



People for development

# TEEN MOTHERS ASSESSMENT

In-depth discussion with the community of Nyanza district

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## **AVSI Rwanda**

As of December 2020, AVSI Rwanda has become a registered local organization. It was born from the international branch, AVSI Foundation, which started its operations in Rwanda in 1994 after the genocide with emergency operations. In 28 years, AVSI Rwanda transitioned to long-term development interventions, carried out in 26 districts. AVSI builds on the long experience gained during its presence in Rwanda, the good relationship with the various stakeholders and the physical presence on the ground. AVSI continues to build on ongoing interventions, especially using the community-based approach. AVSI Rwanda's activities focus on three crosscutting sectors, which are (1) Socio-educational, (2) Families' economic empowerment and (3) Child protection and the fight against Gender-Based Violence:

### **Teenage pregnancy and teen mothers**

Teenage pregnancy rates remain unacceptably high in most developing countries. In Rwanda, studies show a rapid increase in the rate of teenage pregnancy over the past two decades, despite policy achievements to empower women and efforts to reduce child sexual abuse. According to official statistics, 17,849 underage girls became pregnant in 2016. The number decreased slightly to 17,337 in 2017 before rising to 19,832 in 2018. An estimated 23,544 children were born to teenage mothers in 2019, and according to the Ministry of Gender and Family Promotion, as many as 19,701 girls (12-19 years) across the country gave birth between January and December 2020. The actual figures are likely to be much higher, as teenage pregnancies are often underreported.

Pregnant girls and teenage mothers are a group at high risk of violence (violence against teenage mothers is physical, psychological, sexual, economic and community-based, marked by socio-cultural constraints), resulting in a high risk of mental health problems. Yet they do not receive appropriate care and follow-up.

Early pregnancies affect not only the mothers, but also their children, their families and their communities. This affects the psychological experiences of these teenage mothers and they may be deprived of the opportunity to be the empowered women of tomorrow. Their children may face many risks, such as low birth weight, health problems associated with poor perinatal outcomes, and increased risk of socio-emotional problems. Children born to these teenage mothers will inevitably be exposed to abuse, neglect, identity problems and difficulties in accessing basic needs. This increases the economic and social vulnerability of these adolescent girls, their families and society.

Unfortunately, current knowledge on the determinants of adolescent pregnancy in Rwanda is limited, as recent studies have focused on numbers with little analysis of causal factors, or have focused on individual determinants.

The overall goal of the teenage pregnancy assessment is to identify the contributing factors of teenage pregnancy and related problems they face with the aim of designing and implementation of targeted activities to reduce the risks of teenage pregnancy.

AVSI main aim is to review the topic by involving communities in a dialogue structured around Focus Groups. Targeted communities were selected in the (5) districts of Gicumbi, Gatsibo, Nyanza, Ruhango, Kamonyi. The assessments were conducted in the sectors with the highest rates of adolescent pregnancies within the five districts.

This report focuses on the district of Nyanza.



## Introduction

- Period: 14th -16th June 2021
- Place: Nyanza, Rwanda
- Topic: Teenage pregnancy – causes and consequences
- Number of focus groups: 5 –teen mothers; young boys; male parents; female parents; local authorities. Usually, the groups comprised 10 people coming from different (social/geographical) section of the communities.

## Objectives

The aim of the study is to shed lights on the causes and the consequences of teenage pregnancy. Namely:

- A. Understand which are the main root causes - financial, social, educational, family conflicts, traumas, separations - of teenage pregnancy.
- B. Understand how the surrounding environment - relatives, friends, authorities - hide the problem, respond to the issue, try to support - before, during and after the pregnancy - Young Single Mothers (YSM)
- C. Understand the way the community is organized to prevent teenage pregnancy and support teen mothers.

## Methodology

The selection of respondents aimed at providing a wide range of views – people coming from different parts of the community, with different affiliations were invited to participate at the focus groups. In detail, we chose these respondents among the beneficiaries of the Humura Shenge Project. As for the local leaders we selected them from the sectors where this project took place.

The meetings were organized in the Sector Office once in each district, by encountering the targeted groups for a series of (more or less) 3-hour sessions. Around 10 people were invited to participate to each focus group. The interviews were led by young members of the community, who posed the open-ended questions developed by AVSI's team (see annex 1), following AVSI's guidelines (see annex 2). Two or more AVSI staff were present and took detailed notes (see annex 4). A brief preliminary desk review was conducted.

The data analysis has been made by juxtaposing the answers given by the participants of all the groups, question by question. Key words have been identified for creating codes and catch both similarities and differences within the answers (see annex 3).

The following report highlights the main and shared concerns across groups, and for each one of such ideas reports the particular features that have been highlighted by the different groups, that is where opinions diverge.

## Findings

Contrary to most studies, this brief introduction does not highlight the main findings. The information provided are in fact so sensitive, in some cases so grave, that we refrained from taking some pieces of information and leaving aside others and preferred to report them in the document in details along with contextual information and qualifications. Still, the general finding is that social shame drives the entire community, making it difficult to prevent, mitigate and respond to the problems associated with teen pregnancy. In this context, not only the support is minimal, but also teen mothers use it very little as they are scared. Greater awareness and real change in values and behaviours are urged for any improvement to come along. Parents and in particular the

mothers of teen mothers stand out as the most capable to promote and support such a change.

Having heard opinions from different points of view, the study revealed how the perception of the teenage pregnancy issue changes depending on factors such as age, sex, family position, and status quo. Still, despite the diverse perspectives, general concepts have received similar opinions. For instance, everybody acknowledged that teenage pregnancy is a serious problem in the district. At the same time, all the participants confirmed that the phenomenon keeps increasing in comparison to the past, and that more support to teen moms is needed. Finally, parents and authorities blamed social media for negative behaviour and increased sexual intercourse among youth. Local authorities did not respond to some of the questions; however, they gave their take on which measures should be deployed to give adequate support to teen moms.

## **1 While respondents agreed on the fact that the lack of dialogue between parents and their sons is a contributor factor to teenage pregnancy, they had different opinions on whether or not the parents' education does play a role in the matter.**

All the participants considered the lack of dialogue between parents and youth among the reasons why teenage pregnancy rate is so high. In this context, both male and female parents believed that having just one parent is an influential factor. In this matter, within the groups of teen mothers and boys, there are those who think that having one single parent contributes to teen pregnancy, and those who stated the opposite.

If each group of respondents agreed on the fact that parents' education does not play an important role in teenage pregnancy, conversely boys stated that uneducated parents are not a cause for teenage pregnancy.

## **2 Participants recognized sexual violence as a rooted problem into the community. Several cases of sexual abuse by family members and community leaders have been cited during every meeting.**

Among the perpetrators, relatives were cited frequently. Among the most cited: the stepfather, but also the cousin and the brother.

Local, opinion and church leaders were accused to be perpetrators as well. They offer services and support in exchange of sexual intercourse with the girls, and after violating them they try to keep it secret.

## **3 According to the participants after the violence family members cannot do much because perpetrators have the financial means to flee and, leave the girls as soon as they know about the pregnancy. Moreover, teen mothers' family members also received compensation for their secrecy.**

Mothers pointed out that relatives tend to blame the girl by accusing her to bring shame on the family. Local authorities and fathers stated that the teen mother's family cannot do much because the perpetrators flee as soon as they know about the pregnancy. Boys and teen mothers said that the girl's family try to keep it a secret when the perpetrator is a relative or when they get compensation for their silence.

## **4 Every participant said that teenage pregnancy is something to hide beyond the family level.**

Everybody stated how the event would influence the family in terms of loss of dignity within the community. Parents are afraid of being criticized as bad parents. Indeed, male parents said that they

Boys often avoid telling their parents about the girlfriend's pregnancy. They do not accept to be fathers; instead, they often prefer to flee. In this way all the consequences are taken in charge by the girls and her family.

## **5 The general idea is that parents, relatives, friends and the boys do not support much the girls in the process leading to their social marginalization.**

Considering friends, respondents agreed that friends are ashamed to be seen with the teen moms and consequently start to marginalize them. However, boys and teen moms said that some good friends stay close and try to support them.

Relatives show a negative attitude towards teen mothers by stigmatizing them.

Each one of the participants acknowledged that parents do not create a suitable and supportive environment at home for teen mothers. For example, for fathers it is harder than for mothers to accept and welcome the pregnancy. Female parents claimed that only parents encourage girls to continue going to school, and male parents said some close friends do. The rest agree that nobody push them to continue their studies.

After the pregnancy the entire community starts isolating the young single mothers and calling them prostitutes because they are afraid that their children will follow their example. Teen moms added that people could be scared that they would leave their baby with them if they show them kindness.

Female parents stated that the shame that drives from the pregnancy leave the young single mothers alone, abandoned also by their own family. Teen moms and boys stated that despite an initial support, the boys who impregnated them do not provide necessary support.

## **6 Although respondents stated that there's no fixed age for having sexual intercourse, everybody agreed that it should happen after marriage. Moreover, they shared the opinion that sexual curiosity and social media induce girls to have sexual relationships in early age even with adult men.**

Every group of participants think that social network, internet and modernism incentivize young girls to be sexually active. The group of mothers and teen mothers added that sexual exploration is common at that age. Boys think that peer pressure and drugs also play a role. Local authorities are of the opinion that families do not longer take the time to properly educate their children.

Everyone said that is common for young girls to sexually engage with adult men. Local authorities and teen moms agreed on the fact that young women decide to have sexual intercourse with adult men because these can satisfy young girls' needs. Boys added that sometimes girls have sex with their teachers to get better notes.

## **7 Everybody believe that young girls are aware of risks of sex, such as undesired pregnancies and sexual transmitted diseases. Despite the fact that young girls know about contraceptives, community and society discourage them to use them.**

Despite the fact that young women are aware of consequences of having sex and know the efficacy of contraceptives in preventing undesired pregnancies and STDs, they are pushed to not use them by their parents and the entire community because they're badly considered.

## **8 When discovering about the pregnancy, girls feel depressed, discouraged and start isolating themselves. Most of them drop out of school because they are stigmatized and marginalized by their peers and the entire society.**

Within the main reasons why teen moms drop out of schools, extreme poverty and the duty of taking care of the child are the most cited ones by the respondents. Shame and stigma play also a key role in their decision. Finally, teen moms and boys added the fact that the school food is not nutrient enough to breastfeed.

Each group of respondents acknowledged that young single mothers experienced depression and malnutrition. Male parents added that inadequate breastfeeding cause malnutrition among the children. Dealing with these issues is not easy and teen moms find themselves engaged in risky jobs such as sex worker. The group of fathers said that teen moms leave their children to their parents or grandparents in an attempt to overcome suicidal thoughts and loneliness.

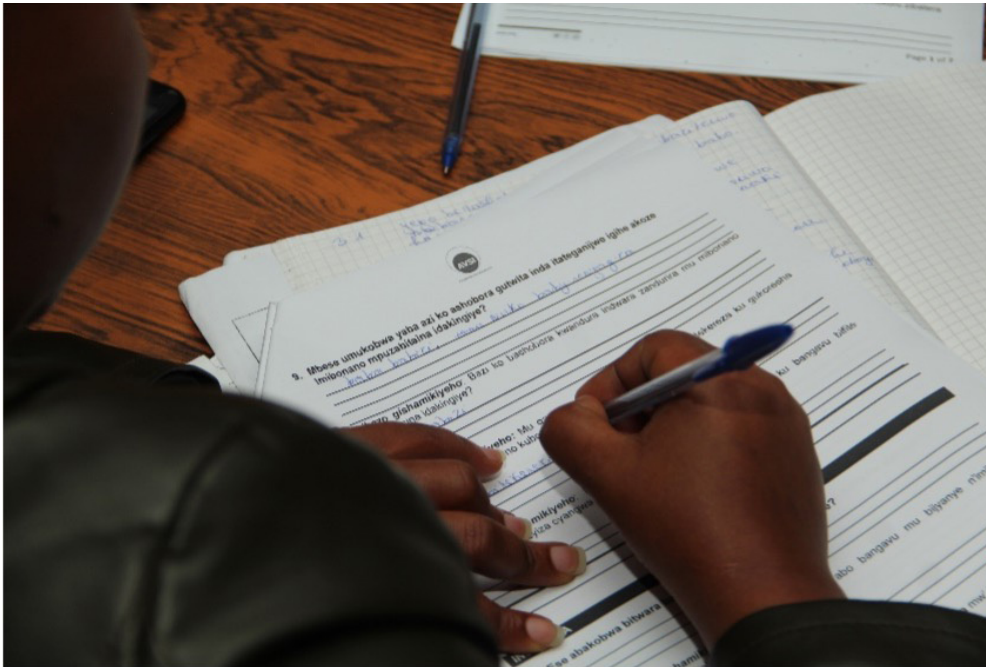
## **9 All participants think that community leaders are supposed to prevent teenage pregnancy by raising awareness about sexual health among youth. However, apart from dialogues at the community level, very few actions have been taken in this sense. Participants gave several suggestions to further help the young single women.**

Each group of respondents stated that reducing the teenage pregnancy rate among young people will require more action than dialogues at the community level. Local leaders suggested mobilizing youth and parents in fighting against gender-based violence, as well as encouraging teen mothers to open up and denounce their perpetrators. The group of the respondents (boys) have laid the following suggestions: repair youth teaching centres during the holidays to make young people more aware about this issue; during the evening of parents sessions, parents should be reminded to give time to their children and educate them, finally churches should provide appropriate teachings to their youth members to mitigate teenage pregnancy. According to the rest of participants, more awareness about sexual health and contraception should be raised.

With regards to actions already in place, local authorities reminded about the establishment of a safe space in schools where girls receive sexual advises and sanitary pads when they are on their menstrual period. The group of mothers mentioned that health facilities provide contraception services for free. Boys and teen mothers said that NGOs are the ones that invest a lot in raising awareness among the youth about reproductive health.

According to the participants, teen moms should be encouraged to go back to school, form saving groups and taught how to start income generating activities. The mothers said that YSM should get help through microprojects that will enable them to be sustainably economically stable in the coming days. Fathers, boys and teen moms mentioned also vocational trainings.





1. A youth volunteer ready to take notes from the FGD.



2. Focus Group: discussion with male and female parents



3. Focus Group Discussion with teen moms



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