

## UN: 7.3 million teen births in developing world

October 30 2013, by Cassandra Vinograd

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Recent research has suggested that teen pregnancies in the developing world are declining, but more than 7 million girls under the age of 18 are still giving birth each year and suffering drastic consequences, a U.N. report said Wednesday.

The U.N. Population Fund expressed particular alarm about the dangers facing girls 14 or younger, who account for 2 million of the 7.3 million births to women under 18 in developing countries. This group faces the gravest long-term social and health consequences from giving birth as teens.

"A girl who is pregnant at 14 is a girl whose rights have been violated and whose future is derailed," the fund's executive director, Dr. Babatunde Osotimehin, said in London.

The report looked at births to women under 18 worldwide, the underlying causes of teen pregnancy, and possible solutions to the problem, which the U.N. said is part of a vicious cycle of rights violations.

"Adolescent pregnancy is most often not the result of a deliberate choice, but rather the absence of choices," Osotimehin wrote in the report, citing lack of access to an education, job opportunities or health care.

The report said that high rates of adolescent pregnancies correspond with

other social problems, like powerlessness and poverty. In many instances, the pregnancies are a result of sexual violence.

The issue is most evident in the developing world—with 95 percent of births to women under 18 occurring there. Ten percent of women ages 20-24 in the Middle East reported at least one birth before age 18, while 22 percent did in South Asia and 28 percent did in Western and Central Africa, the report says.

Every day, 20,000 girls below age 18 give birth in developing countries. Nine in 10 of these births occur within a marriage or a union—highlighting the scourge of child marriage.

While Osotimehin acknowledged that recent studies have shown a decline in the percentage of women having given birth before the age of 18, he said that missed the point.

"The birth or pregnancy in one adolescent is unacceptable. One," Osotimehin told reporters in London. "Whether it's going up or down is not the issue—7.3 million is huge."

The report cited data gathered in 54 countries through two sets of surveys carried out between 1990 and 2008 and between 1997 and 2011. They showed a drop in the percentage of women aged 20 to 24 who reported giving birth before they were 18 from about 23 percent to about 20 percent. The countries covered by the surveys are home to nearly two-thirds of the total population of developing countries, excluding China.

In some places, the data noted, the decline has been rapid, due to a decrease in early and arranged marriages.

Even still, one girl in 10 has a child before the age of 15 in Bangladesh, Chad, Mali and Mozambique.

Wednesday's report was careful to note that some girls under 18 want to become pregnant. It stressed the benefits of waiting—such as better health, educational and future income opportunities—and called for a new approach to curbing teen pregnancies that minimizes the emphasis placed on girls' behavior as an underlying cause.

"Childhood must never be derailed by motherhood," it said, calling for greater efforts to end child marriage and more action on gender equality.

**More information:** The United Nations Population Fund:  
[www.unfpa.org/public/home](http://www.unfpa.org/public/home)

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