

In their Own Words:

Girls from Liberia on Sexuality, Pregnancy and Services



FORWARD
Safeguarding rights & dignity




 **IPPF** International
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International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF)

IPPF is a global service provider and a leading advocate of sexual and reproductive health and rights for all. IPPF is a global network of Member Associations, and works in over 170 countries - providing and campaigning for sexual and reproductive health care and rights. IPPF is one of the world's largest organisations; providing more than 7 million services each year to women, men and young people. IPPF was formed in 1952 at the Third International Conference on Planned Parenthood in Bombay, India.

Foundation for Women's Health, Research and Development (FORWARD)

FORWARD was founded in 1985 as an African Diaspora women's campaign and support charity that works to safeguard dignity and advance the sexual and reproductive health and human rights of African women and girls. By working together with individuals, communities, and other organizations, FORWARD strives to transform harmful practices and improve the quality of life of vulnerable girls and women. FORWARD's vision is that women and girls live in dignity, are healthy, and have choices and equal opportunities to fulfil their potential. This is done through public education, training, research, community mobilization and advocacy action.

Planned Parenthood Association of Liberia (PPAL)

PPAL was established in 1956 to provide family planning and sexual and reproductive health services to Liberians. Its mission is to provide affordable and sustainable sexual and reproductive health and HIV/AIDS services to all men, women and youths in Liberia. PPAL is a non-governmental, non-political, not-for-profit and volunteer agency working towards a Liberian society where each individual enjoys full sexual and reproductive health and rights. Currently, PPAL is working to increase the number of facilities it directly supports throughout Liberia to return to pre-war numbers.

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FOREWORD

The International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) works world-wide to improve access to sexual and reproductive health services to all young people. We focus on supporting the sexual rights of people, especially young people. Young women and girls are our main priority especially the vulnerable and underserved. Every year we provide over two million services to young people through our 155 Member Associations.

World-wide gender divisions and inequalities continue to have a powerful effect on how girls and young women make decisions which affect their future. Millions of girls are denied both a voice and a choice. They are confronted on a daily basis by sexual violence, unwanted pregnancy and child marriage. Many are not able to say yes or no to sex. They cannot choose to use contraception, to marry, to have a child, to visit a health service, or to stay in school. They are often viewed as a burden, while their brothers are considered assets. But until girls are seen by families, communities and decision makers as having the same worth as boys, we cannot achieve sustainable development in the world.

IPPF has partnered with FORWARD on the 'Girls at Risk Project' in Liberia to work directly with young women and girls, pregnant girls and young mothers and their peers to find out about the challenges they face. The results are both inspiring and convincing. We are certain that listening to their voices to understand their needs and wishes is the best way to transform their lives and the situation they live in. This project shows that girls want to make their own decisions, and they have the capacity and the right to do so. All that is needed is for them to be provided with skills, tools and guidance.

I hope this information will inspire you to enable the voices of these girls and young women to be heard. We want to thank the Netherlands Government for funding the project and the team at FORWARD for their hard work in training and supporting the girls in their work. Finally I would like to thank the Member Association of Liberia and the young women and girls who participated in the training and the research. They ensured that this booklet illustrates the realities of their lives and their journeys will inspire us all into action in the years to come.

Doortje Braeken
Senior Adviser Adolescents/Young People
IPPF, London

INTRODUCTION

In Liberia, poverty, gender inequality, early sexual initiation and sexual violence affect girls' and young women's ability to make informed choices on their sexual and reproductive health. The social taboos around discussing sexual matters and a lack of access to information and services make this situation worse. Girls also do not have the self-esteem, confidence and power to make decisions on sexual matters. This can lead to unwanted pregnancies and other negative sexual and reproductive health outcomes.

"Well, we say life in peace time is better than life during war time because when there is peace people feel that there are better days ahead. Girls feel that they will have freedom to life, health, education and more when there is peace"
(Young girl, Monrovia)

The challenges that vulnerable girls face are often ignored by policy makers, families and community leaders. There is a need for urgent action to give girls an opportunity to improve their sexual and reproductive rights and their wellbeing. They also need access to information and services in order to protect their rights.

"In Their Own Words: Girls from Liberia on Sexuality, Pregnancy and Services" highlights the lives of girls and young women in poor communities in Monrovia, Liberia. It shows the daily challenges faced by pregnant teenagers and young mothers. It tells the personal stories of girls as they share their aspirations and ideas for improving their lives.

The quotes and photographs used in this booklet are based on the training and research findings.

LAWS THAT AFFECT THE RIGHTS OF GIRLS IN LIBERIA

Liberia has signed a number of international and regional human rights laws and has introduced national legislation to protect the rights of girls. However, many of these laws are not properly enforced. The following laws are about the rights of children, girls and women:

- The Labour Practices Law of 1956 renders it unlawful for any employer to hire a child under the age of 16 during the hours within which they are required to attend school.ⁱ
- The Domestic Relations Law of 1973 states that the legal age for entering into a contract of marriage is 18 years for a female. If the child is 16 or 17, her parents or guardian may provide consent on her behalf. Forced marriage is an offence punishable by a prison term of between one and five years. If the girl is under 15, the prison term can be increased to 10 years
- The Penal Code criminalizes sexual assault, sexual abuse of wards and the facilitation or promotion of prostitution. Liberian law also prohibits domestic violence.
- The Rape Amendment Act 2006 makes it an offence to have sexual intercourse with a person under 18 years of age (if the actor is aged 18 or over).
- In 1976, the Liberian Penal Law was amended to include new abortion provisions. Abortions are allowed to preserve the physical or mental health of the mother, if the child would be born with a grave physical or mental defect or if the pregnancy resulted from rape, incest, or other felonious intercourse.ⁱⁱ



THE 'GIRLS AT RISK' PROJECT IN LIBERIA

Why did we do the project?

Teenage pregnancy is a major cause of concern in Liberia. The impact of both teenage pregnancy and early motherhood on girls' lives is significant and adds numerous challenges and hardships to the burden girls already face, many of whom are already struggling to survive. While this situation is attributed to risky sexual behaviour, early sexual initiation, child marriage and low use of contraception, there are other factors that put girls at risk. To understand how to address high teenage pregnancy and the social and economic factors which make girls vulnerable, it is important to hear the views of the girls and young women who are affected.

Many girls at risk of teenage pregnancy live in poverty, have little support from home and do not have access to much needed sexual and reproductive health information or services. Teenage pregnancy puts girls at increased risk of sexually transmitted infections (STI's) including HIV. Younger girls by virtue of their age are often more affected by the effects of teenage pregnancy. For many of them, teenage pregnancy and early child birth means an end to their education, increased poverty and lack of options.

“The ‘Girls at Risk’ Project”, was implemented by FORWARD and IPPF in partnership with Liberia Member Association (PPAL). This project set out to assess the situation, experiences and effects of teenage pregnancy and early motherhood on girls in Monrovia, Liberia. The aim was to improve the sexual and reproductive health and rights of girls and young women and also make their situation visible. The project ran from December 2009 to December 2010.

The objectives of the project were to:

- Find out the beliefs, views, attitudes, and experiences of girls at risk and support them to network and access information.
- Understand more about sexual life, early pregnancy and motherhood and its impact on the lives of girls and young women.
- Learn how young women perceive and use existing sexual and reproductive health services.
- Better understand the future aspirations of the young women and girls and find out their opinions on what should be done to improve support for the needs of pregnant girls and those at risk.

What activities did we do?

The project worked with 22 girls and young women aged between 15 and 23 years from the Caldwell and Paynesville areas of Monrovia. A number of activities were conducted to improve their skills, including interview techniques and networking opportunities. A local consultant was recruited to facilitate the sessions and to provide support to the girls. PPAL coordinated the training and recruitment of the girls (many of whom had experienced teenage pregnancy) and helped supervise the interviews.

The research process

The participatory research method used was chosen because it is effective in reaching marginalized groups and facilitates the discussion of difficult issues. Peer researchers were used, as they were able to conduct in depth interviews which revealed information which may not have been told to outsiders. The young women were trained over four days and helped to develop questions for the interviews and to practice how to ask them. Girls also had the chance to practice using a camera and were required to take pictures of their community as part of the information gathering process. This method allowed better access to communities and helped the girls involved to get to know each other and build their confidence and skills.

The research questions focused on the following areas:

1. Why are girls living in poor communities in Monrovia so at risk of teenage pregnancy?
2. What is the impact of teenage pregnancy and early motherhood on these girls' lives?
3. What do girls say about the availability of appropriate services and information?

The interviews took place over three months and each girl interviewed three of her friends on three occasions. The girls were awarded certificates as part of their graduation as peer supervisors and researchers. This was an important step in empowering them as it gave them a sense of achievement. A final workshop was held after the interviews, where the girls could discuss their research experiences, share information and problems as well as agree on what was needed to support girls and young women at risk in their community.



Drama

The use of drama enabled girls to use more innovative and creative ways to share personal stories and stories from the research and helped to better capture their lives and situation.

Stakeholder meeting

A final meeting was organised to share the findings from the study. The supervisors and peer researchers played a major role in this meeting, including during the panel discussion on the main research findings where they responded to questions from the audience. The half day meeting was attended by the senior and programme staff from PPAL, officials from government ministries and other organizations. The stakeholder meeting helped the peer researchers to share what they had learned using pictures, role plays and quotes from the research.



Confidence building training

A one day confidence building training was organised to help the girls improve their self-esteem, identify goals for their future and explore ways for attaining these goals. The majority of the girls talked about going into professional careers such as accountancy, nursing, medicine, fashion and law. This participatory session provided a safe space to discuss rights of girls, entitlements and strategies for collective action and networking to promote the rights of girls at risk.

What were the benefits of this project?

The research results provided better understanding of the situation of girls at risk of teenage pregnancy, their lack of rights and access to services and information. The issues raised and support that the girls requested will help develop the right programmes. These will support girls' access to services and information, enabling them to protect themselves against unwanted pregnancies and help them make informed decisions about their bodies, their future and that of their children.

The drama training also enabled the girls to express themselves in a way which was culturally relevant to their communities. With the peer training, they can pass on the skills and knowledge they learnt to other girls and have a positive impact on their lives. More importantly, the project helped to raise the voices of girls at risk, and gave them a platform to engage, explore ideas and network.



GIRLS LIVING IN POOR COMMUNITIES IN MONROVIA

This section provides a summary of the research findings and voices of girls on their social life, their experiences and what makes them vulnerable to teenage pregnancy. It discusses poverty and the impact of teenage pregnancy on the lives of girls.

Poverty and girls at risk

Poverty was mentioned by many girls as a main cause of high teenage pregnancy in Monrovia. Life in poor communities is very tough. The girls talked of the daily struggle of families to provide food, basic items and school fees for their children and how poverty robs young girls of their childhood. Girls are responsible for most of the housework; many reported waking up as early as three or four each morning to do their household chores before going to school.

Many parents were unemployed or worked long hours for little pay. Unable to get the financial support they need from parents, some girls are forced to support themselves and had to look for different ways to earn money. Often poverty resulted in girls dropping out of school, and many were pushed into prostitution to survive.

“Poverty has the highest rule in Liberia. Some people can’t even afford a cup of rice to eat for the day, let alone send their children to school or carry them to hospital when they are sick”

“Some girls say they are affected by poverty because their parents cannot afford to provide all of their wants and needs. For this reason they have to start fending for themselves at a very young age. Sometimes when the suffering is too much to bear, they vow to do anything in their power to earn money”

“Many girls do not have their daily needs attended to and find their lives very difficult. Prices are increasing nowadays and girls need things like clothes, food and other necessities to make life okay for them. School fees are increasing and girls find themselves in critical conditions such as their parents not having enough money to pay their school fees. Sometimes they may think that life is not treating them right. Sometimes they ask themselves why they were born to suffer”



“A girl who wanted to go to school, but because of poverty she was not able to get the money from her parents so she ended up going in the streets to have sex for money. At the end of the day she got pregnant and was not able to tell who she was pregnant for because she had sex with so many men.”

Family pressure on girls to earn money

Often the pressure to support the family can drive girls out onto the street to get money. Many parents do not question where the money comes from. Many girls feel they have no other choices for getting their needs met. Others expressed frustration that they were forced to support their families at such a young age.

In situations where parents do not pressure their daughters to bring money home, their failure to support and discipline their children could also put them at risk. However some girls mentioned that their parents were not to blame as they were doing their best, and that teenage girls can be very stubborn.

“Girls around my community said that family pressure have caused damage in their lives.

They have been convinced to have boyfriends or godfathers/Sugar daddies.

They have been convinced to use their bodies in order to support their family. Family pressure caused a lot of girls to go out in the streets and mess their lives up.”

“As soon as a girl starts growing breasts her parents will start demanding money from her. In my community there is a girl who started doing man business at the age of 9. It all started because her Aunt wanted to make some money out of her. She is 20 now with a 10 year old child.”

“There is a 15 year old girl who lives in my community and her mother can send her out every night to go and bring \$25 USD. She says she doesn't want to know where the child will get the money, but the money must be there in the morning. So every night the girl goes and sleeps with men. In the morning she comes home with \$20 US and that is very okay with the mother.”



“If you are not restricted by your family you will just do things because others are doing it and it is very dangerous for the girl child because you can get pregnant without knowing the owner, or getting raped because you are always coming home late. This is very common in our slum communities and is happening every day and mostly to girls staying with other people”

Teenage pregnancy a result of lack of opportunities for girl

Girls growing up in poor communities in Monrovia often have very limited options. Many view pregnancy and motherhood as their only choices. Dropping out of school early is also common, as in many situations parents do not value their daughters' education and put pressure on girls to marry early. Lack of employment opportunities also forces girls onto the street in order to find money. The lack of safe spaces for engaging young people contributes to the feeling that "there is nothing to do outside school and household chores".

"There is this 14 year old girl with 2 kids and two different fathers. She first got pregnant when she was 12 and used to help her mother to sell rocks. A man came to the mother and said that he wanted to help the girl by taking her from the rock hole, but instead he went and got the girl pregnant and threw her out. It happened the second time when another guy came and said that he will help her with the baby, but then gave her another baby. All this happened to this girl because her parents were poor and not able to properly care for her."

"Some say that it is bad to send a girl to school because she will get married in the future and need to stay back to make a home and it would be a waste of money to send a girl child to school."



The impact of war on girls' lives

Liberia's 14-year long civil war ended in 2003 leaving behind major social and psychological problems, with children being especially affected. Countless families were torn apart and many children became orphans. They were left without an education and some children were sent to live with relatives who were not always able to support them. The findings showed that there is little difference to the lives of girls and women during conflict and after. The devastating effects of the civil war have increased poverty and unemployment levels in Monrovia. Today, Liberia is listed as one of the poorest countries in the world.ⁱⁱⁱ

“Some say they wake up in the morning and don't even know what to do with their life for that particular day because they are living with themselves, no parents or anybody to direct them as to what should be done. They are living this way because they lost their families during the war. They also started doing drugs so that when they wake up in the morning, they won't know how night falls and when they are having sex with men they won't feel it or remember.”



“Some girls say that the only difference between peace time and war time is that they see people riding big cars all around Monrovia and some rebels can’t just come to you and start beating you. They say arm robbers are still taking people’s properties and harming and killing people, women are still being raped and others are still dying from hunger and lack of good medication. Almost every week we find dead bodies in our communities, I don’t know who else is saying it but I am because this is how I see it.”

“Life during the war was very bad for us, we were not able to go to school so many people did not even graduate from high school. Some people watched their loved ones die right before their eyes and that was horrible to see. Girls were raped by soldiers, people’s properties were taken from them, children were raping their own mothers, they were opening pregnant women and taking the children out of their stomachs, and most times there was not even food to eat, and plenty of people were dying because there were no hospitals to go to.”

Other girls had a positive view about the end of the war and felt that things had improved.

“During times of peace, we have schools running on regular basis, when you are sick you go to the hospital to get treated, people are no longer killing each other like animals, and although girls are still being raped, it is not as rampant as it used to be during the war.”

GIRLS' EXPERIENCES OF SEXUAL MATTERS AND TEENAGE PREGNANCY

The responses from the study confirmed that girls are engaging in sex also termed “mummy and daddy business” or “man business”. Girls do not have accurate information on sexual matters including pregnancy. Sex is often not discussed openly within families, this is because many parents lack information on sex education and are not confident to talk to their children about sexual matters. Girls who move to the city from rural areas can be at greater risk of teenage pregnancy and under more pressure to have unprotected sex, as they often live with extended family and need to earn income to support themselves.

‘Man business’

Engaging in sexual relationships and early sexual activity is common in Liberia. Responses to the question on “man business” (which refers to sexual relationships with men) showed that girls often had multiple relationships. This could either be for love or simply for survival and was linked to girls’ inability to negotiate safe sex, prevent pregnancy, or choose to be pregnant. Some girls also said being beaten was normal in relationships.

“When a girl does man business early it leads to early pregnancy and causes a lot of damages to the girl”

“Boys – wow! – They have so many girlfriends. Girls can feel jealous about this but boys don’t really mind, if they find out you have other boyfriends they just push you to the side and say that they can find another girl anyway.”

It was often difficult for girls to see engaging in sex other than serving the purpose of survival. Therefore, even where girls were attracted to boys of their own age who were felt to be better lovers, it is the older men who are better providers.



“Girls want as many boyfriends as possible, four, five, six – as many as you can possibly get! You need different boyfriends to provide different things – the men that provide food for us we call them the ‘investors’ those that put clothes on our back and nice things for us are the ‘value boys’. Each and everything that you need, each thing you want or need or put on your back – you need a different boyfriend for.”

Peer pressure

With the breakdown of family ties and in many cases the absence of any family, the pressure from peers on teenage girls was found to be very high. This often had a strong impact on girls' decision making on early sexual initiation and unprotected sex and was made worse by poverty.

“Most girls say that peer pressure destroyed their future because it caused them to start having sex sooner than they wanted, which led to a pregnancy... [that] caused some of them to drop out of school... This is common all over Monrovia.”



“Girls around here start having sex around 11 years old, they start that early because their friends are starting to talk about it and they want to try it, want to catch the fun...”

“Some girls say your friends will respect you if you are doing man business with some big man and it feels good to know that others are watching you and maybe even admiring you because you are loving to an older guy.”

“Peer pressure affects girls for so many different reasons. Girls with low self-esteem will always want acceptance and praise from their peers so for this reason they easily follow the wrong crowd. Some follow others because of their material things such as gold chains, matching clothes, earrings, slippers and so on. Some join the crowd simply because their parents cannot provide for them so they turn to their friends.”

“As long as we don't have money to go to school, buy clothes and eat we will go out into the streets, especially if we see our friends looking good. We always find a way to look good by all mean.”

Engaging in unprotected sex

For the majority of girls, teenage pregnancies are unplanned and unwanted. Many girls typically have unprotected sex with different men, which is further complicated by that fact that many girls are then not sure who the father of their child is.

A small number of girls said that some teenage girls wanted to get pregnant as a way of keeping their boyfriends and to enable them to continue to receive the support he gave to them. A number also mentioned that having “flesh to flesh” sex, not only felt better but it also was a way to show your partner how much you loved him.

“Very few people are using contraception – they don’t think to, they don’t really think they will get pregnant.”

“The condom will burst in your womb and cause you many problems.”

“If a girl has gotten her menstruation at the age of 12 and she has started having sex without the full knowledge of preventing pregnancy then that girl is surely at risk of teenage pregnancy.”

“Most people say that family planning is not good, it stops you from giving birth. It puts growth in your stomach.”



Low use of modern methods of contraception

Although girls do not have adequate information on sexual and reproductive health matters, the findings showed that some girls are aware that modern family planning methods prevent pregnancy. They knew that contraception helps to prevent pregnancy in general, but many did not perceive themselves as being at risk because they thought they were too young to get pregnant.

Girls said that condoms can protect against sexually transmitted infections (STIs) including HIV. However, many girls were not using any reliable form of contraception although they were engaging in regular sexual activity. This is due to a number of reasons including- myths, traditions, gender roles, religion, and not being able to ask their partners to use contraception. Girls shared stories on the side-effects of contraceptives; many were incorrect and based on myths that have been passed around over years.

A major barrier to the use of condoms lay in attitudes towards girls having condoms in their possession. There is also a lot of shame associated with buying condoms and pressure from men not to use them.

“Once you start having sex as a teenager, you are sure to get pregnant because you don’t know anything about your body as per when to and when not to have sex, you just go about enjoying yourself. Sometimes you may even think that you’re too small to get pregnant and this puts you at more risk of getting pregnant.”

“People afraid to use condoms, they don’t feel good, sex doesn’t feel the way it should”

“Girls do not like to use family planning because of traditional beliefs and because of religion”



“The injections cause you to bleed and bleed and get so fat, you won’t want to use it. The bad thing is that people say if you have not had a child before and take family planning you will never have children in your life and this is bad if it is true”

Girls' views on HIV

While teenage pregnancy is a high risk among this vulnerable group of girls, many were also at risk of other sexual and reproductive health problems such as unsafe abortions and sexually transmitted infections including HIV.

Many of the girls did not perceive HIV to be a real threat. There was the common view that you can always tell if someone is HIV positive. As the girls are not having sex with 'sick looking' men, they believe they are safe and that they can trust their partner. As so few are having HIV tests, these beliefs are never challenged.

"HIV is not real- we have not seen it around here"

"People think that you have to be sick and dry to have HIV."

"People don't want to do HIV tests, why would they want to worry until they die?"



Sexual exploitation, incest and rape


Sexual violence is still very high in Liberia partly as a result of the use of rape as a weapon during the war. There is also a false myth among men that they can cure HIV/AIDS if they have sex with a virgin. Although there is a law on rape, many cases are not reported and very few people are prosecuted by the courts.

Although the study found that girls are under great pressure from their peers and families to engage in sex, there is also a lot of sexual exploitation and abuse from men. The findings indicate that the perpetrators were mainly older men in positions of power- teachers, relatives, bosses and guardians. Girls told countless stories of men taking advantage of them, of being exploited, abused and raped, resulting in many cases of unwanted pregnancies.

“A bad thing about being a girl in Monrovia is that before you get any job your boss will want to have sex with you first just because you are a girl.”

“A girl was sexually exploited by her teacher in school and got pregnant. She dropped out of school and became an early mother.”

“Men encourage girls with money, cell phones, or other material things to allow them to have sex with her. When this happens, the girl gets pregnant at an early age.”



“Some bad things about being a girl in Monrovia is that others will take advantage of you, rape you, or just use you and leave, and even if you get pregnant they won’t care what will happen to you and the baby. Girls are trapped in the middle because some people say that girls are to be loved and cared for while others say that girls are to be used”

Yet surprisingly when girls discussed reasons for rape, more often than not they also partly blamed girls for dressing promiscuously, and lessened the blame on men by suggesting that they ‘couldn’t help themselves’.

“Some bad things about being a girl in Monrovia are that girls no longer dress modestly, they dress exposing all their bodies, sometimes men take advantage of them and rape or impregnate them and leave them to fend for themselves.”

Female genital mutilation

Female genital mutilation (FGM) is a taboo subject in Liberia and was not discussed openly by the girls involved in this project. The prevalence rate of FGM in Liberia is estimated to be 60%^{iv} and is performed primarily by the Mande speaking people of western Liberia (the Gola and Kissi).

FGM in Liberia is normally performed as a rite of passage marking the transition from childhood to womanhood. It is mainly practiced by older trained members of secret societies with the average age of initiation being between 8 and 14 years old. However girls can be subjected to FGM from the age of three and there is no law in Liberia that makes the practice of FGM illegal.



THE IMPACT OF TEENAGE PREGNANCY AND EARLY MOTHERHOOD ON GIRLS' LIVES

“People say that being pregnant as a teen or being a teenage mother is a problem by itself... because you are still to be taken care of but now you are taking care of somebody else..... you will now be worrying and you will not have time to play when you are in school and ... you will be failing because you will no longer be paying attention to your lessons and your friends will no longer want to be identified with you before people think they are like you, and it will be very hard for you to live with. Sometimes you may even think about killing yourself...”



Teenage pregnancy disrupts education of girls

Education is known to help break the vicious cycle of poverty, but government policies on teenage pregnancy and social pressure do not support pregnant girls or child mothers to stay in school or return to school once they have given birth. Some schools do not allow pregnant girls to stay in class for fear of 'influencing' and 'infecting' other girls. The result for many pregnant teenage girls is that they are either forced to drop out of school by the school authorities or by their parents.

The Liberian Ministry of Education has a policy which states that pregnant girls should attend 'night school' as opposed to continue mixing with their peers in classes during the day. Despite this, the girls' stories would suggest that this was not uniformly implemented. Even if some schools do allow pregnant students to continue their studies, the girls themselves often feel too ashamed and therefore choose to drop out anyway. During the focus group discussions, girls raised the risks associated with this policy.

"There is a girl who got pregnant while still in the 5th grade and the school authorities told her to stop coming so that other children will not follow her example. The girl stopped going to school and when she gave birth to her child she was too ashamed to go back to school so now she is selling in the market to take care of her and her baby."

"People say that teenage pregnancy or youth motherhood affects girls' lives in a way that they will drop out of school, or miss out on one or two years, and by the time you return to school your friend or classmates will be out of school or will be ahead of you and you will be ashamed to become classmates with those who were below you before."

Social stigma and its effects on pregnant girls

Pregnant teenagers faced a lot stigma beyond the classroom. Girls shared stories of being shunned by friends, family and community members. Girls often come under huge pressure and feel isolated and vulnerable.

“Your friends will no longer want you to play with them; they will start to call you names that will make ashamed to come near them. It will make you keep to yourself, making you to stop associating yourself with others before they start teasing you. This is not good for the healthy growth of any young person.”

“The consequences that girls face are that their parents drive them out of their house and they can find it very difficult to take care of their babies.”



Unsafe abortion

Teenage pregnancy can cause young women to be stigmatized, dismissed from school, and neglected by family. The result is that, for many, the first option is to attempt an abortion. Since abortion is only legal under certain circumstances in Liberia the majority are carried out using dangerous methods, by untrained practitioners, herbalists or the girls themselves. Many abortions ended in death, or with the girl having long term damage including disabilities. The reality is that girls are not aware of the law and are not able to access existing services.

“A girl began having sex at the age of 14 and she got pregnant because she had no information from her parents and others, so she ended up going to her friend to get an abortion and it caused a rupture of her womb.”

“Most girls will try an abortion as the first stop anyway and some are successful at getting rid of the baby. They will pay someone to help them with this or they will just take some remedy for it at home – sometimes it ruins their stomach and womb, sometimes they even die from this.”

“...They use country herbs, special portions, all types of things. They also use the special chalk, they put it inside themselves, sometimes they put it in by themselves, sometimes the boyfriend will put it on his penis to insert it, other times it will be the traditional healer that will put it on his penis for you. Other people use a mixture of ground cassava leaves, ground up glass bottles, and mix with blue (bleach for clothes) and they drink it. It damages you so much it even kills you. But they will have to do it anyway.”

Girls' experiences of child birth and motherhood

Many young mothers involved in the study were aware of the risks that pregnant teenagers and their babies faced, due to their bodies not being mature enough for childbirth. Additionally many girls also suffered at the hands of hospital staff, due to poor quality of care during childbirth. Even when the mother and baby make it safely through childbirth they still face health risks as they often lack the knowledge, skills and money to take proper care of themselves and their babies.



“If you are young and pregnant, nurses can make you feel so bad, they can even beat you. There are some kind nurses but very few. Most are mean, they are old and they talk at you and beat you.”

“Girls’ bodies are not ready to have babies. If a young girl becomes pregnant it is difficult for her to have her baby. There is a young girl who went to give birth but she had to go under surgery because she never had strength to push, the baby was very big.”

“There was a 12 year old girl in my community who got pregnant but when she went to deliver her and the baby died in the process. All of the midwives said that the girl was too small to make it through.”

“... She was struggling through the pregnancy because there wasn’t enough money to support her. She gave birth to the baby and because there were not enough funds to support her and the baby, the child was not taken care of properly. The baby was very sickly and in the end died.”

“...When her parents finally found out about it (pregnancy) they decided to let her keep the pregnancy but she died in childbirth anyway, so that was her end.”

Teenage pregnancy and life options for girls

In general girls hold very negative views of the future for themselves and other teenage mothers. Most see teenage pregnancy as destroying all hopes for their future. They see teenage mothers as being 'useless' and unable to contribute to their community. Although there were some accounts of young mothers getting support from their families or boyfriends, for the most part the girls' stories showed that teenage pregnancy pushes girls deeper into poverty.

In the short term, girls are occupied with taking care of their young baby and therefore struggle to find the time to work for money. In the long term, many drop out of school losing the opportunity to improve themselves and the lives of their children. Therefore the vicious cycle of girls getting pregnant, dropping out of school, and struggling to make ends meet – and thus being forced to turn back to sleeping with men for support - continues.

“Girls who are put at risk feel there is no future for them in society. They think that there is no more hope for them to be better people again and they think they are useless in their communities.”

“Teenage mothers say that they don't stand a chance at a good future. They also feel that they can die anytime.”



Sexual and reproductive health information

For many girls the lack of information on sexual matters is one of the causes of teenage pregnancy. Girls reported getting information – including on sexual development, sexual behaviour and sexual and reproductive health – from a number of different sources. The majority had received some form of sex education at school, others mentioned being involved in education awareness sessions, getting information from health care settings and hearing/seeing slots on radio or television (although few households own their own television). Very few girls had had useful discussions with parents – for the most part sex was not openly discussed in the home, although some did refer to conversations with grandmothers or other older people living in the community as being helpful.

Despite there being a number of potential channels for good information, girls on the whole agreed that the information they received was ‘not enough’ – and that sex was still considered a taboo topic that was rarely openly discussed. This was frustrating for them as they readily acknowledge that they want and need the right information. Many girls have to rely on their friends for information – accurate or not – about sex. There was also little focus on addressing barriers and power relations which made it difficult for girls to negotiate safe sex.

“Most girls here get information on sex and reproductive health from their friends.”

“Because they do not know some of the services that are available for counselling young girls who are at risk, so they get pregnant at a very early age.”

“We know that family planning can help people not to get pregnant unless they want to.”

“Some of the girls say that they get their information from their parents, some from school but most of them from their friends and this is not enough because the parents or schools are afraid to go in-depth with the information when the girls want details so they go to their friends.”



Access to sexual and reproductive health and support services

The girls (predominantly the supervisors) involved directly with their local Family Planning Associations in particular Planned Parenthood Association of Liberia (PPAL), talked positively about the youth friendly services available in specific clinics. The majority of participants, however, had not used these services. The few who were using modern forms of contraception tended to access services in a range of settings – from local hospitals and clinics, to pharmacies, to buying from ‘men who roam around our community selling drugs at cheaper price’. For the most part girls knew about the benefits of using services.

Many of those interviewed felt strongly that the services they need are not available to them and others. The poor signposting of services was also mentioned as a barrier by a number of the girls. They were either not aware that youth friendly services existed or they lived too far away to access the service. The 'shame' of accessing 'adult' services and further poor treatment of teenage girls by health workers were raised in the study. Stories of being judged and abused when seeking advice about family planning or pregnancy and specifically when giving birth were all too common among young girls.



“There are not enough sexual health services available for girls and this alone puts them at risk.

There are no real counselling services available for girls at risk where they will be comfortable to share their inner feelings with somebody else...they are forced to go through all these things alone.”

“Most girls say that the services are not well known or very popular because girls are ashamed to go to family planning services because they think that it is for older people.”

“The bad thing is that whenever you are affected with or by something and go for services the people there will talk to you very bad or even curse you before tending to you.”

There was a clear absence of other specialist support services for girls at risk including pregnant girls and young mothers.

“Some girls around here say support services for pregnant teenagers and young mothers are not available and that they need more. Some girls say that there are no supporting services for girls at risk and this just leaves the girls to be vulnerable to all kinds of problems.”

“Some girls say that there are not support services for teenagers or young mothers so you will have to struggle on your own if you don't have people to care of you in the process.”

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM GIRLS FOR URGENT ACTION

During the research discussions and debriefing with girls to prepare for the stakeholder consultation, the girls were asked to express their thoughts on their future aspirations and dreams. In general most young mothers and pregnant girls did not have any positive hopes for their future, and this view was expressed by many girls. However a few felt hopeful that they could turn their lives around. The main desire for girls was to go back to school to complete their education and to get support to undertake business ventures. Girls noted the absence of any programme interventions for girls within their communities to support girls at risk and improve the situation of pregnant girls and teen mothers.

The impact of teenage pregnancy and early motherhood on girls' lives is significant and adds numerous challenges and hardships to the burden of girls, many of whom are already struggling to survive. The recommendations provided here are based on what girls wanted for themselves and their peers through the study findings and focus group discussions during the debriefing sessions and consultations.



Provision of a supportive environment and support services

“Pregnant teenagers should be assigned a counsellor who will help them make good decisions about the pregnancy.”

“There should be a counsellor in the schools that the students will be free to talk to.”

“Some girls say that there should be sexual health services in all hospitals and even in the schools where children will learn how to take proper care of their bodies and make good decisions.”

“Internet cafes to access information and share information with other young people”

“Parents support programme to be able to speak to girls and to support their girls and to improve communication with young people.”

“We need youth friendly services and good information on sexual matters.”

Support to continue education

“I think a better way to support girls at risk is helping them go back to school if they are high school dropouts and have adults mentoring them during the process.”

“Vocational school for teenage mothers to help sustain themselves and their babies.”

“What I think should be done to better support a girl at risk is to give them money to either go back to school or create a small business to help them cater for they and their children needs.”

Provision of safe youth space to access information

“Some girls say that there should be a special centre for teenagers and young mothers so when a teenager is pregnant they can go to that centre until they give birth and learn how to take care of that child. The program should encourage them to go back to school to complete secondary education.”

“Provide a good environment where they will be free to talk about things that are affecting them and let their voices be heard.”

“Some other services and information I think that should be available is a centre where girls will learn how to take care of themselves and their babies. Also, a free centre/ cafe where girls will have access to all the information they may need.”

“Some girls around here say that the services that are available for girls at risk, especially family planning are good but more needs to be done. Family planning should have centres in all of the communities or zones in Monrovia because these services help teenagers to get information on sexual and reproductive health and rights. They should also advise, at times on how to make decisions about sex.”

“Help educated girls to find jobs.”

“We need enough clinics for those girls, and we need special media to be broadcasting some of this information.”

“There should also be support services for (rape) victims because they become mentally disturbed after they are raped or abused so a support system would help them cope with life and allow them to feel free to live among their peers again.”

“A lot of young girls listen to the radio, but most choose the stations with the music, not the talking. So the messages to reach us would need to come through the music, not boring talking shows which we won't pay attention to.”

“I think youth media via radio programmes should be available.”

Establishment of a girls' network programme to support girls at risk

"To establish a girls' network which will provide a safe space for girls to discuss issues that affect their lives and enable girls to meet regularly either weekly or monthly."

"We want a special programme for girls for example girls' summer camps and programmes at the community level to support girls."

"There should be more programmes to take young girls from on the streets and job creation for girls."

"We want young girls teenagers to reach out to each other on the internet and chat about building things like good manners addressing discrimination or girls of the same community or different communities working together for the same purpose."

"Training of peer researchers as peer facilitators to conduct workshops in various schools to support girls' sex education and reduce taboos around discussing sex, how to use and negotiate condoms and access to condoms. Need to educate both girls and boys."

"Planned Parenthood Association of Liberia should help us have radio programmes for young people to create awareness on teen issues and sexual matters and to have young people to host the programme. Air time on radio programmes for both urban and rural teens."

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE STUDY

- Improve signposting to sexual and reproductive health services to ensure girls have better access.
- Create girls' only spaces to discuss sexual and reproductive health issues and information and help them to share and learn from each other.
- Develop programmes to target parents of teenagers - strengthening parenting skills and communication skills around SRH.
- Provide comprehensive sexuality education which includes a focus on gender, human rights, prevention of HIV/AIDS/STI and unwanted pregnancy as well as attention to confidence building and negotiation skills.
- Support girls at risk to find alternative ways of making money including provision of skills training and opportunities.
- Provide courses for pregnant teenagers and pregnant mothers to learn how to take care of their babies.
- Introduce more youth friendly services at the community level.
- Raise awareness of the impact of policies that make girls more vulnerable, including for example unsafe abortions and policies that prevent pregnant teenagers and young mothers from staying in school.
- Raise awareness among girls and service providers of the legal provisions in relation to the law on abortion.

FINAL THOUGHTS

High teenage pregnancy shows a failure to protect and fulfil the sexual and reproductive rights of girls. For many, teenage pregnancy means that they miss out on education and have limited skills and opportunities, which result in a vicious cycle of poverty for themselves and their children.

“The ‘Girls at Risk’ Project” set out to better understand the situation of girls at risk of teenage pregnancy, their views on sexuality, the services available to them and their thoughts on the future. The pilot project aimed to improve the lives of young mothers and girls at risk and also increase their knowledge of sexual and reproductive health and rights.

When the girls were asked to evaluate their role in the research, many said they were more confident, had acquired new skills and were ready to take action to improve their situation. A few mentioned that they had learnt a lot about their own community and needs of other girls. A few said they were initially very worried about the process and found the training and support helpful.

The pilot project has helped to raise girls’ aspirations, expose them to other possibilities and audiences and also helped to strengthen their collective voices. All girls deserve to be given opportunities and should be nurtured and supported through enabling policies and programmes, which provide access to information, skills and a supportive environment.

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Foundation for Women's Health, Research & Development

Suite 2.1 Chandelier Building,
8 Scrubs Lane,
London NW10 6RB
United Kingdom

Telephone:

+44 (0)20 8960 4000

Fax:

+44 (0)20 8960 4014

E-mail:

forward@forwarduk.org.uk

Website:

www.forwarduk.org.uk

FORWARD
Safeguarding rights & dignity

Planned Parenthood Association of Liberia

18th Street & Payne Avenue
PO Box 10-0938
1000 Monrovia- 10
Liberia

Telephone:

+231 (0)7700 9401

E-mail:

ppaliberia@yahoo.com



International Planned Parenthood Federation

4 Newhams Row
London
SE1 3UZ
United Kingdom

Telephone:

+44 (0)20 7939 8200

Fax:

+44 (0)20 7939 8300

E-mail:

info@ippf.org

Website:

www.ippf.org

