

UN ZAMBIA JOINT STATEMENT ON WORLD POPULATION DAY

11 July 2013

World Population Day, commemorated each year on July 11 July, brings to the fore the demographic trends, dividends and challenges that impact societies the world over. The theme for this year is 'adolescent pregnancy'. This is a topic that affects us all as policy makers, parents, teachers, students and friends.

Globally, too many of the estimated 16 million teenage girls who give birth each year never had the opportunity to plan their pregnancy. In Zambia, over 30% of 15-19 year old girls have already been pregnant or have had a child. This is an alarming rate of pregnancy among adolescents. Zambia's 2013 MDG Report indicates early marriage and adolescent pregnancy as two main triggers for the high maternal mortality rate in the country. 42% of Zambian women are married before the age of 18. Thirty eight mothers die each month due to complications relating to pregnancy and child birth. And many of these mothers are teenagers. Unsafe abortions, obstetric fistula, hemorrhage and malnutrition often result in young mothers facing a heightened risk of maternal complications, death and disability. Their children, even when surviving birth, face higher risks as well.

"Adolescent pregnancy is an abrupt disruption to education, and an end to childhood. Keeping girls safe and in secondary school, enforcing laws that deter early marriage and harshly punish rape, and the active promotion and access to birth control and reproductive health education – this is what will break this cycle" said Kanni Wignaraja, the UN Resident Coordinator and UNDP Representative.

Education and staying in school plays a major role in changing this situation. It creates awareness, it delays marriage and childbearing, and it reduces the otherwise high fertility rate. A Zambian woman with no formal education has a fertility rate of 8; with one year of secondary this halves to 4; and then it halves again to 2.4 with one year of tertiary education. This pattern also correlates with infant and child health. The better the education of the mother, the healthier the child. Good quality reproductive health services that cover family planning and the prevention and treatment of sexually transmitted infections, including HIV, must be readily available in order for adolescent boys and girls to make informed and healthy choices about the onset of sexual relations, pregnancy and child spacing.

On this World Population Day, the UN in Zambia calls on the government and all stakeholders to help make the right public policy choices and to invest resources in the education, health and wellbeing of adolescent girls. Every young girl, regardless of where she lives, her economic or social circumstances, has the right to enjoy and fulfill her potential. Today, too many girls in Zambia and across the world are denied that right. We can change that.