

The Japan Times **OPINION**

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Too young for motherhood

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Motherhood in childhood has become a huge global problem, states a new U.N. report. Every year, 7.3 million girls — or 20,000 per day — below the age of 18 give birth in developing countries, and 2 million of these adolescent mothers are below the age of 15.

Nearly 70,000 of these girls die each year — or nearly 200 day — from pregnancy related complications. And 90 percent of these girls are in marriages or unions.

The United Nations Population Fund's "State of the World Population 2013" report, "Motherhood in Childhood: Facing the Challenge of Adolescent Pregnancy," focuses on the worldwide problem of adolescent pregnancy — which takes a tremendous toll on girls' health, their education and their future employment prospects — and what can be done to reverse this trend.

Japan, together with other developed countries, should consider what kind of concrete assistance it can offer to help solve the problems.

UNFPA points out that the sooner a girl gets pregnant after reaching puberty, the more likely she will experience health problems. Girls aged 14 and younger face double the risk of dying during childbirth or suffering obstetric fistula, which causes incontinence and other health problems that often result in shame and social segregation.

In addition to the dangers pregnancy poses to their health, adolescent mothers are often denied their basic rights to an education, preventing them from fulfilling their potential.

Therefore, UNFPA points out, the phenomenon of children having children has a severe economic impact on both communities and nations.

If, for example, adolescent mothers in India and Brazil had waited till their early 20s to have babies, \$7.7 billion and \$3.5 billion in economic productivity would have been added to these countries' respective economies.

And if Kenya's more than 200,000 adolescent mothers were in the workforce instead of raising children, the economy would have gotten a \$3.4 billion boost.

While developing countries face by far the greatest challenges concerning children having children, even in developed countries adolescent pregnancies take an economic toll. UNFPA notes that in the United States alone it costs taxpayers \$11 billion a year.

Yet despite the heavy health and economic costs of adolescent pregnancy, reportedly only 2 percent of every dollar spent on international development is directed toward the problems faced by adolescent girls.

Increasing funding would be very helpful, but it would provide only part of the solution. The traditional focus of programs aimed at reducing incidences of child pregnancy must also change.

“Too often, society blames only the girl for getting pregnant,” said UNFPA Executive Director Dr. Babatunde Osotimehin.

“The reality is that adolescent pregnancy is most often not the result of a deliberate choice, but rather the absence of choices, and of circumstances beyond a girl’s control. It is a consequence of little or no access to school, employment, quality information and health care.”

Instead of focusing on changing the behavior of girls, UNFPA recommends a holistic approach that involves governments, communities, families and focuses on changing the attitudes and actions of the societies in which vulnerable girls live.

The prevalence of adolescent pregnancy is fueled by a combination of factors such as poverty, social acceptance of child marriage, a lack of efforts to keep girls in school, social pressures and sexual coercion or violence.

The UNFPA asserts that “adolescent pregnancy is both a cause and a consequence of rights violations.” When girls are unable to exercise their basic rights to health, autonomy and education, they become more vulnerable to getting pregnant.

And pregnancy further undermines the ability of girls to exercise their basic rights.

UNFPA’s specific recommendations for reducing incidences of adolescent pregnancy include keeping girls in school, stopping child marriage, changing attitudes about gender roles and gender equality, increasing adolescents’ access to sexual and reproductive health, including contraception, and providing better support to adolescent mothers.

UNFPA suggests that education plays a key role in reducing incidences of adolescent pregnancy, noting that the longer girls remain in school, the less likely they will become pregnant.

In addition to preparing girls for future jobs, education raises girls’ self-esteem and status, giving them more say in decisions affecting them.

UNFPA also asserts that governments must address underlying causes, including poverty, sexual violence and coercion, social pressures, gender inequality and negative attitudes and stereotypes about adolescent girls.

They also need take into account the critical roles that men and boys can play in preventing adolescent pregnancy.

One key to reducing the number of adolescent pregnancies would be for governments to enforce the provisions of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which has been ratified by nearly every member of the U.N. with the exception of Somalia, South Sudan and the United States.

The CRC grants children — defined as anyone under the age of 18 — special protections. “Upholding these protections,” UNFPA emphasizes, would “help to eliminate many of the conditions that contribute to adolescent pregnancy” and “help end a vicious cycle of rights infringements, poverty, inequality, exclusion and adolescent pregnancy.”

It can be very difficult to influence government policies, religious and cultural practices, and the social environment of other countries.

With one of the lowest adolescent birth rates in the world at just 4 per 1,000 women, Japan should be able to draw on its expertise and play a valuable role in efforts to make the UNFPA’s call that “Childhood should never be derailed by motherhood” a reality for every girl.

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