age. However research show that the risk of low birth rate is connected to the biological age itself. In developed countries teenage pregnancies are associated with many social issues including lower educational levels, higher rates of poverty, and other poorer life outcomes in children of teenage mothers. Teenage pregnancy in developed countries is usually outside of marriage, and carries a social stigma in many communities and cultures. Many studies and campaigns have attempted to uncover the causes and limit the numbers of teenage pregnancies.

According to a 2001 UNICEF survey, in 10 out of 12 developed nations with available data, more than two thirds of young people have had sexual intercourse while still in their teens. Several polls have indicated peer pressure as a factor in encouraging both girls and boys to have sex. The increased sexual activity among adolescents is manifested in increased teenage pregnancies.

Many health educators have argued that comprehensive sex education would effectively reduce the number of teenage pregnancies, although opponents argue that such education encourages more and earlier sexual activity.

While facing the grim realities of teen pregnancy is not pleasant, this is not the picture that has to be painted. Teen mothers are perfectly capable of having a healthy pregnancy and a healthy baby. With the proper nutrition, early prenatal care and good screening for potential problems the majority of these potential problems will not come to light. While some tend to think that you can't teach a teen mother anything about her body or baby, it's really a ridiculous notion. Many of the teen mothers who take active roles in their care do go on to have healthy babies, despite the other hardships that they will face in their lives. Support from the families and communities is a must for the young, new family to be successful.

Prevention? It all depends on how the child is reared. The environment she is exposed to. The culture she grew up in.

For one, the best prevention is making a child realize that life is beautiful and there are many wonderful experiences that she can have as she grows to become adult. Going into community activities, getting involved in civic groups, availing of the free services that support units and organization offer. Best of all, make the child know that sex and family life can be best enjoyed when she has maximized her full potentials as a young individual and successful professional.  
**(Jake Balacwid)**

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