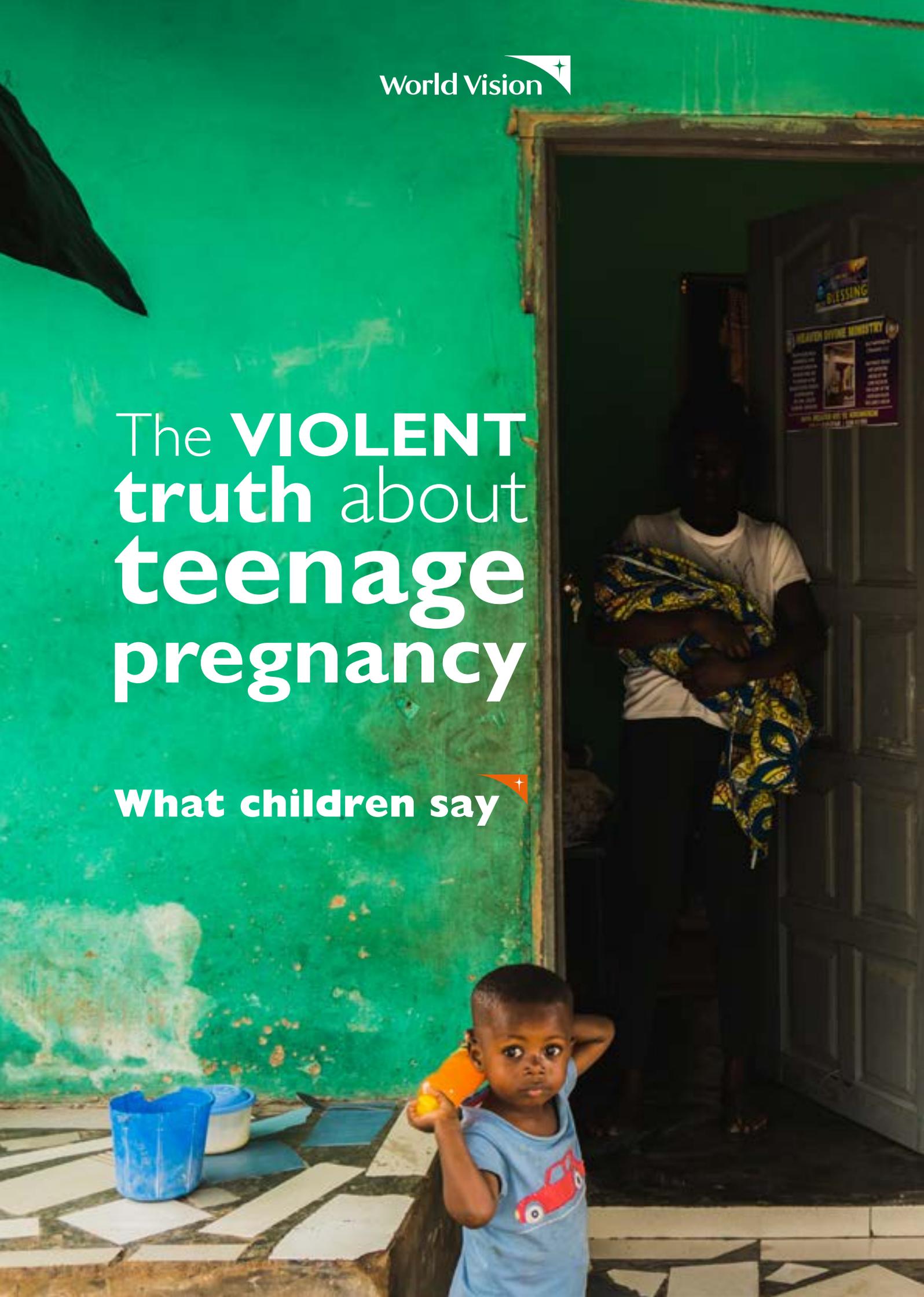


# The **VIOLENT** **truth** about **teenage** **pregnancy**

What children say 





## The violent truth about teenage pregnancy | September 2019

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This report was written by World Vision International based on a series of child-led and participatory reports organised by World Vision between 2016 – 2019 in Central African Republic, Ethiopia, Ghana, Mauritania, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Uganda.

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Illustrations by child researchers in Sierra Leone

*Child protection considerations: Child researchers were trained on issues of consent, and World Vision ensured the safe and ethical participation of children when they shared their stories, adhering to World Vision's child protection protocols. Where indicated by an asterisk, the names of young mothers under the age of 18 were changed to protect their identities, and all photos were taken and are used with informed consent.*

Cover photo: Felicia, 18, stands with her two children.



**One in five women** report having been **sexually abused as a child**, while one-third have experienced **gender or sexual-based violence.**

(World Health Organization 2014)



# Introduction

Teenage pregnancy is often identified by children and young people as one of the critical issues in their communities. Across World Vision programmes in sub-Saharan Africa, children see teenage pregnancy as a major impediment to the education, health and well-being of their peers. This is not a surprise given that nearly one-fifth of all girls become pregnant while still in their adolescence in Africa,<sup>1</sup> and girls who give birth before the age of 15 are five times more likely to die in childbirth than women in their 20s.<sup>2</sup>

Recently, World Vision worked with children across seven countries in Africa to undertake research looking into this issue. The child-led and participatory research projects uncovered a strong connection between teenage pregnancy and sexual violence and abuse.

Approximately 15 million adolescent girls (aged 15 – 19) worldwide have experienced forced sexual intercourse or other sexual acts at some point in their life. A growing number of studies, particularly from sub-Saharan Africa, indicate that the first sexual experience of girls is often unwelcome and forced.<sup>3</sup> For many girls, sexual abuse leads to unwanted pregnancy as teenage girls who have been forced into sex are less likely to have the opportunity or choice to use contraceptives.<sup>4</sup>

The evidence shows that in many places girls are at greatest risk of exposure to sexual violence within the context of close relationships such as those with family, friends and intimate partners.<sup>5</sup> Lack of safe access to water and sanitation and safe passages to schools can also increase the risks of sexual abuse and rape.

However, what was reflected strongly in the research was the extent to which poverty, combined with a high cost of education, lack of parental care and lack of income support for children, may lead girls to be forced by circumstance to exchange sex for money and goods.<sup>6&7</sup> In some cases, teachers may even blackmail girls for sexual favours.<sup>8</sup> Occasionally girls may enter sex work, but more often they form transactional relationships with influential men – teachers, neighbours, public officials – and those, like motorcycle drivers or petty traders, who seem able to provide for their basic needs of food and transport. One study in Ghana even tied teen pregnancy as a result of transactional relationships to period poverty and the need for sanitary pads.<sup>9</sup>

Prior research found that among girls in sub-Saharan Africa who became pregnant, the average age of the fathers tended to be significantly older. In Tanzania, one study found that over 50 per cent of the men who impregnated girls aged 12 – 19 were more than 30 years old.<sup>10</sup> This leaves girls more at risk, as research finds that sexual abuse by older men (common in all seven child research projects) also leaves girls at higher risk of HIV/AIDs and non-use of condoms.<sup>11</sup>

Child marriage can also lead to sexual abuse and teenage pregnancies since children involved are unable to give or withhold their consent. The results are dangerous for young girls. Just a 10 per cent reduction in child marriage could contribute to a 70 per cent reduction in maternal mortality and a three per cent reduction in infant mortality rates.<sup>12</sup> Studies estimate

the cumulative cost of early pregnancy due to child marriage at US\$566 billion by 2030.<sup>13</sup>

Even though sexual violence and abuse, especially commercial sexual exploitation and child marriage, are illegal, these practices persist. Not enough is done to implement existing laws, and quite often harmful practices are condoned by communities whose understanding of childhood and gender roles can increase girls' vulnerability.<sup>14</sup>



The consequences of teenage pregnancies are well documented. Many girls or their children do not survive; others suffer from stigma and are left to care for their children on their own in poverty and without proper health care. Young mothers almost always drop out of school, thus forgoing opportunities for education and a better life. Very few countries have established and implemented policies to ensure that girls are allowed and enabled to go back to school once they become mothers.<sup>15</sup>

Not all teenage pregnancies are the result of sexual violence or are unwanted. Likewise, not all sexual violence results in teenage pregnancy. However, exposing the linkages between sexual violence and teenage pregnancy can help strengthen the following measures, necessary to prevent and respond to both problems:

- Ensure zero tolerance of sexual violence against girls and boys
- Make sure schools are accessible and safe for girls to learn without fear
- Provide economic opportunities to families to prevent negative coping strategies
- Empower girls and teach children to manage risks
- Address harmful gender norms and practices such as child marriage.

This report aims to harness children's views and experiences of teen pregnancy and draw attention to the urgent need to address these issues.

1 Kassa, Arowojolu, Odugogbe, and Worku Yalew (2018). "Prevalence and determinants of adolescent pregnancy in Africa: a systematic review and Meta-analysis." *Reproductive Health*, 15 no. 195. <https://reproductive-health-journal.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12978-018-0640-2>.

2 UNICEF (2014). "Committing to Child Survival: A Promise Renewed." [http://files.unicef.org/publications/files/APR\\_2014\\_web\\_15Sept14.pdf](http://files.unicef.org/publications/files/APR_2014_web_15Sept14.pdf).

3 WHO: Krug, Dahlberg, Mercy, Zwi and Lozano (2002). "World Report on Violence and Health." Chapter 6. [http://www.who.int/violence\\_injury\\_prevention/violence/global\\_campaign/en/chap6.pdf](http://www.who.int/violence_injury_prevention/violence/global_campaign/en/chap6.pdf)

4 Ibid.

5 UNICEF (2017). "A Familiar Face – Violence in the lives of Children of Adolescents." <https://data.unicef.org/resources/a-familiar-face/>.

6 Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium: Denney, Gordon, Kamara and Lebby (2016). "Change the context not the girls: Improving efforts to reduce teenage pregnancy in Sierra Leone." <https://securelivelihoods.org/publication/change-the-context-not-the-girls-improving-efforts-to-reduce-teenage-pregnancy-in-sierra-leone/?resourceid=400>

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8 Africa Child Policy Forum (2014). "The Africa Report on Violence Against Children." Page 27. <http://africanchildforum.org/files/AfricanReprotVAC.pdf>.

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11 Ibid.

12 Boehmer (2013). "Girl child marriage and its association with national rates of HIV, maternal health, and infant mortality across 97 countries." *Violence against Women*, 19:536-51. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/23698937>

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15 HRW (2018). "Leave No Girl Behind in Africa." [https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report\\_pdf/au0618\\_web.pdf](https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/au0618_web.pdf)

# A letter from Adjoa\*

17, Akotoshie, Ghana



*Three years ago, when she was 14, Adjoa started selling things by the roadside to help her mum out at home. There she met a 35-year-old man who offered to take care of her and help her with school supplies. Adjoa ended up pregnant.*

People will say all kinds of things about us – about teenage mothers. They'll say we're lazy, or not interested in school, or foolish. But we're not. We're hardworking, and industrious, and sensible, and just looking for a way to support ourselves.

What happened to me was all about financial problems. I needed money. My school didn't charge fees, but there were books they would ask you to buy that were compulsory. I've always been very good in school. I even passed my elder sister in the school year. But things were very difficult.

My father died in 2011, so my mum, she has been struggling for a while. It worried me when I asked for money and she said she doesn't have any. She was suffering to get the money.

So I thought, maybe I can also find a way to get the money I need. I met a man through selling snacks on the side of the road. But it wasn't right.

I didn't know I was pregnant. My mum took me to the hospital and we took the pregnancy test, and everything was positive. I showed the man who got me pregnant, and he was helping with the costs, but my mum was doing a police case and he was afraid and went away. Now he doesn't come home. When we call him, he doesn't pick up the calls. And so we've forgotten about him.

I'm not a shy type; I don't care what people say. I started back at school barely three months after giving birth. I even sometimes bring my friends to the house when I'm coming to breastfeed the baby during break. But it has really changed my plans. By now, I would have been at Senior High School (SHS) otherwise.

I'm very happy to be back at school; I think I'm the only one in this village who has given birth and gone back to school. I'm thinking of becoming a doctor. But what I want now after SHS is to work even harder, so my son can go to a world class school, and he can learn, and be even better than me in the future.

He just turned two in July. His name is Isaac. Sometimes, he picks up a hammer, and hits every nail that he sees, or he takes a pen, and uses it as a microphone, the way pastors do, so I'm thinking he will become a great furniture maker or a man of God one day.

I would like to say – girls shouldn't follow a man, especially girls underage. They will tell you all sorts of sugar-coated words, but after having an affair with you, they just see you as trash or something.

We should focus only on our education. When the situation comes, you can't reverse it again. Giving birth isn't easy. Sometimes, I see the other girls in the village who are following men, and I call them to advise them. Because I know the consequences.

An education is the key to success. If you are not educated, it is very hard for you to prosper. Other girls who have had babies need to come back to school, and just ignore anyone who says something, and put their focus on their education. Parents should support them, and teachers shouldn't ignore them.

My mum takes care of the baby, and she sent me back to school because she knows I can make it in the future. We still don't have money, but my mum and I both sell. And my son, he's very funny. He's a gift.

# Summary

Over the past three years, groups of school children in seven countries in Africa spoke to more than 500 boys and girls in their communities about one of the most underreported consequences of sexual violence for girls – pregnancy.

Using World Vision's child-led research methodology as a starting point, many children chose the topic of teen pregnancy when asked to identify issues of violence against children in their communities. A taboo subject in most communities around the globe, children joined together to talk openly about adolescent pregnancy and what they see as one of the greatest threats to their peers' futures.

Sexual abuse of girls and boys across the world is under-reported and under researched. Hence, the reports provide a valuable insight into sexual violence against girls and boys and offer a tool to help prevent the problem and improve protection. In this case, children's concern about teenage pregnancy served as a safe entry point to discuss its causes, including alarming stories of sexual abuse. While the research carried out by the children and summarised in this report is by no means scientific, it is groundbreaking as an education tool for the children themselves and offers a disturbing insight into the abuse endured by so many girls.

Although they are not necessarily indicative of broader trends across the countries where the children live, the child-led reports are an insight into the views and concerns of some young people who care about child rights in their own communities.

The children discovered that when girls became pregnant, it was overwhelmingly as a result of sexual abuse by an adult, including school teachers. The children perceived the prevalence of rape, early marriage and forced sex work in their communities to be shockingly high. The child researchers repeatedly suggested that poverty put girls at greater risk of sexual violence, as it forced them into transactional relationships, generally with older adult men.

*“Seventeen [out of 19] of those teenagers [who had experienced pregnancy] said they thought teenage pregnancy was a problem. They saw teenage pregnancy as a problem because it let them drop out of school, exposed them to surgical operations [during or after childbirth] and made them unhappy or ashamed in their community.”*

*Sierra Leone research report*

The young researchers called on their governments and local authorities to uphold the law and bring the perpetrators of rape and sexual abuse to justice. They also asked for economic opportunities to prevent girls from being forced into marriage or sex for money.

This report was written based on the findings of the individual child-led reports and presents some of the findings of the conversations between peers. It also starkly shows the need for targeted support for girls to prevent the abuses and poverty that lead to teenage pregnancy, as well as for young mothers and pregnant girls so they can continue their education and bring up their children with confidence and a healthy start to life.

World Vision urges governments to listen to the calls of their young citizens and end impunity for perpetrators of abuse.



Abena\*, 15

# Highlights from the research

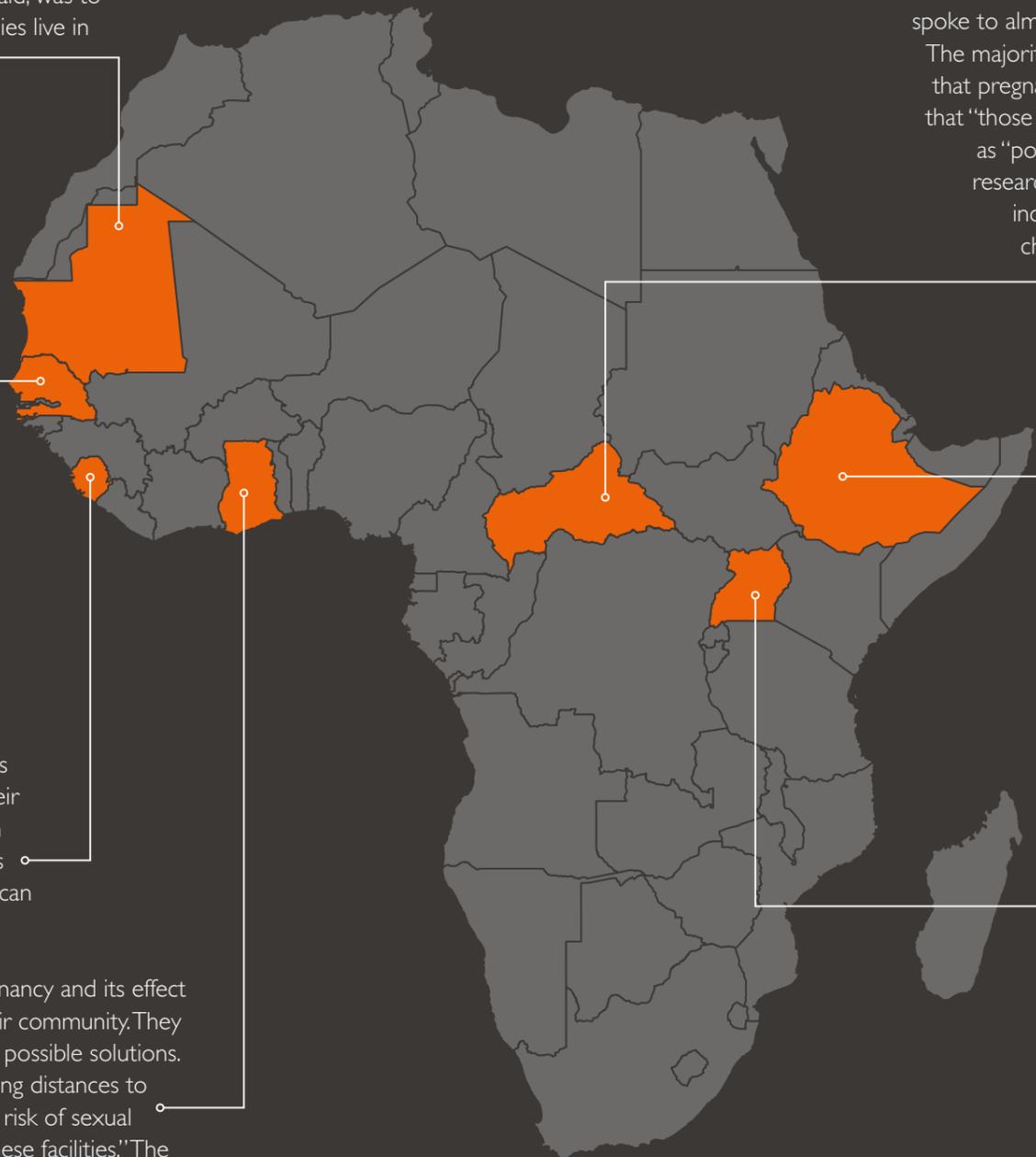
In **MAURITANIA**, children spoke to 53 girls about the high rate of child marriage and sexual abuse by adults in their community. All of the children said that pregnancy forced girls to drop out of school and a majority of the children called for the punishment of perpetrators by upholding existing laws. According to the girls, teen pregnancy “is caused by parents negligence; girls aren’t well protected, even in their own families, let alone in public places, schools, and other institutions.” The solution, the children said, was to “improve the situation for the most vulnerable girls and those whose families live in extreme poverty.”

A group of 12 young people in **SENEGAL** spoke to 122 children across two villages in September 2018. They conducted some desk research before interviewing their peers, and were fully aware that girls are much more likely to give birth in poorer regions of the world. They noted that “nearly all adolescent births (95%) occur in low and middle-income countries.” At the village level in south east Senegal, where the children live and where over half of girls are married before they are 18, the young researchers reported that “poverty, lack of parental education and lack of child protection” are the main causes of girls falling pregnant. The vast majority of girls they spoke to fell pregnant as a result of being abused by adults, including teachers.

In **SIERRA LEONE** 14 boys and girls became researchers and spoke to 19 girls who were either pregnant or had recently given birth. They chose adolescent pregnancy as a topic of great concern in their community. Similar to Ghana, they found “lack of parental care, poverty and limited medical facilities,” has made pregnancy for girls “a common problem in our town.”

“From our discussions with the 18 pregnant girls and one girl who had recently given birth in our town, many of them said their caregivers such as aunts, uncles and other relatives they stayed with could not provide for their basic needs, including adequate food to eat, paying school fees, giving them lunch or transport when going to school, learning materials, decent clothes and a place to sleep. Therefore, they decided to fall in love with men who can afford some of those basic needs, which their caregivers cannot afford.”

In November 2016, 16 children from Akotoshie, **GHANA**, identified pregnancy and its effect on education as one of the worst forms of violence against children in their community. They interviewed 100 of their peers to try to understand the problem and find possible solutions. They discovered that poor water and sanitation coverage, as well as the long distances to school and health clinics were causes of pregnancy since girls were “put at risk of sexual assault or abduction when fetching water or transporting themselves to these facilities.” The majority of children who participated in the Ghana research thought adults were responsible for their peers falling pregnant.



The child researchers found the greatest impact of pregnancy on the girls' lives was that they were forced to drop out of school as a result of their pregnancy. Of the girls the children spoke to who had experienced pregnancy, the cause was almost always poverty or neglect.

In October 2018, young researchers from the **CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC (CAR)** spoke to almost 70 children, aged between 12 – 18, about their views on child pregnancy. The majority of the girls were either pregnant or young mothers. The researchers found that pregnancy was mostly the result of forced relationships with adults. Children noted that “those responsible are most often teachers.” They also mentioned other adults such as “posted public officials” and “parents who sleep with their own daughters.” Child researchers observed how poverty increases girls' risk of becoming young mothers, including cases where they are forced into sex work as a means of survival. The children also emphasised the devastating health impact of underage pregnancy on the mother and child, including infant and maternal mortality.

In August 2019, 29 children between the ages of 12 – 19 worked in Kolfe sub city, Addis Ababa, **ETHIOPIA** interviewing 38 children and 38 adults on the topic of teenage pregnancy in their community. Common causes of teenage pregnancy were rape, child marriage, child trafficking and consensual teenage intercourse. The children found that the consequences for teenage mothers were harsh. “Their parents abandon them or remove them from their house hence the children will live in the street or with relatives placing them to further harm. They as well as their family experience stigmatization and discrimination.”

In **UGANDA**, 20 secondary school students came together in early August 2019 to look into teen pregnancy in Buikwe and Ngogwe. They spoke to children, as well as adults and caretakers, about the topic. Everyone interviewed had multiple stories of girls they knew who had become pregnant, and the researchers declared that “girls at school were most at risk as they can be convinced by the men on their way to school!”

Rape, defilement (sex with a minor), poverty and family neglect were cited as common causes of early pregnancy: “Some of the children are being neglected by their parents and some parents are poor so they can't provide necessities to their children, hence this makes them look out for men who can provide and in return they need something.”

16 World Health Organization. (2014). Adolescent pregnancy: adolescence is a time of opportunity during which a range of actions can be taken to set the stage for healthy adulthood: fact sheet (No. WHO/RHR/14.08). World Health Organization.

# Methodology

## Children campaigning for children

*"We are excited about the experience and ability to undertake a research that will bear our names. We never thought we could do it, but we have done it."*

*(Young researcher, Ghana)*

Child-led research is being pioneered by World Vision as an important way of raising children and young people's voices and ensuring they are included in campaigning for changes that will affect their futures. The approach prompts young researchers to make changes in their own lives and to get involved in advocacy and campaigning more broadly.

This publication was written by World Vision International, based on a series of studies conducted in seven countries. The research team for the country studies was composed of 46 girls and 45 boys, aged 12 – 17, from CAR, Ethiopia, Ghana, Mauritania, Senegal,

Sierra Leone and Uganda. Research was conducted in World Vision area programmes in each country, where child sponsorship projects are located. The child researchers interviewed over 550 research participants: 288 girls and 214 boys in the seven countries, as well as adults in communities in Ghana, Uganda, and Ethiopia. In preparing this report, World Vision also returned to Akotoshie, three years after the initial research, to speak to some of the child researchers and girls there.

Groups of children have long worked together to lobby local authorities on issues that impact their communities. Child protection committees or children's

clubs supported by World Vision are active in over 70 countries. They bring children together to identify issues of concern in their local area, hold authorities to account and campaign for the rights of the child.

In the same spirit, this series of research projects opened up crucial discussions at the village and town levels about a neglected area of government policy, helped to build the confidence and knowledge of young people and challenged the stigma often attached to teen pregnancy.

One young researcher in CAR explained what motivated her to participate in the project. "It is very painful for me, because I think to myself, why do these girls, instead of going to school, get pregnant and unsupported? This is what I care about. When I see this, it hurts. And I decided to talk about it." Hyppolite, 16.

The child researchers were supported by staff members who provided training on research skills and ethics, ensuring consent, voluntary participation and confidentiality. The methods used included face-to-face semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions, discussion groups and multiple-choice questionnaires.

Three years after the initial project, some of the children involved in the Ghana research reflected that it helped to give them more courage to talk to others outside of their school. They went on to present their findings to government ministers and talk to parents, teachers and local authorities about their concerns.

Two former child researchers reported that thanks to the project, when their friend was raped and became pregnant, they were better able to support her; and she is now continuing her education while her mum helps her care for her baby.

The findings of the child-led research also opened young eyes to their own prejudices and helped reshape attitudes: "I thought it would be kids who have what they need and just want to try it [sex] and then found out that they are doing it because they don't have a choice," Augustina, a 17-year-old researcher from Ghana reflected.

In Uganda, one young researcher said, "I learnt how to work hand-in-hand with the teenage mothers and not segregate them from other children." Another reflected, "I got to know that after giving birth teenage mothers can go back to school!"



*Child-led research is when children lead their own research process (designing the questionnaires, collecting information, analysing the results, and writing and disseminating their report). In this process, children and young people can be assisted by an adult facilitator, but the adult only helps the young researchers and doesn't manage or direct the research project. Child-led research is always connected to children's and young people's interests and their motivation to make a difference.*

*For more, please see: [wvi.org/child-participation](http://wvi.org/child-participation)*

# Causes and effects of teen pregnancy

Despite the seemingly random selection of communities in the seven studies, and disparate histories of the individual countries and regions, common themes emerged across sub-Saharan Africa. Girls overwhelmingly told young researchers stories of rape, abuse, and being forced into transactional relationships due to poverty. Young mothers spoke of rejection by their families and an end to their educations.

## Forced and abused

"I used to live with my uncle and he is the one who takes care of me. So when I reached adolescent age, my uncle started sleeping with me. I decided to go and report my uncle. But my uncle told me that if I go and report, he will kill me. So I didn't go and report and that is how I got pregnant." (Ghana respondent)

There is a growing body of research from sub-Saharan Africa that suggests the first sexual experience of many girls is often unwanted and forced<sup>17</sup> and this was reflected in the conversations the young researchers had in their communities.

**SEXUAL VIOLENCE** against children is any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic, or otherwise directed, against a person's sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work.<sup>18</sup>

It is an umbrella term that includes (a) The inducement or coercion of a child to engage in any unlawful or psychologically harmful sexual activity; (b) The use of children in commercial sexual exploitation; and (c) The use of children in audio or visual images of child sexual abuse; (d) Child prostitution, sexual slavery, sexual exploitation in travel and tourism, trafficking (within and between countries) and sale of children for sexual purposes and forced marriage.<sup>19</sup>

In many of the child-led reports, child researchers talked about long distances between health centres, wells and schools as causes of teen pregnancy. The lengthy journey times, sometimes along less travelled paths and roads, leave girls vulnerable to attacks along their route.

Child researchers in Ghana described how a friend of theirs was raped when a man entered her bedroom at night while she slept. Another girl in the same community was raped by her father's friend after she fetched him something from the market.

One Ethiopian girl, 17, told the child researchers her story. "One day my girlfriends and one of the boys left our house and I was left behind with one of the boys. He started harassing me and I tried to scream yet he hit me hard so I lost consciousness and he raped me. When I woke up he was sitting there and I started to cry. My friends came, they simply said 'get over it.'"

In Uganda, child researchers reported that "A pastor of one of the churches in Ngogwe raped a 12-year-old girl. He would go to the girl's home to pray with family and then he turned to their young daughter and raped her."



Clara, 18, and her one-year-old daughter Kechura

In *Small Cracks, Big Gaps*, World Vision reviewed the policies and legislative progress of 20 countries that made commitments to end violence against children. The report reveals that, while significant progress has been made to end violence against children, many gaps remain, particularly concerning the protection of children from sexual violence and child marriage. Often times, the commitments that were made have not been matched by substantial action.

Similarly, research into legislation in African Union countries regarding teenage mothers' access to education, shows that while laws may be in place to persecute defilements and statutory rape, and ensure a girl's right to education; there are large gaps in enforcement and action.<sup>20</sup> Although defilement has been illegal in Uganda since 1990, it is rarely prosecuted due to family pressures and financial pay offs.<sup>21</sup> Weak implementation and prosecution was also mentioned by the child researchers in Ghana who cited a common practice whereby police will refuse to investigate cases of rape without the payment of 'travel support' by the victim's parents.

17 WHO: Krug, Dahlberg, Mercy, Zwi and Lozano (2002). "World Report on Violence and Health." Chapter 6. [http://www.who.int/violence\\_injury\\_prevention/violence/global\\_campaign/en/chap6.pdf](http://www.who.int/violence_injury_prevention/violence/global_campaign/en/chap6.pdf)

18 Ibid.

19 Committee of the Rights of the Child (2011), General comment No. 13: The right of the child to freedom from all forms of violence. [http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/crc/docs/CRC.C.GC.13\\_en.pdf](http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/crc/docs/CRC.C.GC.13_en.pdf)

20 HRW (2018). "Leave No Girl Behind in Africa." [https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report\\_pdf/au0618\\_web.pdf](https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/au0618_web.pdf)

21 ODI: Bantebya, Ochen, Pereznieta and Walker (2014). "Cross-generational and transactional sexual relations in Uganda: Income poverty as a risk factor for adolescents." <https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/9308.pdf>

## Forced and abused: Mulu\*

Mulu, now 17, was just six-years-old when her father died and her mum gave her to another family as she struggled to support her children. As Mulu grew up, her adoptive family refused to send her to school, and insisted that she work at home for them. At the age of 11, she fled home. Searching for somewhere to go, she met a broker who offered to find her a job as a housemaid.

Unfortunately, the situation was not as she expected. Her new employer was a man in his 40s, and he harassed Mulu and raped her repeatedly. "I begged him not to do this to me, but he refused and threatened me not to tell anyone. After some months I started to feel strange and told a woman living next to us. She suspected that I might be pregnant. I was so frightened; I did not know what to do. The next day I told him that I was pregnant. He kicked me out of the house and changed his address."

Mulu faced many challenges beyond her age. "I tried many ways to abort the child, but it did not happen. I slept on the street for more than five months eating food from garbage. Finally, I went to my mother and told her what had happened, but she did not accept me. One of her friends heard my story and has allowed me to live with her."

Mulu gave birth to her child and started working as a day labourer in order to support her child. She dreams of becoming a self-sufficient woman and supporting her daughter; "I feel like my own future is ruined but I live for my child. If God wills it, I will continue my education after my daughter starts school. I do not want her to repeat my life."

According to Tiresa, a health extension expert at Kolfe health center, in Mulu's community there are plenty of similar cases with many girls from poor and vulnerable families. Tiresa and her staff provide counselling and health support to the girls and encourage them to give birth at the health centre.

"Empowering girls is key to preventing teenage pregnancy," adds Rahel, Child Protection Specialist with World Vision Ethiopia. "In order to prevent teen pregnancy, we need to educate society and children about their rights and options and intervene when cases of abuse happen. At World Vision we work on prevention by creating awareness in schools in collaboration with child protection committees, and working with faith leaders, health and education experts, police and lawyers."



It is estimated that **120 million girls under the age of 20** (about one in 10 worldwide) have been subjected to **forced sexual intercourse (ie rape) or other forced sexual acts** at some point in their lives.

(UNICEF 2015)

"The broker told me that I would make a lot of money if I worked as a housemaid and I agreed as I had nowhere to go."

## Sex for survival

“I lived with my mother who could not afford to pay my fees and so my friends advised me to have sex with boys so that they can help me in my schooling, but it ended me getting pregnant.” (Ghana participant)

Overwhelmingly and without exception, the child researchers found that respondents viewed poverty as the most significant cause of sexual abuse and its effect, pregnancy. Sex for money – either with boys their own age or more often, with adults in the community – was frequently seen as the only option for many girls in the communities surveyed.

The children across the seven countries are well aware of the massive injustice experienced by those who must take great risks just to survive. The young researchers noted that migration to cities in search of work and homelessness has prompted some girls their age to enter the sex trade.

In Ethiopia, child researchers also identified child trafficking as a potential cause of teen pregnancy. “These girls take different routes before they reach their destination and if they do not have sufficient money to facilitate the process they will be sold off or be forced to perform sexual acts.”

As one young mother in Sierra Leone said: “With no other relative around to feed me, I was forced to find a boyfriend to provide food for me so that I did not starve to death.”

And another: “My parents said that they do not have money for my education and therefore I struggle for myself to find money and take care of my schooling. The only option I had was to find a boyfriend who could support me to continue my education. As the boyfriend supported my schooling, he always asked me to sleep with him. Sleeping with my boyfriend caused my early pregnancy.” (Sierra Leone participant)

The young researchers in Senegal reported “girls are sometimes tempted to resort to the sex trade in order to help their parents, meet their needs and purchase their school supplies due to their family’s precarious situation.”

“I needed money to register for my basic school certificate examination when I was in my final year and could only do so by sleeping with boys to get money, leading to pregnancy.” (Ghana participant)

In Sierra Leone, five of the pregnant girls the young researchers interviewed said their families would often not eat for two or three days because of lack of money. One explained, “Every morning I go to school without money to buy food and I always saw my colleagues buying food and eating during lunch. Therefore, I had no option but to find a boyfriend who can give me some money to buy food at school during lunch. Visiting my boyfriend every day to give me money to buy food at school resulted to my pregnancy.”



Joanna\*, 17, and baby Sheilat

# Sex for survival: Zion\*

“The cause of teenage pregnancy in Uganda is poverty.”

Zion, 16, is eight months pregnant. She lives near Ngogwe in Uganda.

I finished Primary 7, and then went to stay with my father for Senior 1. I only started term 1 on St Cornelius day. In the holidays, I went to the islands to see my mother. But I found that she is too poor.

Someone came, and he started telling me things. I met him in December; he was a shopkeeper, and 18 years old. And I started asking because we were poor, but when they give you, they take. And I agreed. I didn't know I was pregnant when I came back from the islands.

But then I found out. My father told me, “You go from here. You go to your aunt.” He's done providing me with care. He told me that he doesn't have money he can waste on me. And he told me to leave the school.

I don't even have a phone, and if I try to get a phone...if you call the man, he doesn't answer. A nice doctor tried to search for the man, but he's gone away.

I wanted to kill myself, because of this problem. But my aunt told me, “You'll live, and you'll stay with me. You can stay here. We will fight and struggle.”

I had wanted to become a nurse. Those nurses I see, they always look smart, they have good behaviour, good manners. After giving birth, I will suffer with my aunt, and will get the money to pay the school fees. So I can go back, and I can start again.

Until then, I'll just be here, doing house work with my aunt, like today. Some days I become sick, and others I become healthy. I go on changing. I give birth next month.

The cause of teenage pregnancy in Uganda is poverty. You end up like this when you have some needs, and your parents don't have money. If you ask for lunch, he or she just tells you, “I don't have money.” And so they suggest that you struggle for yourself, and you look for money. And you get it, but it makes these problems, like getting pregnant when you are still young.

It happens at school, too. The teachers, they will tell you, “you bring the books.” So you go back, and you tell your parents, “I don't have the books needed.” But they are just going to say, “What can I do for you? Me too, I don't have money.”

And you will have to search for yourself to get that book, and even the school fees. Children have to suffer for themselves. Those parents, they don't care. We need clothes, and sanitary pads, and other things too.

If you are pregnant, you suffer. Other people abuse those of us who have gotten pregnant. They laugh at you, they say things, they spread rumours about you. But if you hear someone abusing you, you just have to control yourself and keep quiet.

My friends haven't come to see me since I got pregnant. I don't know why. I've been asking myself, but I don't know why they don't come.

I want my baby to be a policeman, to provide security. I want to help others; if I see him providing security to others, me too, I will become happy. And I want to become a nurse to save peoples' lives.

I want to be faithful to my son, or if she's a girl, providing her with what she wants, in order to reach her goals.

## Child marriage

Poverty, child marriage, and child pregnancy are all also inextricably linked. As one child protection expert in Ghana explained: “When a girl gets pregnant she will be handed over to whoever made her pregnant.”

In Ethiopia, child researchers were told of “a seventh grade and 16-year-old girl whom they knew who was pressured to get married by her parents. She was married to the individual who is 30 years of age. After she got married she became pregnant and at the time of getting birth it was a very difficult labour and she lost her life.”

In CAR, the researchers spoke to a girl who was “forced to go out with a man secretly.” When she fell pregnant, she felt her only option was to marry the perpetrator. She suffered health problems following the birth due to her young age.

## Unsafe in the classroom

“I was always visited by a teacher just like my sister. He would invite me into his room, where we would watch TV and listen to music. We fell in love with each other. We had intercourse and I became pregnant.” (Senegal respondent)

“Ibra was a primary teacher. I met him on the road, when we were back for holidays. He was 28. He promised to take me back to school after giving birth. I still wanted to study. Now when I call him, he doesn’t receive my calls. He’s not there.” Joanna\*, 17, Uganda.

For many young women, the most common place where sexual coercion and harassment are experienced is in school<sup>22</sup> and the young researchers in CAR spoke to children who reported “sexual relations between pupils and their teachers in exchange for grades allowing them to move up a class. Our French teacher impregnated one of the girls in our class; she stays with the nuns now.”

A series of recent studies have shown that making secondary school more accessible can decrease teen pregnancy rates by up to 34 per cent.<sup>23</sup> However, despite a global body of research that says continued enrolment in the school system is the safest place for girls, what came across repeatedly from the young researchers and the girls they’d spoken to who have fallen pregnant is that these journeys to school, and girls’ presence in school itself, can be perilous. In addition to sexual abuse by teachers, children reported cases of rape along journeys to school, and that girls are often forced into transactional relationships with older men in order to afford costs such as transport to school, money for textbooks, or to pay for lunch between classes.

The young researchers repeatedly found that girls in school were generally more likely to become pregnant than girls out of school. This can perhaps be attributed to the high costs of school fees and supplies for girls from poorer families, which, combined with local practices and weak child protection systems, leave them vulnerable to transactional relationships and abuse.

## Sex education

Although a majority of the pregnant girls and young mums spoken to by the young researchers identified rape or sex for survival as the cause of their pregnancy, a small number of girls found themselves pregnant through consensual relationships with peers.

“For me, it was lack of sex education. Since I was not enrolled in school, I engaged in sexual activity and that is how I got pregnant.” (Ghana participant)

“I wish my parents had told me more about the subject of sex education. Unfortunately, I didn’t have this chance and I fell into this trap. I ask girls to control their menstrual cycle and avoid unprotected sex. Because at the slightest mistake on their part, they can get pregnant.” Farida, 17, CAR

In some cases, the children the researchers spoke to mentioned sex between children of the same age as a cause of child pregnancy. In these cases, most children highlighted the need for sex education and access to contraceptives, as well as higher levels of parental involvement.

“I’ve had to quit my first year of college. I’m pregnant now. I’ve been going out with my boyfriend for a while but my parents didn’t know about our relationship. I wanted to sleep with him. It’s only my Mum who knows I’m pregnant; she asked me if I was having my periods. That’s how she found out.” Fanta, 17, Senegal

Researchers in Ethiopia identified “peer pressure as the main contributing factor on children’s engagement in underage sexual intercourse. Children not only engage in sexual intercourse, they also sometimes leave their home, eventually living on the street because of negative reinforcement from their friends.”

Similar to poverty and being forced into sex for survival, lack of sexual education as a cause of teen pregnancy can be traced to low levels of parental involvement. Many of the young researchers’ reports noted the influence of parental neglect or lack of protection on young girls’ vulnerability.



Worldwide, complications related to early pregnancy and childbirth are the leading **cause of death for girls aged 15 to 19.**

(WHO 2018)

<sup>22</sup> Boehmer (2013). “Girl child marriage and its association with national rates of HIV, maternal health, and infant mortality across 97 countries.” *Violence against Women*, 19:536-51.

<sup>23</sup> Evans (2019). “Build High Schools to Reduce Teen Pregnancy and 4 Other Findings in Global Education.” <https://www.cgdev.org/blog/build-high-schools-reduce-teen-pregnancy-and-4-other-findings-global-education>

## Isolated and an end to education

“Sometimes girls are shamed and mocked by others at school when signs of early pregnancy start to appear.” (CAR participant)

Thirteen of the pregnant girls with whom researchers spoke in Sierra Leone said they felt socially isolated from family and friends as a result of their pregnancy. “They said as they got pregnant their parents or caregivers do not give them enough food, good clothes, drove them from the family house, sang bad songs for them.”

In many countries, children also spoke of rejection from their families as a result of their pregnancies. “In the beginning of our pregnancy, our family and the neighbouring community did not receive the news very well. We were shunned and it was a challenging time. I even left the area where I used to live and stayed with relatives for a while to avoid the stigma.” Girl, 17, Ethiopia.

The rejection by those who should be supporting the girls has wider repercussions, often causing girls to drop out of school to avoid bullying. In Uganda, the majority of the girls spoken to who have become pregnant were kicked out of their homes and forced to seek support from extended family members. As their parents refuse to continue paying school fees, their educations have now also come to an abrupt end.

Almost all of the child-led research projects noted school drop out as a direct result of pregnancy.

“I was in school when I met a man; he proposed to take care of me and my education.” Felicia, now 18, was just 15 and pregnant for the first time when the young researchers interviewed her in Akotoshie. When we spoke to her again in 2019, she explained how the pregnancy had led to an end to her education. “I moved back to my mother, but the man stopped taking care of me and my baby. Life became difficult for us, so my mum asked me to return to stay with him and I got pregnant again.”

“I stopped schooling after I had my first baby because there was no one to take care of me. The man stopped supporting. I had plans to continue my education so I could be a nurse or a soldier in future.”

Young researchers in CAR spoke to a 16-year-old pregnant girl who dropped out of school when she fell pregnant. She said she was forced to “find a man” to take care of her when her parents could not. Their report found that “the main consequences of teenage pregnancy on education are low levels of education among girls, failing exams, exclusion from school and voluntary discontinuation of schooling.”

In Senegal the young researchers found that “the main consequence of adolescent pregnancy is dropping out, according to 80% of respondents.”

Matilda, 22



In many African countries, old laws ban pregnant girls from attending school, and even where laws have been changed, implementation has been slow. Twenty-six countries now have re-entry policies designed to pave the way back to education for young mothers, but they vary greatly in the level of support (or punitive measures) provided.<sup>24</sup>

In Ghana, new re-entry guidance published in 2018, as well as the elimination of school fees for Senior High School in 2017, seem to have made a difference to the experiences of the teenage mothers spoken to by the young researchers. In 2015 a study of pregnant girls in Ghana found that only 50 out of 185 pregnant pupils surveyed took part in exams for the 2015/16 academic year.<sup>25</sup> In Akotoshie, whereas Matilda, 22, sat her Junior High exam eight years ago when she was raped and pregnant at age 13 and then never went back to school, her younger peer Adjoa\*, 17, went back to school a few months after giving birth in 2017 and plans to continue to Senior High School.

### Advocating for girls in Ghana

*Gregory Dery, Child Protection and Advocacy Manager at World Vision Ghana, supported the young researchers in Akotoshie in 2016, and was part of the technical team that worked on the new Ministry of Education guidance for re-entry in 2018. The new guidelines allow pregnant girls to choose to either continue schooling while pregnant, or to defer and return after delivery. "The problem has been girls who experience early and unplanned pregnancy were driven out of schools by the heads and were not allowed to return or even to participate in examinations," Gregory explains.*



<sup>24</sup> HRW (2018). "Leave No Girl Behind in Africa." [https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report\\_pdf/au0618\\_web.pdf](https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/au0618_web.pdf)

<sup>25</sup> PDA Ghana (2019). "Pupils exchange sex for sanitary pads." <http://www.pdaghana.com/index.php/jobs/125-news/social-human-development-news/436-pupils-exchange-sex-for-sanitary-pads.html>

In other countries, change is occurring more slowly. A re-enrolment policy was also issued in 2018 by the Ministry of Education and Sports in Uganda to encourage continuation of studies, but none of the girls spoken to over the course of the research were actively attending school. School attendance was made all but impossible due to the continued cost of school fees, withdrawal of parental support and community prejudice. There was also confusion over whether the new guidance meant girls could continue to attend school or were simply allowed to take their exams.

One girl in Uganda, Joan\*, 14, explained, "In the village, there is one parent who came to my school. She told my headmistress that I'm pregnant. Headmistress told me, 'you go back home. You will not come and do not learn.'"

World Vision has been working with Joan's teacher to ensure she is still allowed to sit her exams, and return to school after the birth of her baby. However, she said, "If a school allows me to go and study when I'm pregnant I will go and study."



Infants born to mothers younger than 18 years of age have a **60% higher risk of dying** in the first year of life, compared to those born to mothers **older than 19 years.**

(UNICEF 2014)

### Impact on health

Many of the young people's reports mentioned the impact that pregnancy had on girls' health.

One young mother (and researcher) in CAR said, "I am aware that early pregnancy can lead to difficult deliveries, surgery, post-partum infections, even miscarriages, maternal deaths, etc. What is of interest to me are the cases of girls' surgeries. These girls are closer to death than giving life and staying alive, because they are too young for that [pregnancy]." Melicia, 17.

It is also likely that girls lacking familial support or who are living in the poorest communities receive far from adequate pre- and postnatal care, resulting in higher rates of complications.

The girls the young researchers in Sierra Leone spoke to reported poor health as a result of their pregnancies, and young researchers in Ethiopia described the physical and emotional impacts of early pregnancy:

"The girl might suffer from fistula - a condition in which an abnormal opening occurs that connects the vagina to another organ, such as a bladder, colon or rectum. In addition, a girl might lose her life during childbirth due to her immature physical development to manage childbirth. The emotional impact includes a girl experiencing psychological problems if she did not get the appropriate psychosocial support during this period. A girl might lose self-confidence and self-esteem, continually blame herself, and develop hatred towards herself and in extreme circumstances commit suicide. A story shared by a community member shows the challenge of early pregnancy and delivery, 'I gave birth when I was fifteen years of age, it was a very challenging time for me. It was a very hard labour compared to the time I gave birth after I became physically mature.'"

## Children's calls for change

There was consensus amongst almost all of the young researchers that there must be an end to impunity for sexual abuse and the law must act to protect girls.

The children in Ghana acknowledged the work they have been able to achieve by suggesting "child protection committees should be formed in all communities." In multiple countries, children also spoke about the need for existing laws, such as those to punish perpetrators of rape, for instance, be enforced.

In general, across all seven countries, children were asking for five main things:

1. Prohibit sexual violence against children. Enforce laws to end impunity for perpetrators of sexual abuse and protect and assist victims of abuse.
2. Help establish strong re-entry policies and eliminate school fees so that young mothers are able to continue their education.
3. Increase access to sexual health education and contraception.
4. Prevent sexual abuse of children by making schools safe and empowering parents to care for their children. Work with parents to increase livelihood opportunities so that they are better able to support their children.
5. Change harmful attitudes, beliefs and social norms that condone sexual violence against children through mobilisation of families, religious leaders and communities.



## Calls for action from young researchers in CAR

The children's demands summarise well the views of many of their fellow researchers. In their own words, they wrote:

*"To eliminate/stop early pregnancy in young girls, the children suggest the relevant parties undertake the following:*

- *The parents should: Advise their children, avoid exploiting their children for economic reasons, avoid sending their children out late at night, only to the fields, and to assume their responsibilities;*
- *The government should: restore authority to the State in the locality, alert the judiciary, impose the law on those who commit violence against children particularly, promote media aimed at child protection, take disciplinary measure against those who break the law, promote education on health and reproduction;*
- *Teachers should: not rape young girls, those who commit rape should be banished from the school, build toilets individually for girls, boys and teachers, respect the professional code of ethics, stop employment of children for their domestic and rural tasks;*
- *School authority should: impose internal regulation in schools for best practice, have regular meetings with parents for precautionary measures, raise awareness about violence and early marriage, and their causes and consequences, organise training of peer educators for young people;*
- *The children and young people should: listen to advice from parents and others, avoid interacting with males with malicious intentions, organise discussion groups on the consequences of early pregnancy;*
- *Religious leaders should: Raise awareness of and give advice to members of their church, organise sensitisation on early pregnancy in the Christian movements.*
- *Others should: Continue to increase awareness and help the population."*

# A letter in closing, by Adjoa\*, Matilda, and Felicia

Akotoshie, Ghana

August 9, 2019



We are teen mothers in Akotoshie, and we need support from our parents and the public so that we can progress in life. We hope this has been able to clear some of the misconceptions you might have about us teen mothers.

We have different stories, but we have all suffered from the stigma of being a teen mum. People say a lot of things to insult and belittle you. People sometimes gossip and make fun of you because you are a nursing mother. They are always looking for opportunity to use our situation as a teenage mother to ridicule us and this can be very hurtful.

## **Matilda:**

My parents always tell me that since I have been able to get pregnant and give birth, then I should be able to fend for myself. But it wasn't by choice; I was raped. Everyone says I am a bad girl. I was nearly thrown out of the house, it was my elder brother who intervened and saved me.

We have been stigmatised and people do not like to associate with us. I used to teach children at the church but I have stopped. I always sit at the back whenever I go to church now. I was so ashamed of myself. I was so ashamed and scared that I couldn't even go out in public.

The perception that we are bad girls is very unfortunate.

People are always looking out for opportunities to talk bad about you and once you react you are seen as a disrespectful child. People even cite your child as a disadvantage in your life and prevent others from supporting you. The best thing we can do is to be cautious and hold ourselves in dignity.

What worries us most is that people think once you are a teenage mother then it's either because you are a bad girl or you are lazy. We detest that perception.

We want the world to know that we are not lazy; it was due to certain circumstances that made us pregnant. The fact that we are teenage mothers does not mean we are bad girls. We have learnt a lot from our circumstances as teenage mothers; we are not foolish. People think we do not like to work, but they forget that taking care of children is very demanding and work in itself.

There are very few good men around now. Most men would only deceive you and have an affair with you. The good ones would not come to you unless you are old enough to get married.

## **Felicia and Adjoa\*:**

We are not bad girls. Two of us, we only needed money to take care of ourselves and our educations. There were books and other materials that we needed to buy, but for both of us, we did not have money. So we had to get other alternatives of getting money to procure those materials. Because we got pregnant, our peers thought of us as prostitutes. The fact that we got pregnant does not mean we have been having sex with any man we meet.

As teenage mothers, you have to be very tough and hard working. So that people will not see you as lazy and conclude that you have an affair with any man that comes your way. People also need to know that we are victims of circumstances and the fact that we are teenage mothers does not make us prostitutes.

We are teen mothers and we would like government and other agencies to support us to progress in life. We thank you for listening to us and helping to clear the misconceptions others have about us.





**It takes a world**  
to end violence against children

## **The violent truth about teenage pregnancy** | September 2019

World Vision is a Christian relief, development, and advocacy organisation dedicated to working with children, families, and communities to overcome poverty and injustice. Inspired by our Christian values, we are dedicated to working with the world's most vulnerable people. We serve all people regardless of religion, race, ethnicity, or gender.

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