

Dr. Babatunde Osotimehin

UNFPA EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

MESSAGE ON WORLD POPULATION DAY

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There are over 600 million girls in the world today, more than 500 million of them in developing countries. They are shaping humanity's present and future. The opportunities and choices girls have during adolescence will enable them to begin adulthood as empowered, active citizens.

With the right skills and opportunities, they can invest in themselves, in their families and their communities. However, pregnancy jeopardizes the rights, health, education and potential of far too many adolescent girls, robbing them of a better future.

About 16 million girls aged 15-19 give birth each year, and complications from pregnancy and child birth are the leading cause of death among girls in this age group, especially in developing countries.

Adolescent pregnancy is not just a health issue, it is a development issue. It is deeply rooted in poverty, gender inequality, violence, child and forced marriage, power imbalances between adolescent girls and their male partners, lack of education, and the failure of systems and institutions to protect their rights. To bring these issues to global attention, this year's World Population Day is focusing on adolescent pregnancy.

Breaking the cycle of adolescent pregnancy requires commitment from nations, communities and individuals in both developed and developing countries to invest in adolescent girls. Governments should enact and enforce national laws that raise the age of marriage to 18 and should promote community-based efforts that support girls' rights and prevent child marriage and its consequences.

Adolescents and youth must be provided with age-appropriate comprehensive sexuality education to develop the knowledge and skills they need to protect their health throughout their lives. However, education and information are not enough. Good quality reproductive health services must also be readily available in order for adolescents to make informed choices and be healthy.

At the local level, communities should provide the infrastructure to deliver reproductive health care in a youth-friendly and sensitive way.

Underlying all these efforts is the understanding that the dignity and human rights of adolescent girls must be respected, protected and fulfilled. Today, we call on governments, the international community and all stakeholders involved to take measures that enable adolescent girls to make responsible life choices and to provide the necessary support for them in cases when their rights are threatened. Every young girl, regardless of where she lives, or her economic circumstances, has the right to fulfil her human potential. Today, too many girls are denied that right. We can change that, and we must.