



People for development

TEEN MOTHERS ASSESSMENT

In-depth discussion with the community of Ruhango district, Kinazi sector

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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 Ruhango, in particular in Kinazi sector.

Introduction

- Period: March-April 2022
- Place: Kinazi sector, Ruhango district, Rwanda
- Topic: Teenage pregnancy – causes and consequences
- Number of focus groups: 5 -- teen mothers, young boys, male parents, female parents, local authorities.

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.¹

The data analysis has been made by combining the answers given by the participants of all the groups to each question. Key words have been identified for creating codes and catch both similarities and criticalities 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 study, this report does not highlight main findings. The information provided are in fact so sensitive, in some cases so serious, that we refrained from highlighting them and preferred to report it along with contextual information and qualifications. 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 becoming single mothers. In this context, while support is minimal, the real problem is due to the little use that

¹ Prevalence of teenage pregnancy and the associated contextual correlates in Rwanda, Helyon, Science Direct, 2020
First Time Young Mothers in Rwanda Baseline Study, UNFPA, 2017
A Situational Analysis of Teenage Pregnancy & Teen Mothers in Rwanda, Ajprodho Jijukurwa, 2020

is made of it as girls and families are scared to make use of it. Greater awareness and real change in values and behaviours are needed for any improvement to come along. Women, including but not only the mothers of single mothers, seems to be the group most capable to promote and support such a change.

Having had meetings with different kind of participants, the study revealed how the perception of the teenage pregnancy issue can vary depending on factors such as age, sex, family position, and status quo. Despite the diverse ideas heard and collected, however, general concepts have all been argued with analogous opinions. For instance, everybody agreed on the fact that teenage pregnancy is a serious problem in the district. At the same time, all the participants confirmed that the phenomenon keeps increasing in relation to the past. Parents (both male and female) and authorities remarked the use of social media as a way to induce youth in having sex and negative behaviours.

1 Reasons as poverty, lust for a better life, and family conflicts, have been cited by each group as driving features for adolescent pregnancy.

If all the participants considered the lack of dialogue between parents and youth among the reasons why teenage pregnancy rate is so high, only male parents believed that having just one parents is an influential factor. Conversely, local authorities believed that having a single parent helps young people in being more responsible without developing bad habits. Mothers and youth said that families experience teenage pregnancy regardless of the number of parents. Instead, early education is much more a pivotal factor.

Parents education has been considered an important influence, but from different points of view. First, all the participants recognize that teenage pregnancy is an issue for both literate and illiterate families. This was especially remarked by local authorities. Parents and boys stated that more educated parents are more likely to talk about sexual health and reproduction with their children. Fathers and mothers said that uneducated parents are not a cause for teenage pregnancy, but a leading factor for consequences such as school drop and isolation. In contrast to all the other groups, YSMs declared that parent's education is not important, what it does is the family relationship.

Only YSMs explicitly mentioned rapes as a cause of their pregnancy. Notwithstanding everybody confirmed that sexual violence is an actual problem and a threat for the entire society.

Local authorities added that female youth look at the aids coming from the government, or organisations, as a chance to improve their living conditions with a consequent interest in becoming pregnant.

2 As anticipated below, sexual violence has been recognized as a rooted problem into the community. Several cases of sexual abuse have been cited during every meeting.

When a young girl is abused, families often decide not to talk with authorities. This is because they do not want the community to be aware about their case, but also because they do not trust authorities in such events. Boys and girls mentioned the raise of conflicts within the households, with the father accusing the mothers of being a bad educator. Parents and local authorities declared that sometimes, families reach an agreement with the perpetrator, basically silence in exchange for money.

Local leaders were also cited as perpetrators, among them teachers. Notwithstanding, the accent has been put on their role of covering the issue. Indeed girls, boys, and fathers argued that local leaders often remain silent, or even worse, they support the perpetrators in exchange for money.

Among the perpetrators, relatives assumed a position. Among the most cited: the uncle and the stepfather. One of the girls at the meeting was impregnated by the man who married her mum.

Moreover, all the participants agreed on the fact that the rate of sexual intercourses between an adult man and a teenager is high. Girls are attracted with promises and gifts, as well as money. During the meetings with the mothers and the YSMs, contrarily to men gatherings, drug abuse was not cited as a reason of sexual violence.

3 Asking participants if there is an appropriate age to have sex, they all answered that sex is only allowed after marriage. Only boys and girls admitted that the reality is different.

All the participants acknowledged that money is a major cause for girls to engage in sex. Beyond this, the reasons are alike the driving features for teenage pregnancy. Parents continued blaming the use of social media and the inputs from the outside. As, the local authorities, they also cited poverty and drug abuse. Boys and girls included their personal points of view: the former quoted the peer pressure and the need of satisfying expectations; the latter added the need to satisfy the boys.

4 According to the answers collected, young people are aware of the risk of taking sexual communicable diseases, as well as girls are aware of the possibility to get pregnant.

While for the chance of getting pregnant, all the participants said that girls know it regardless their background; for sexual diseases, local authorities argued that the level of awareness change considering their education and their social engagement. Indeed, parents confirmed that through the radio and social gatherings, youth learn sex education. By contrast, more than one girl affirmed not to know anything about sexual diseases.

Contraception has a bad cultural connotation for many reasons, some of them linked to religion. All of the participants, except local authorities, related contraception to the risk of become sterile. Parents were supporting the idea that contraception stimulates adultery among youth. This is also the reasons why both boy and girls claimed that girls using contraception are exposed ad prostitute.

5 All the participants 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, local authorities said they stop attending social gatherings, and girls, talking about their own experiences, stated that parents, especially their fathers, started being discouraged and quitting all the social activities they were attending before the daughter's pregnancy.

For the same reason, everybody agreed on the fact that parents often minimize the problem. Rather than stimulate the dialogue and create common awareness, both elder and new generations prefer not to take the issue into consideration.

Boys often avoid tell their parents about the girlfriend's pregnancy. They do not accept to be fathers; instead, they often prefer to escape. On the contrary, when boy's parents are aware of it, they often refuse to be responsible, and all the consequences must be taken in charge by the girls and her

family. Male parents and authorities cited the fear of boys to go into prosecution, but after a temporary support, when the situation is calm, they stop being present.

Although young girls know where to look for support, they prefer not to seek for it. First, because they are afraid of the consequences concerning their family, then because they do not believe that someone would help them.

6 Everybody cited the relevant difficulties of the fathers in accepting the situation compared to how the mothers behave. Despite this, cases of full support by parents and friends were cited by the groups of mothers and YSMs.

Mothers accept the situation way before the fathers. All of the groups argued that often, fathers start blaming the mothers. Both parents said that they completely accept the situation when there is no way to escape from it, nevertheless they perceive the event as a shame for years. In this regard, boys and girls said that even when parents accept the situation, they hardly want to contribute to raise the baby.

7 The general idea is that parents do not support much the girls in the process, as well as friends, by not creating a suitable environment for her.

Considering friends, everybody agreed that only true friends remain, all the others start to marginalize the girl. Culturally, once a girl becomes a mother, she is considered a woman, then she starts a phase in which youth do not treat her as a peer and adult people look at her as a child. YSM added that at the community level, at school, they were pointed out as prostitute, even if they were victims of abuses.

Parents usually do not encourage girls to continue going to school. Rather they suggest her to drop out. No girls witnessed a parent supporting her in going to school. At the cultural level, since they became mothers, they were supposed to take care of the baby. In both parents' groups, participants claimed poverty as a leading factor and education as a waste of time for a teenage mother. Only local authorities mentioned the level of education of parents as an influence.

As a consequence of the lack of support and the mistrust in family and authorities, teenage mothers develop a series of immediate negative coping mechanisms:

- Drop out from school
- Suicidal thoughts
- Self-isolation
- Loss of self-confidence
- Escaping plans
- Unaccompanied attempts of abortion
- Loss of hope for the future.

8 A common issue teen mothers must face during and after pregnancy is mental health. Next to physical health problems, girls often experience loneliness, depression, and extreme fatigue due to the lack of support and the abandon of friends and relatives.

Girls, talking about their personal stories, cited diseases such as anaemia and hypertension

One of the causes of health problems has been identified in malnutrition by authorities and male parents

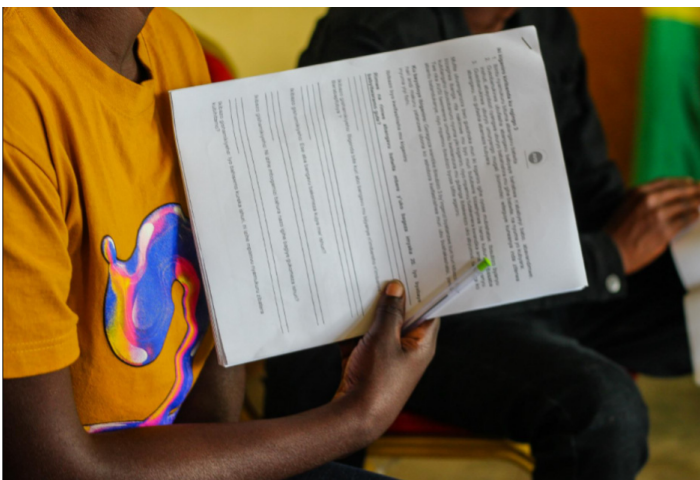
The ways teen mothers look for help are various: female parents said the girls start their recovery thanks to charity aids; male parents talked about the support provided by ECD centres to the girls and the babies; a girl, within the teen mothers group, talked about her long stay at the hospital and the care from doctors. Conversely, boys and authorities did not cite any external support, they remarked the fact that at that point, girls significantly look for a job and a revenue

9 In everybody opinion, raising awareness about reproductive health would be the most useful weapon to contrast teen pregnancy. Community leaders should stimulate the dialogue in schools and public places through events and campaigns. Moreover, all the participants agreed that allowing girls to get back to school or attend vocational trainings would minimize the negative impact of pregnancy on teenagers

About the current actions undertaken by the Government, all the participants said that girls and vulnerable families receive money to cover basic needs. Mothers said that the authorities supported their daughter in attending training courses, boys gave credit to the governmental aids to get the health assurance.

At the same time, male parents and authorities quoted the events and dialogues in place at community level as an actual measure.

Male parents recognized the importance of family relations, as well as girls do, for fighting against damaging aftermaths. According to male parents, boys and girls, the creation of sharing experiences groups would be a positive coping mechanism, whereas authorities remarked the need of appropriate counselling and legal support.





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