

# Thai teen pregnancy on the rise as sex education misses the young

January 17 2014, by Amélie Bottollier-Depois

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Days away from giving birth and living apart from her family, 16-year-old Ying is one of a growing number of Thai teenagers to fall pregnant every year in a country where sex education is focused on the married.

Despite its anything-goes image, Thailand has a conservative streak, meaning that young people are told to abstain from intercourse altogether instead of being educated about using protection, a situation that experts say has driven soaring rates of [teenage pregnancy](#).

Ying, whose name has been changed to protect her identity, did ask her boyfriend to use a condom but "he is a man, he did not listen.

"He used some once I was pregnant, but it was too late," said the softly-spoken girl, who moved into sheltered accommodation at Bangkok's Association for the Promotion of the Status of Women (APSW) when she was six months pregnant.

"My parents were afraid I would be embarrassed among my friends, so they told me to stay here," said Ying, from Pathum Thani province north of Bangkok. She now has no contact with the baby's father.

The adolescent birthrate has continued to rise for the last eight years, instead of the expected fall, according to Caspar Peek, country representative for the UN's Population Fund.

"Instead of going down, as you would expect to happen with [higher](#)

[levels](#) of literacy, higher levels of development, money etc, the levels have actually gone up," he told AFP.

According to the United Nations, the birthrate among Thai teenagers was 47 per 1,000 girls from 2006 to 2010—roughly in line with neighbouring Cambodia, but higher than Malaysia's 14.

Thai health minister Pradit Sintavanarong said there were 130,000 births to teenage mothers in the country in 2012.

But he said the true figure of pregnancies among the under 20s is thought to be double that, with many girls opting for an abortion—a procedure that is illegal in Thailand under almost all circumstances.

"It is an increasingly important problem," said Pradit, adding that 12 percent of teenage mothers get pregnant a second time before they reach 20.

He said society was "very conservative" in Thailand where people "deny" issues of sexual activity among the young.

"They think teenagers should not have sex and that's all," he said.

Thailand has a low overall birthrate of just 1.5 or 1.6 births per woman, showing that access to contraception is not the problem.

It has successfully reduced its birthrate from 6 children per woman 40 years ago with family planning programmes aimed at married couples, said Peek, who added that school teachers were "often uncomfortable" giving [sex education](#) classes.

To mitigate this—and the reluctance of parents to broach the subject with their children—the Planned Parenthood Association of Thailand

has launched a campaign to educate 80,000 teenagers that will run until June 2014.

"We cannot tell anyone not to have sex, it's a natural thing. But they should be prepared," said Somchai Kamthong, the group's director of information, after giving a talk at a school in Bangkok.

About 50 teenagers aged 16 to 19 years old, some with balloons stuffed under their t-shirts, laugh as two of their classmates put a condom on a dummy penis.

"There is an average of two students dropping out of school per semester because they got pregnant," said Jittrakorn Kanphaka, a counsellor at the 130 pupil college.

Some girls, like Ying, are told to leave by their families because of the stigma of their pregnancy.

"Most of them came here because they have nowhere else to go. Their families rejected them," said the Bangkok APSW shelter's psychiatrist Kantanick Nirothon.

He said many of the boarders at the centre had been raped, often by a close relation.

Like 14-year-old Pook, who clasps her 11-day-old son against her chest.

"I was raped by my uncle," she said, matter-of-factly.

She has decided not to give up her baby for adoption, but to take some of the courses offered by the centre—which include data processing, embroidery and massage—to help her support her child alone.

"My parents do not have money so they told me to study here and take care of the baby at the same time," she said.

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