

# Spotlight Initiative

*To eliminate violence against women and girls*

## PROTECTING THE MOST VULNERABLE: Importance of policy and legislation to prevent compulsory withdrawal of pregnant learners and guarantee re-entry

### POLICY BRIEF

An initiative of the United Nations funded by the European Union



**Caribbean Observatory on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights**  
Monitoring • Mobilising • Advocating

## RATIONALE

Worldwide, one in five girls has given birth by the age of 18. In the poorest regions of the world, this figure rises to over one in three girls.<sup>1</sup> Adolescent births are more likely to occur among the poor, less educated, rural and indigenous populations.<sup>2</sup> In the Caribbean region, adolescent fertility is at 60.1 births per 1000, which is above the desired benchmark<sup>3</sup> of 40 births per 1000. Teen pregnancy and early motherhood represent a cost of opportunity for women, given that they often have to interrupt or drop out of their formal education<sup>4</sup>, which compromises girls' development opportunities.

Low levels of educational attainment and early childbearing affect girls' life trajectories in profound ways.<sup>5</sup> Girls who are married, have had children, or have dropped out of school early are more likely to have more children over their lifetime and earn less in adulthood. This makes it more likely that their household will live in poverty.<sup>6</sup> A PAHO/WHO,

UNICEF and UNFPA 2018 report<sup>7</sup> found that in most countries, adolescent girls with no education or only primary education are up to four times more likely to get pregnant than girls with secondary or higher education. Low education attainment is a cause and a consequence of teenage pregnancy.<sup>8</sup> Other consequences for women associated with a lack of educational attainment and early childbearing include higher risk of intimate partner violence and a lack of decision-making ability within the household.<sup>9</sup> These girls are at higher risk of being disempowered in ways that deprive them of their basic rights. Adolescent pregnancy also hinders girls' psychosocial development and is linked to poor health outcomes and higher risks of maternal mortality.<sup>10</sup> In addition, their children are at higher risk for poor health and social outcomes.<sup>11</sup> A study commissioned by the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) in 2009<sup>12</sup> on the benefits of investing in youth revealed that...



... the average direct cost per adolescent mother in the region is approximately **US\$2,000 per year.**



... in total, the costs of supporting adolescent mothers in the region amount to about **2.43% of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP).** If the opportunity costs of adolescent girls not having the chance to fulfil their potential are added, the figure climbs to **12.3% of the region's GDP.**

## THE SITUATION IN THE CARIBBEAN

### Early and Unintended Pregnancy (EUP) – a regional problem

Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) region is the only region with rising adolescent fertility rates among adolescents younger than 15 years; recent data for those aged 15-19 however, show declining trends from 2000 to 2022, except for Antigua and Barbuda. In 2022, adolescent fertility rates of young

women aged 15-19 years (per 1000) vary among Caribbean countries (7.4 per 1000 in Bahamas, compared to 63.1 in Guyana).<sup>13</sup> The Guyana Multi Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) 2014 found that young women aged 15–19 years old who resided in rural areas were one and a half times as likely (17%)

1 Ibid.

2 Ibid.

3 UN World Population Estimates.

4 Ibid.

5 World Bank Report. Economic Outlook 2020.

6 Ibid.

7 PAHO/WHO, UNICEF, UNFPA. *Accelerating progress toward the reduction of adolescent pregnancy in Latin America and the Caribbean*, 2018.

8 UNESCO. Early Pregnancy and Education in the UK, 2020. Available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000374506> Accessed on 16 June 2023.

9 Ibid.

10 PAHO. Latin America and the Caribbean have the second highest adolescent pregnancy rates in the world. Available at [https://www3.paho.org/hq/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=14163:latin-america-and-the-caribbean-have-the-second-highest-adolescent-pregnancy-rates-in-the-world&Itemid=0&lang=en#gsc.tab=0](https://www3.paho.org/hq/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=14163:latin-america-and-the-caribbean-have-the-second-highest-adolescent-pregnancy-rates-in-the-world&Itemid=0&lang=en#gsc.tab=0)

11 Ibid.

12 Cited in UNFPA. Adolescent Pregnancy is not just a Health Issue, December 2015. Available at: <https://caribbean.unfpa.org/en/news/adolescent-pregnancy-not-just-health-issue-unfpa-0#:~:text=A%20study%20commissioned%20by%20the%20Caribbean%20Community%20%28CARICOM%29,in%20the%20region%20was%20approximately%20US%242%2C000%20per%20year> Accessed on 20 June 2023.

13 United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, World Population Prospects: The 2022 Revision <https://population.un.org/dataportal/> accessed 15 July 2023.

and those who reside in the interior of the country are 1.6 times as likely (18%) as those that live in urban areas (11%) to have started childbearing. The negative socio-economic consequences of early childbearing are reinforced by additional findings which show that more than one-half of young women (15–19 years) who had begun childbearing (59%), had gone no further than primary school, and 50 percent were from the poorest and second poorest wealth quintiles.

The lack of access to autonomous sexual and reproductive (SRH) services increases the risk for adolescent pregnancy in the Caribbean. Sexual debut often occurs during the adolescent period and is associated with unprotected sex and other sexual risk behaviours. Despite clear evidence of the benefits of high-quality, curriculum-based comprehensive sexuality education (CSE), few children and young people receive CSE, which could have empowered them to take control and make informed decisions about their sexuality and relationships freely and responsibly.<sup>14</sup>

## The current policy and legislative landscape



Early pregnancy and motherhood are closely linked to issues of human rights. For example, a girl who cannot access contraception or reproductive health information is denied her right to health and to protect herself from an unintended or unplanned pregnancy. A pregnant girl who is pressured or forced to leave school is denied her right to an education.

Despite the right to education being guaranteed to all school-age children in most countries across the region, only one country has laws requiring withdrawal or guaranteeing re-entry. Pregnant adolescents are often forced out of formal educational institutions and prevented from returning, with attempts at returning frequently rebuffed by school administrators. Such denial has significant

impacts on their lives and on their future economic prospects, as well as on that of their children. A UNFPA analysis of SRHR Laws in the English- and Dutch-speaking Caribbean covering 20 countries<sup>15</sup> found that all but two countries have laws or written policies, which guarantee the re-entry into formal educational institutions for adolescents who become pregnant.<sup>16</sup>



In **Jamaica** where there is a law on exclusion of pregnant learners, the law does not forbid the return and reintegration of such mothers after the period of pregnancy; and there is a policy to support reintegration.

Since 2013, Jamaica has led the way in support of school-age mothers attending school while pregnant. The Women Centre of Jamaica Foundation (WCJF) provides outreach services to adolescent mothers. Education and skills training are delivered to improve levels of employment and productivity among Jamaica's youth.

In **Guyana** there is no law banning pregnant learners from returning to a former school, however in 2018, an official policy was published on the reintegration of pregnant and/or maternal adolescent mothers into institutions of formal education.

In Guyana, Women Across Differences (WAD) has been collaborating with UNICEF and the Ministry of Public Health, the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Indigenous Affairs and the Ministry of Social Protection to prevent adolescent pregnancy, prevent second pregnancy, and provide life and livelihood skills for the adolescent pregnant girls or mothers.

<sup>14</sup> UNESCO. International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education: An evidence-informed approach, 2018.

<sup>15</sup> The 20 countries are: Anguilla, Antigua and Barbuda, The Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Bermuda, British Virgin Islands, Dominica, Grenada, Guyana, Jamaica, Montserrat, St. Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, St. Maarten, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Suriname, Trinidad and Tobago, The Cayman Islands, and Turks and Caicos Islands.

<sup>16</sup> UNFPA Legislative Analysis of Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights in the English- and Dutch-speaking Caribbean, 2023.

A Walden University study in 2017<sup>17</sup> of the Educational Aspirations of Barbadian Adolescent Mothers and Their Perceptions of Support that explored the lived experiences of women who bore children in their teen years and who struggled to complete formal high school, found that even when granted the opportunity to complete their schooling after giving birth, many girls lack the impetus to

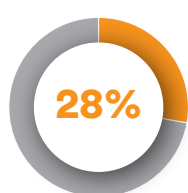
re-enrol and continue their high school education.<sup>18</sup> UNICEF also observed that there were principals throughout the Caribbean who were violating the law by disrupting the education of pregnant and parenting teens by forbidding them to return to school after pregnancy while teen fathers were allowed to complete their schooling (UNICEF, 2003).

## The role of the education sector

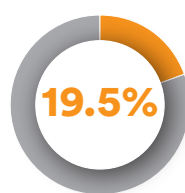
The education sector has a clear role in preventing EUP and ensuring the right to education for pregnant and parenting girls.<sup>19</sup> EUP prevention is linked to rights-based, quality education, girls' access to school, CSE, child marriage, health services, school-related gender-based violence (SRGBV) and a safe, supportive environment at school that requires the effective response of the education sector, in collaboration with other actors. This denial of a pregnant girl or adolescent mother to reintegrate into school is a violation of her right to education. It is the duty of the Ministry of Education to respect, protect and fulfil the right to education for all school age children, in line with international laws, which the reviewed countries have signed.<sup>20</sup> Education is the key to women's empowerment.<sup>21</sup> Through it, women have better access and opportunities in the workforce, leading to increased income and less isolation at home or exclusion from financial decisions.

The education sector must identify systems and the infrastructure that promote safety and inclusion and foster gender equality as key components to avoid violence and discrimination against pregnant and parenting girls, which may jeopardise their willingness to continue education. Educational leaders and policy makers should use research findings that explore the lived experiences of teenage mother who re-entered the school system to guide programmes aimed at empowering pregnant or parenting girls to achieve educational success and long-term socioeconomic wellbeing. The aforementioned Walden University study identified as challenges, the issues of stigma, hopelessness and determination as being factors which compounded balancing motherhood and being a student. Resources and time must be invested in mitigating the backlash from schools, parents, parent-teacher associations (PTA), school boards, the faith community, and others by showing them compelling evidence of the ramifications of inaction, including the socio-economic consequences on the family, community, country, and the region.

## Socio-economic impact and consequences of adolescent pregnancy and early motherhood in Suriname, 2022<sup>22</sup>



Adolescent mothers are **28% more likely** to withdraw from the labour market than women with their first child in adulthood. This carries an estimated loss of annual income of **SRD 118,920,906 (USD 16,290,535)**.



The unemployment rate for adolescent mothers is **19.5%**. This implies a **loss of revenue estimated at SRD 26,330,072 (USD 3,606,859)** for 2016/17.

17 Walden University. The Educational Aspirations of Barbadian Adolescent Mothers and Their Perceptions of Support, 2017. Available at: <https://scholarworks.waldenu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=4382&context=dissertations&httpsredir=1&referer>

18 Ibid.

19 UNESCO. Early and Unintended Pregnancy: Recommendations for the Education Sector, 2018. Available at: [https://www.right-to-education.org/sites/right-to-education.org/files/resource-attachments/UNESCO\\_Early\\_and\\_unintended\\_pregnancy\\_2017.pdf](https://www.right-to-education.org/sites/right-to-education.org/files/resource-attachments/UNESCO_Early_and_unintended_pregnancy_2017.pdf) Accessed on 14 June 2023.

20 UNESCO. Early and Unintended Pregnancy: Recommendations for the Education Sector, 2018.

21 Women's empowerment through education, 2021, Available at: <https://yourdream.liveyourdream.org/2021/08/womens-empowerment-education/> Accessed on 26 June 2023

22 UNFPA. Socio-Economic Impact of Adolescent Pregnancy and Early Motherhood in Suriname, 2022.



The observed gap in education level and the resulting income difference between women with an adolescent pregnancy and early motherhood, compared to women with a first child in adulthood, indicates a loss of income of **SRD 165,296,927 (USD 22,643,415)**.

Due to the limited access in labour participation, employment and lower income resulting from adolescent pregnancy and early motherhood, tax-losses at the state level amount to a **total tax revenue forgone by the State of SRD 73,661,948**. The annual socioeconomic cost due to the loss of income due to unemployment and economic inactivity are **SRD 413, 071, 784 (USD 6,585,176)**, equivalent to **1.6% of the GDP**.

## REGIONAL GOVERNING BODIES SUPPORT FOR COUNTRY ALIGNMENT WITH SDGS

The International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) draws a clear connection between reproductive health, human rights, and sustainable development. When SRH needs are not met, individuals are deprived of the right to make crucial choices about their own bodies and future, with a cascading impact on their families' welfare and future generations. Moreover, because women bear children, and often the responsibility for nurturing them, SRH and rights issues cannot be separated from gender equality. The denial of these rights exacerbates poverty and gender inequality and runs contrary to the commitment that has been


made to “leave no one behind” – a pledge which is central to the Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Regional governing bodies, such as the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) and the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS) Commission, play a pivotal role in creating the space and agenda for goals in support of adolescent mothers. They are key to ensuring the centrality of SRHR in achieving the SDG 3 (good health and well-being), SDG 4 (quality education), SDG 5 (gender equality) and SDG 10 (reducing inequalities) – that are essential to development.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DECISION MAKERS

Policy makers need to increase focus on the implementation of policies that ensure pregnancy does not signal the end for a girl's education, and that curriculum-content, particularly CSE is strengthened for both girls and boys to reduce girls' vulnerability and to facilitate their empowerment.

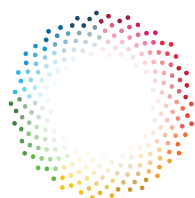
1. Examine why there has been limited progress in preventing withdrawal and re-entry among pregnant learners and what it will take to be effective in addressing EUP among learners.
2. Actively engage with other State actors including ministries of social services and finance, and non-state actors such as the faith community, parents, school boards, PTAs, men, women and youth groups, and the private sector to galvanise support for an effective response, co-ordinated by the education sector, aimed at preventing EUP and compulsory withdrawal, and facilitating reintegration of pregnant learners and mitigating societal backlash.
3. Leverage resources and expertise of multilateral agencies such as UNFPA, UNICEF and UNESCO to support the national response to prevent EUP and the compulsory withdrawal of pregnant learners, and to guarantee re-entry.
4. Develop and publish official policies to prevent compulsory withdrawal of pregnant learners and guarantee re-entry into formal education institutions.

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5. Include budgetary provision to support childcare for adolescent school age mothers to continue and complete their education.
  6. Enact laws guaranteeing the reintegration of pregnant or adolescent mothers into formal education institutions, either in their respective former institutions, or ones of similar status.
  7. Conduct community engagement with school, community, faith-based organisations, PTAs and School Boards to reduce stigma on girls returning to school after pregnancy.
  8. Provide age-appropriate CSE for all young people, invest in girls' education, especially through to secondary level, prevent child, early and forced marriage, sexual violence, and coercion, build gender-equitable societies by empowering girls and engaging men and boys, and ensure adolescents' access to SRH information and services to prevent EUP.

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