

The challenges faced by adolescent girls in Liberia

by the Honourable Vabah Gayflor, Minister of Gender and Development, Liberia

Ensuring that adolescent girls have a supportive environment for their growth and development and are protected from abuse, exploitation, violence and premature entry into adult roles such as marriage and labour is particularly challenging in my country, Liberia.

An adolescent girl living in Liberia:

- *has probably not been to primary school*; the net primary school enrolment for girls stands at only 39 per cent, according to the latest national estimates.
- *is unlikely to go on to secondary school*; just 14 per cent of girls of secondary school age are enrolled in secondary education.
- *is at high risk of being illiterate*, like 24 per cent of adolescent girls and young women aged 15–24 in the country.
- *has a high risk of suffering rape* – the most frequently reported crime, with girls aged 10–14 the most frequent victims of rape.
- *probably has limited knowledge of HIV and AIDS*; only 21 per cent of young women aged 15–24 have comprehensive knowledge of HIV and AIDS.
- *has a high probability of either being married or in union*; 40 per cent of women aged 20–24 in Liberia were married before the age of 18.
- *faces the strong likelihood of being pregnant*; the adolescent birth rate for girls aged 15–19 stands at 221 per 1,000 – the second highest rate in the world.
- *is unlikely to give birth in a hospital or health facility*, as only 37 per cent of births take place in institutional settings.
- *will possibly have to give birth without the assistance of a skilled health worker*, which only attend 51 per cent of births.
- *runs a high risk of death from pregnancy and childbirth*; the maternal mortality rate stands at 1,200 per 100,000 live births.
- *has an even higher risk of death from maternal causes if under 15*; girls aged 10–14 are five times more likely to die

from causes related to pregnancy and childbirth than those of ages 20–24.

- *may be left with a delivery-related injury if she survives her pregnancy*, such as fistula or uterine prolapse.
- *faces a high lifetime risk of death from her first and subsequent pregnancies*; the lifetime risk of maternal deaths stands at 1 in 12.
- *may see her child die within the first year of life*, with almost 1 in every 10 infants dying before their first birthday.
- *will probably not have support from a partner, even if she is married*.
- *has little or no recourse to protection from further abuse, exploitation and disempowerment*.

Creating a supportive environment for adolescent girls in Liberia begins with protecting them from violence and abuse, and ensuring that they obtain a quality education.

It will also necessitate ensuring that families do not allow their girls to marry before age 18 or allow them to be engaged in exploitative labour.

It requires that knowledge of HIV and AIDS be promoted among young people, and that victims of sexual violence have recourse to justice.

It necessitates investment in reproductive, maternity and basic health care for millions of adolescent girls.

Most of all, it demands that communities and society respect the rights of women and girls, and have the courage to address customs and practices that harm and discriminate against them.

Under the leadership of President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, the Government of Liberia is striving to provide the protection adolescent girls need and to help them acquire the skills that will enable them to protect themselves. We welcome the support of the international development community in assisting us to act quickly and effectively.

See References, page 109.