

CONVENING BRIEF

Partnering With Adolescent Mothers to Break the Cycle of Intergenerational Poverty

A Side Event at the 78th Session of the United Nations General Assembly

JANUARY 2024



Executive Summary

While adolescent motherhood is common, it is not often a priority for global funders. Adolescent mothers are a diverse group, but they express common desires: educational and economic opportunities, political inclusion, parenting and child care support, and an end to the social stigma and isolation that sideline them from creating the future they want for themselves and their children.

Donors, program implementers, and policymakers all play a role in supporting adolescent mothers by supporting programs and policies that:

- fight stigma about young motherhood.
- support girls to continue their education and pursue economic opportunities.
- integrate child care, child development, and parenting support into solutions.
- bring adolescent mothers together for social support.
- give adolescent mothers a seat at the table.



Saskia Guerrier (Conrad N. Hilton Foundation) and Gabrielle Bailey (Children's Rights Innovation Fund) deliver opening remarks.

Event Overview

Around the world, adolescent motherhood is a common experience. On average, 30% of girls ages 15 to 19 are either married, have children, or both, according to the most recent Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) data for countries in sub-Saharan Africa. And while these mothers and their young children are uniquely vulnerable, they are often invisible to funders, policymakers, and non-governmental organizations and shunned by their families and communities.

On September 18, 2023, the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation with Population Reference Bureau (PRB), Children's Rights and Violence Prevention Fund (CRVPF), Children's Rights Innovation Fund (CRIF), Population Council GIRL Center, International Resource for Impact and Storytelling (IRIS), and We Are Purposeful brought together an international group of donors, program implementers, government officials, and representatives from multilateral organizations to amplify the voices of adolescent mothers in East and Southern Africa (ESA) and create space for formal powerholders to share their commitments to address adolescent mothers' priorities. This brief provides a summary of the convening's key discussion points and offers strategic recommendations to help global donors, program implementers, and policymakers working in



TOP LEFT: Honorable Dr. Dorothy Onesphoro Gwajima (Tanzania) speaks with Lisa Bohmer and Saskia Guerrier (Conrad N. Hilton Foundation). **TOP RIGHT:** Lauren Rumble (UNICEF) and Cherner Bah (Sierra Leone, We Are Purposeful). **BOTTOM:** Gabrielle Bailey (CRIF) speaks to attendees.

ESA center adolescent mothers in policies and programs aimed at reducing poverty and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

Organized as a side event to the 78th meeting of the United Nations General Assembly, the convening recognized adolescent mothers as experts on their own needs and amplified their voices by sharing their insights and desired solutions for providing nurturing care for their children and securing their own futures. An immersive acoustic experience and quotes from young mothers in Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique, and other countries grounded the event in their lived experiences and solutions-oriented recommendations.

Narrative research and data from co-host organizations in the ESA region illustrated opportunities to improve outcomes for young mothers and their children. Passionate discussions sparked renewed commitments from formal powerholders representing governments and multilateral organizations—including the Honorable Harriette Chiggai, Women’s Rights Advisor to the President of Kenya; the Honorable Dr. Dorothy Onesphoro Gwajima, Tanzania’s Minister of Community Development, Gender, and Special Groups; the Partnership for Maternal, Newborn, and Child Health (PMNCH); and UNICEF—to elevate the priorities of adolescent mothers and support investing in their solutions.



“Young mothers are relevant to work across all sectors and movements, including human rights, humanitarian response, and development. Whether you see them or not, whether you center them or not, they are there. We are not talking about a small population, but a very large population that has been marginalized from our priorities.”

- Jody Myrum

Jody Myrum Strategies and Our Collective Practice

By the Numbers

Convening Date | Sept. 18, 2023

48

Participants



19 Program Implementers



4 Donors



11 Researchers or Academics



7 Government Officials



7 Multilateral Organization Representatives

1

 Immersive Soundscape

1 High-Level Panel Discussion



with government, donor, multilateral organization, and civil society organization stakeholders

5 Co-Host Organizations



4 Powerholders committing to support adolescent mothers and their children



~200



Young Mothers' Voices Represented

5 

Explorations of Data and Research

10,000+ 

Social Media Engagements

Uplifting Adolescent Mothers' Voices

Hear From Young Mothers in the ESA Region

"We lose friends when we become moms. **No one wants to associate with you.**"—*Young mother, Kenya*

"I was not prepared to have a child; **I was afraid, very scared, and bewildered.** My dream was to do nursing, but then I had to stop studying."
—*Young mother, Mozambique*

"Women nurses treat the young mothers inhumanely. Insulting and even beating us."—*Young mother, Kenya*

"Most of the girls become homeless because they are thrown out of their houses by their parents or guardians."
—*Young mother, Kenya*

"I love my children, but I am not proud since I cannot give them a different life compared to the one I had. This makes me think of how **history will be repeating itself.**"
—*Young mother, Tanzania*

"I would love to be supported to start a business, so I don't keep depending on others. **I want to be able to provide for my child.**"—*Young mother, Tanzania*

"I would like to have a land space to raise my child. To have something to sell and help sell. Because the babies get sick, and I have no money to take them to the hospital and pay for their medicine."
—*Young mother, Mozambique*

"Girls should be taught about family planning early to avoid pregnancy. I didn't get any family planning and I didn't have much information about pregnancy when I was in school."
—*Young mother, Tanzania*

"I wish schools could be nicer. Encourage the girls to continue their studies. They used to badmouth and insult pregnant girls and now they ignore them."
—*Young mother, Mozambique*

"I feel good to be able to share my issues and challenges and be able to find community in young mothers going through the same issues as me."
—*Young mother, Kenya*

Source: Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, *In Her Words: Listening to Young Mothers in Kenya, Mozambique, and Tanzania*, 2022.

Research and Data Show Adolescent Mothers Face Similar Challenges, Despite Their Diverse Experiences

Adolescent mothers—though often marginalized—are a large group who live and parent in a variety of contexts. Despite their diversity, the presented research showed that adolescent mothers express common challenges, including:



shame, stigma, isolation, and marginalization



educational and employment barriers



lack of child care and parenting support



difficulty accessing high-quality health care



mistreatment or abuse by peers, family members, and health practitioners



the threat of gender-based and domestic violence from partners

But young mothers also express optimism, belief in the power of connecting with other young mothers, and a strong drive to seek better circumstances for themselves and their families.

Studies also illuminate that adolescent mothers and their children are a package deal: Successful interventions simultaneously help address the needs of the mother and child, including nutrition services, parenting education, and accessible child care for mothers in training programs.

Diversity in Adolescent Motherhood: A Global Perspective

Sajeda Amin (Population Council) pointed to data from the Adolescent Atlas for Action, zeroing in on three countries with high rates of adolescent motherhood but different contexts—Bangladesh, her native country and area of expertise; Mexico; and Zambia—and presenting unique policy prescriptions to improve outcomes in each setting.

Mexico

17% of adolescents have ever given birth.

Context: Most adolescent mothers are in informal unions, often due to constrained circumstances.

Programs and policies should focus on: Social protections and resources that enable unmarried mothers to ensure the well-being of themselves and their children.

Bangladesh

14% of adolescents have ever given birth.

Context: Early marriage is a primary driver of adolescent motherhood.

Nearly 1 in 6 girls has experienced pregnancy and motherhood.

Nearly 1 in every 3 births is to an adolescent.

Programs and policies should focus on: Delaying marriage and providing early exposure to contraceptive knowledge.

Zambia

24% of adolescents have ever given birth.

Context: Adolescent mothers are heterogenous and exist as single mothers, in cohabitating unions, and in formal marriages. Premarital pregnancy drives formation of unions.

Programs and policies should focus on:

Programs that delay pregnancy either through increased education or better access to contraception.

RESOURCE HIGHLIGHT

Adolescent Atlas for Action

Adolescent Atlas for Action allows users to explore how adolescents are faring in different areas of their lives—including education, sexual and reproductive health and rights, and gender norms and agency—in select low- and middle-income countries around the world. Its data sources include the latest Demographic and Health Surveys and Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys.

Following Their Lead: Experiences of Young Mothers in Kenya, Mozambique, and Tanzania

Jody Myrum (Jody Myrum Strategies, Our Collective Practice) and Ramatu Bangara (CRIF) shared insights from two large narrative research projects that interviewed hundreds of adolescent mothers in Kenya, Mozambique, and Tanzania. In their own words, young mothers expressed their needs and challenges and shared their ideas for solutions.

Challenges

- **Marriage:** Marriage is often at the center of pregnancy among girls and young women—either as a solution or a driver. Early or unwanted marriage can trap them in limiting—or even dangerous—circumstances.
- **Pervasive, systemic violence:** Violence often leads to early motherhood, sustains the power dynamics that keep young mothers isolated and marginalized, and becomes the solution to the pregnancy (in the form of early marriage).
- **Shame, stigma, and isolation:** Beginning in early pregnancy, these harmful social consequences of early motherhood stymie young women’s educational, social, and economic opportunities; hurt their physical and mental health; and limit their futures.
- **Unsupportive systems:** Systems designed to support young mothers often discriminate against them and their children—for example, schools and health care professionals.
- **Limited economic opportunities:** Young mothers are excluded, either intentionally or through social stigma, from education, training, and job opportunities that enable them to become financially self-sufficient and provide for themselves and their children.

RESOURCE HIGHLIGHT

[In Her Words: Listening to Young Mothers in Kenya, Mozambique, and Tanzania](#)

Researchers spoke with more than 200 young mothers across the three countries about the challenges they face and their solutions for providing nurturing care for their children and securing their own futures.



Solutions

- **Community:** Bring young mothers together in community and create safe spaces for them to be girls so they have social support, are not isolated, and can build their political power and agency.
- **Health services:** Provide health services that treat young mothers with humanity and access to the full spectrum of family planning and reproductive health services.
- **Education and livelihood support:** Support young mothers to safely continue their education. Provide livelihood opportunities to enable them to care for themselves and their children, including capital and resources.
- **Resources, especially child care:** Support access to relevant resources, parenting information, and child care. For all opportunities, young mothers need child care, and it's often a barrier.
- **Programmatic focus and attention:** Center young mothers in programming and support their efforts to organize and build power. This focus can help to prevent violence.



"We hear a lot, 'they're no longer a child,' which is ridiculous. You still, developmentally, are a child, psychologically, are a child, but you have the responsibility that we normally associate with adulthood. We have to stop saying that [young mothers are no longer children]. When we say that, we miss a whole part of the needs that young mothers face. Saying 'you're no longer a child' excludes young mothers from the programs and support they need."

- Ramatu Bangura,
CRIF

Experiences of Adolescent Girls in Africa: Insights Into Their Lives and Policy Implications

Kehinde Ajayi (Center for Global Development) shared initial findings from her research, a joint collaboration with Center for Global Development, Population Council GIRL Center, and the Gender Innovation Lab at the World Bank, on adolescent girls and economic empowerment. DHS data show that while 70% of African girls ages 15 to 19 don't have children and aren't married, 30% have transitioned off this path. Among 20- to 24-year-olds, an even smaller share is unmarried and without children.

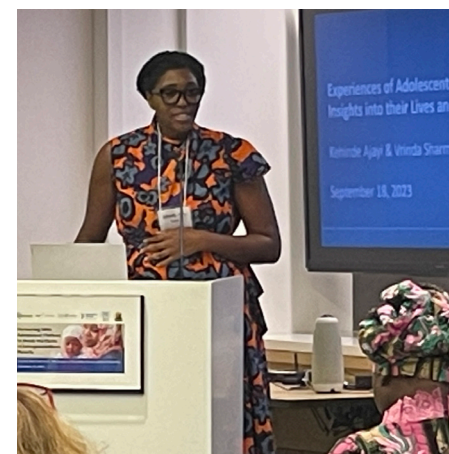
In both groups, there is much diversity in who's working and not working and who's in school and not in school, including country-level differences. But there is a strong correlation between moving into marriage and childbearing and not being in school, the research shows.

"This has an effect on intergenerational well-being," Ajayi said. "If we do not recognize the reality that these girls are existing and facing different challenges, this has a big impact on our ability to support the next generation of children and their children, who grow up to be adolescents and the future workforce and society in all these countries."

RESOURCE HIGHLIGHT

What Does It Take to Build Girls' Economic Potential?

In a blog post, Kehinde Ajayi explains the importance of explicitly addressing economic empowerment in programs and policies designed to support girls and young women.



"Everyone wants to talk about the ideal trajectory for girls—that they stay in school, don't get married, and don't have children—but today a lot of girls are off this aspirational path. We need programs that cater to the full breadth of adolescent experiences."

- Kehinde Ajayi
Center for Global Development

Skills Training to Help Empower Young Mothers in Kenya and Tanzania

Fassil Marriam (CRVPPF) highlighted major findings about young mothers from demographic and narrative research over a period of six months in Dar es Salaam and Nairobi. The findings echoed those from other research presented in the convening, emphasizing feelings of isolation and a desire for empowerment. These young mothers:

- Are being pushed out of school.
- Feel isolated from peers—even siblings.
- Want to be together with other young mothers and share experiences.
- Want to learn how to parent well, but feel like no one, including their partners, supports them in parenting.
- Want to learn how to prepare nutritious food for their children.
- Need safe, accessible child care for their children while they pursue opportunities that build their futures.
- Need skills training so they can provide for themselves and their families.

In response to these findings, CRVPPF started a skills training program for young mothers that includes child care.

RESOURCE HIGHLIGHT

Evidence to Build the Power of Young Mothers

Working alongside 12 partner organizations, CRVPPF took a multifaceted approach to understanding the needs of adolescent mothers in Kenya and Tanzania, conducting demographic mapping of 5,000 households with young women; interviewing young women about their feelings of power, disempowerment, and potential solutions; and consulting with local officials and organizations about their perceptions and recommendations for empowering young mothers and young women.

In Sierra Leone, We Are Purposeful Helps Change Law Barring Pregnant Girls From School

Josephine Kamara leads policy and advocacy communications at We Are Purposeful, a hub for girls' activism founded in Sierra Leone and now working in 100 countries.

We Are Purposeful began at the height of the Ebola crisis, when over 14,000 girls were pregnant, schools were closed, and access to health services was limited, Kamara said. When the country was declared Ebola free, “pregnant girls were kicked out of school due to a discriminatory government policy,” she said. “We saw the effect on them economically.” In response, the organization brought girls together, led a series of conversations with stakeholders, supported community discourse, and engaged with the media to drive momentum for policy change.

In March 2020, President Julius Maada Bio announced that the Government of Sierra Leone had lifted the ban prohibiting pregnant girls from attending school. “It happened because girls were involved, girls fought, they shared their stories, and their stories were powerful enough to make change happen,” Kamara said. Today, Purposeful maintains its commitment to uplifting the voices of girls and young mothers, putting them front and center in grantmaking and funding decisions and program design.



RESOURCE HIGHLIGHT

[Interview With Josephine Kamara](#)

Watch Kamara speak about Purposeful's work supporting girls' activism in Sierra Leone and around the world.

“Two things can be true at the same time. It is true that we have a teenage pregnancy crisis in the world, but it can also be true that those girls can be included in decision-making concerning their lives.”

Centering Adolescent Mothers in Policy and Programs Across All Levels

Chernor Bah, Minister of Information and Civic Engagement in Sierra Leone and co-founder of We Are Purposeful, moderated a panel with Honorable Harriette Chiggai, President's Women's Rights Advisor, Kenya; Lauren Rumble, Associate Director, Gender Equality, Programme Group, UNICEF; and Lisa Bohmer, Director, Global Early Childhood Development, Conrad N. Hilton Foundation.

Each panelist remarked on the value of actively engaging young mothers in program development and implementation and shared their current commitments to improving outcomes for young mothers and their children, as well as challenges and ideas for solutions.

The discussion shed light on the role of governments, multilateral organizations, funders, and civil society organizations and emphasized the need for integrated solutions that involve actors at all levels across sectors, including health, education, economics, human rights, and development.



Honorable Harriette Chiggai (Kenya) speaks about her country's efforts to support adolescent mothers.

A Government Perspective

Honorable Harriette Chiggai, Kenya

Challenges	Commitments
<ul style="list-style-type: none">→ Collecting and using data to gauge program effectiveness.→ Implementing a whole-government approach; programs that support young mothers are fragmented and siloed across agencies.→ Collecting consistent feedback from adolescent mothers.→ Combatting the cultural perception of adolescents as children without a voice; adolescent well-being and listening to adolescents for solutions “is a new discussion.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none">→ Adopted a universal health coverage policy, which defines adolescents as a priority population.→ Developing a “Safe Homes, Safe Spaces” campaign to change mindsets around pregnancy among adolescent women and girls and prevent gender-based violence and incest. The program will be active in all 47 counties, including 21 “hot spots” for adolescent pregnancy.→ Preparing to pilot Centers of Excellence for Women and Girls to provide economic empowerment and investment training, accompanied by child care.



“If you want to solve cultural issues, you can’t just bring scientific solutions. You have to unwind the cultural issues, and then bring the scientific information.”

- Honorable Harriette Chiggai
President’s Women’s Rights
Advisor, Kenya

A Multilateral Organization Perspective

Lauren Rumble, UNICEF

Challenges	Commitments
<ul style="list-style-type: none">→ Making girls more visible in data—especially girls ages 10-14, who aren't captured in MICS, DHS, and many household surveys.→ Increasing dedicated funding to girls' efforts, particularly through partnerships with local groups. Currently, UNICEF only spends 4% of its budget on girls across 190 countries.→ Overcoming politics and capitalizing on easy wins: Countries are often stuck in the politization of women's and girls' issues and don't consider different, well-established entry points to reach young women, including return-to-school programs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">→ Adopted an <u>Adolescent Girl Agenda</u> and a <u>Child Rights Mandate</u>.→ Developed a live mobile app that collects feedback on programs from millions of girls around the world.→ Launched a new <u>Global Girl Leaders Advisory Group</u> so girls around the world can weigh in on program design and effectiveness.



“What’s stopping us? Many policymakers can become mired in the politization of women’s and girl’s issues, especially on issues like reproductive health. We lose sight of the most important focus: that girls are a powerful investment. Investing in girls’ health, education, and wellbeing yields multiple dividends not just for girls themselves, but for countries and economies.”

- Lauren Rumble
UNICEF

A Donor Perspective

Lisa Bohmer, Conrad N. Hilton Foundation

Challenges	Commitments
<ul style="list-style-type: none">→ Focusing programming by girls' empowerment or early childhood actors on adolescent mothers.→ Bringing different sectors together, including health, education, early childhood development, and social protection.→ Preserving existing HIV, maternal and child health, and early childhood gains in the face of challenges exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, including loss of income, food insecurity, malnutrition, and more.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">→ Adopted a two-generation approach: In 2020, the Foundation expanded its early childhood development initiative focus to include the well-being of young mothers and their young children.→ Pledged to localize resources: Across the foundation, 25% of all resources aim to go directly to local organizations by the end of 2023.→ Convened a cohort of partners based in the Africa region and able to channel funds to grassroots organizations to plan, together with adolescent mothers, a program to respond to their needs.



“We believe that centering the needs, power, and potential of adolescent mothers should form the foundation for our work in this space. And this we feel is essential to enable adolescent mothers and their young children to reach their full potential, which will ultimately create a more prosperous society as a whole.”

- Lisa Bohmer
Conrad N. Hilton Foundation

How Can Formal Powerholders Deliver for Adolescent Mothers?

One of the event's key outcomes was the creation of a space for formal powerholders to share their commitments to addressing adolescent mothers' priorities.

Honorable Dr. Dorothy Onesphoro Gwajima, Tanzania's Minister of Community Development, Gender, and Special Groups:

- Tanzania is working to increase the number of facilities providing reproductive health services. There are now more than 900 such facilities, up from 215 in 2021.
- The government supports early childhood development as a way to change mindsets, challenge harmful norms, and support generational well-being.
- Tanzania has established 300 early childhood development centers that are owned and operated by local communities, and is working to establish more.



"I call upon all of you: Welcome to Tanzania, let us discuss and find out what you can do to ensure the community-owned early childhood development centers are readily available to serve the future of our children."

- Honorable Dr. Dorothy
Onesphoro Gwajima
Tanzania

How Can Formal Powerholders Deliver for Adolescent Mothers?

Helga Fogstad, Executive Director, PMNCH:

- PMNCH will use research and data from the side event to make the investment case—not just the human rights or development case—for supporting efforts to uplift women and girls and fight inequality.
- PMNCH hosted the 1.8 Billion Young People for Change Campaign, a virtual event that brought together a global community of adolescents, advocates, and leaders for debate, dialogue, and action. Over 100 countries committed to hosting similar events.



“We know what needs to be done, but if you do not get to the underlying inequality, you will not be able to empower that girl. We have to empower the girls. We have to change the culture.”

- Helga Fogstad
PMNCH

Recommendations for Donors, Program Implementers, and Policymakers

How can those working in the ESA region support adolescent mothers?

Donors can:

- **Invest in policies and programs explicitly designed to serve girls** who are pregnant and/or parenting.
 - **Fund local partners and grassroots organizations**, including youth-led organizations, that advocate for and with women and girls.
 - **Support programs that take a holistic approach** to supporting young mothers and their children, integrating economic opportunities, social and political empowerment, education, child care and early childhood development, and parenting support.
 - **Support narrative change to challenge stigma** and to enable adolescent mothers to tell their own stories.
- Fund participatory planning** to give young mothers a seat at the table.

Program implementers can:

- **Involve young mothers from program inception**, including in planning, design, implementation, and results reporting, and regularly collect their feedback on what's working and what's not.
- **Provide parenting skills support** and training for young mothers, including in child nutrition.
- **Offer livelihood training** and economic empowerment opportunities for girls and young mothers, especially accompanied by child care.
- **Bring young mothers together** in safe spaces that build social support, share resources, and build political power and agency.
- **Challenge harmful stigma, norms, and misinformation** around adolescence, women and girls, pregnancy, marriage, and men's and boys' responsibilities as parents.

Policymakers can:

- **Integrate child care into services**, such as child care programs at schools and on-site child care for training programs.
- **Expand access to stigma-free education and health care services** for pregnant and parenting girls, such as vaccine rollouts, efforts to prevent gender-based violence, and community health worker programs.
- **Expand access to sexual and reproductive health care** information and services, including the full range of contraceptive options.
- **Ensure that policies enable adolescent mothers to return to school**, if they wish to, in a safe and stigma-free environment.

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