

Health

Pregnancy in Mozambique up

Teen pregnancy epidemic 'drives' population boom

MURRUPELANE, Mozambique, Aug 13, (Agencies): In the tiny maternity ward in Murrupelane, two 16-year-old mothers breast-feed their babies, both born that morning.

Mozambique's child marriage and teen pregnancy rates are among the highest in the world, a driving factor in the population explosion in this poverty-plagued southern African nation.

After emerging from a brutal war in 1992, the former Portuguese colony saw its population swell 40 percent in the two decades to 2017, reaching 29 million today.

"My parents really wanted me to get married," says Julia Afonso, one of the girls who has just given birth in Murrupelane, a village in the north.

In a tiny voice, she says her family received 1,500 meticals (\$21, 22 euros) as a dowry.

Around half of Mozambique's women - 48.2 percent - marry before they turn 18, according to UN children's agency UNICEF.

Of girls aged between 15 and 19, 46.4 percent are either pregnant or have already become mothers.

These early marriages and pregnancies "are impoverishing the community," says Murrupelane village chief Wazir Abacar.

Young parents "cannot feed their children, and the mums leave school," he said. As a result, 58 percent of Mozambican women are illiterate.

Ema Nelmane, now 13, gave into the advances of a man she met in the market who offered her 200 meticals (three euros).

"She saw a chance to get the same shoes her friends were wearing," her grandmother said, by way of explanation.

When she fell pregnant, Ema was flabbergasted.

"I didn't know you could get pregnant by making love," she said, breast-feeding seven-month-old Ismail in the clay yard outside her grandmother's home.

Ema was plucked prematurely into the world of adults.

"I can't go out and play with my friends anymore," she said.

As in other developing countries, teenagers in Mozambique often fall pregnant "through lack of education," said demographer Carlos Arnaldo.

"Parents see in these births a guarantee that they'll be looked after when they get old."

Until recently, Mozambique's government did little to tackle demographic problems.

But the mounting costs of the population boom have forced a change of thinking.

"The economic consequences for

the government are that it has to build hospitals and schools," said Pascoa Wate, head of maternal and child health at the health ministry.

"In spite of government spending, people don't have access to them."

In a bid to curb the population explosion, Mozambique's government is in the process of changing the law to allow marriage only at 18, rather than at 16 with parental consent.

"We know that the practice of early marriage is rooted in deeply-seated cultural values and social norms that prioritise fertility," said Youth Minister Nyeleti Mondlane.

With UN support, Mozambique has also been waging a contraception awareness campaign since 2016.

Only a quarter of women currently have access to contraception, according to a national health survey.

In the shadow of a mango tree in the northern village of Namissica, a dozen women crowd around a table to watch a nurse demonstrate how to use different contraception, with the help of a wooden model penis and a plastic vagina.

If their husbands are "not cooperative", nurse Fatima da Silva Cobre advises women to opt for a birth control implant.

Also:

BENI, Congo: Highlighting the dangers in containing an Ebola outbreak in a war zone, suspected rebels killed seven people in northeastern Congo and sent residents fleeing, an official said.

Global health officials have warned that combating this virus outbreak is complicated by multiple armed groups in the mineral-rich region and a restless population that includes 1 million displaced people and scores of refugees leaving for nearby Uganda every week.

The insecurity means health workers might have to change a vaccination strategy that proved successful in Congo's previous Ebola outbreak, the World Health Organization's emergency preparedness chief Peter Salama has said.

The "ring vaccination" approach of first vaccinating health workers, contacts of Ebola victims and their contacts might have to give way to the approach of vaccinating everyone in a certain geographic area such as a village or neighborhood. That would require a larger number of vaccine doses.

Vaccinations began Wednesday in the current outbreak, which was declared on Aug. 1 and has killed 11 people in the densely populated region. WHO has said more than 3,000 Ebola vaccine doses are available in Congo.



31-year-old nurse Malakeh Harbaliyya treats a child at Hope Hospital in the rebel held village of Al-Ghandura, northeast of Aleppo, on Aug 1. (AFP)

Docs reunited to open hospital

Syria medics mete out hope in Aleppo city

AL GHANDURA, Syria, Aug 13, (AFP): Her scarred hands wrapped in gloves, Malakeh Harbaliyya lifted an infant out of an incubator at a hospital in Syria's rural north, holding him gently as he guzzled milk from a bottle.

Nearly two years ago, the nurse and her brave colleagues were scrambling to save premature babies from heavy regime bombardment of Aleppo city, before ultimately being forced to quit the facility altogether.

Now the same team of doctors has reunited to open Hope Hospital in northern parts of the province still outside regime control.

"I think of the children first before thinking of myself, because their lives are in our hands," said 31-year-old Harbaliyya at the facility in rebel-held Al-Ghandura.

"Their tiny souls didn't do anything to deserve this war."

In November 2016, Harbaliyya was working in the only children's hospital still operating in rebel parts of Aleppo city when an air strike slammed into the building.

In footage of the aftermath, Harbaliyya is seen scooping up a baby in a light pink blanket, then suddenly bursting into loud sobs.

Barely eight months later, after evacuating the city, a car bomb sent Harbaliyya herself into intensive care in neighbouring Turkey.

But she has pulled through, and the severe burns on her hands have today healed into a swirl of scars.

Her hair covered by a pink-coloured scarf and dressed in a top that reads "Girls for the Future," Harbaliyya beamed as she lovingly pinched a frail infant's cheeks.

"My colleagues at the Hope Hospital - the staff with me here - gave me the will to live," she said.

Examine

In blue scrubs, Dr Hatem greeted his colleagues at the door before heading in to examine a girl squirming on a consultation bed from stomach pain.

The hallway features a large portrait of Mohammad Wassim Maaz, a beloved children's doctor who died in an air strike on Aleppo city in April 2016.

Later that year, after the city's Children's Hospital was knocked out of action and as a regime victory loomed, Hatem and his colleagues formulated a plan.

With government troops closing in, the staff knew they would soon be evacuated from Aleppo and wanted to stay together, said the 32-year-old doctor, also the hospital's director.

"Wherever we went, we wanted to set up a children's hospital," said Hatem, preferring not to give his surname.

In under a month, a crowd-funding campaign by the Turkey-based Independent Doctors Association and Britain's CanDo charity gathered enough donations from around the world to rehabilitate and run a new hospital for a whole year.

"We would never have imagined that we could find the whole amount in

just three weeks," Hatem said.

With equipment brought from Britain via neighbouring Turkey, they opened the Hope Hospital in April 2017 in the previously underserved Al-Ghandura district.

"There was not a single dispensary or anything to do with medicine in the whole area," said Hatem, who crisscrossed parts of the province still under rebel control looking for a good location.

Slowly, the facility grew into a fully-fledged children's hospital complete with nine baby incubators, a malnutrition clinic, a well-equipped lab and emergency services.

After having to refer many women to another hospital, they added an obstetrics and gynaecology section too.

"The team is mostly the same as the one in Aleppo but, because of the bigger workload here and the higher turnout, we had to increase staff," said Hatem.

As the only specialised facility for miles, his clinic set amidst tall pine trees receives 8,500 to 9,500 cases a month.

"The Hope Hospital really is a point of hope," he said.

"It allowed the staff from Aleppo to feel that there is still humanity left in the world," Hatem said of the donations that brought the facility to life.

But funds have started to run out and another crowd-funding campaign failed to meet its target.

Now, staff hope to sign a contract with the UN's children agency (UNICEF) to help run the facility for six

more months. Hospital manager Riyadh Najjar, 31, said the hospital is providing services to many in need.

Also:

FRANKFURT AM MAIN: Investors fled shares in German chemicals and pharmaceuticals giant Bayer Monday, fearing a massive damages ruling against one of newly-acquired US firm Monsanto's flagship products could signal a wave of costly lawsuits.

The stock had plunged 11.5 percent to 82.60 euros (\$94.47), lopping around \$10 billion off its market value.

A California jury on Friday awarded dying groundskeeper Dewayne Johnson damages of almost \$290 million, saying Monsanto should have warned buyers that its flagship Round-up weedkiller could cause cancer.

While observers have predicted thousands of other suits could follow, Bayer said the jury's findings went against scientific evidence and that other courts might "arrive at different conclusions".

Nevertheless, "if it's a quarter of a billion dollars per case, you don't need to lose many lawsuits before it becomes quite expensive," said analyst Michael Leacock of MainFirst bank, pointing out that Monsanto faces some 4,000 US lawsuits at the state level and 450 so-called "multi-district" cases at the federal level.

"The total cost, in our view, could easily reach \$10 billion" if Bayer were to settle out of court with a still larger number of plaintiffs, he predicted.

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