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# Helping Tanzanian teenage girls avoid pregnancy

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# research evidence for policy



A young mother, her baby, and a friend in Mtwara, Southern Tanzania. Photo: Richard Sambaiga

## Helping Tanzanian teenage girls avoid pregnancy

NCCR north south ytnos



Case studies featured here were conducted in Tanzania and Ghana

### Policy message

- Many young Tanzanian women know how to get the information and support they need in order to avoid getting pregnant, and what to do if they are. It is important for them to get accurate advice from people around them, especially parents, relatives, and friends, as well as information from other sources, such as mass media. Access to reliable information generally improves the ability of young women to avoid or deal with pregnancy.
- Mass media aimed at young people can increase their resilience. Youth magazines are an important source of information. They contribute to building the competence of teenage girls to deal with teen pregnancy, birth, and childrearing. However, messages should be targeted not only at helping girls avoid getting pregnant, but also at helping young mothers and mothers-to-be adjust to their new situation.

- Adolescence can be a tricky period in our lives. But for teenage girls it is especially fraught with risk. If they become pregnant, they may be ostracised by their families or spurned by society. They also have a high risk of dying during childbirth. And many are condemned to live in poverty as single mothers.
- That makes the sexual and reproductive health of adolescents an important public health issue. To design better policies and interventions that will steer young people towards responsible parenthood, it is necessary to know more about how adolescents learn about and deal with sex. This edition of *evidence for policy* examines this issue, based on research in Tanzania.

### Social resilience: focusing on adolescents' resources

- Many studies on teen pregnancy look at the risks that young people face: the risk of getting pregnant, the risk of being ostracised, and so on. They then focus on how to reduce these risks.
- The NCCR North-South research in Tanzania and Ghana instead focused on social resilience: the ability of young people to overcome risks. Resilience moves beyond the concept of "vulnerability". Vulnerable people are likely to succumb to a risk: a vulnerable girl is in danger of becoming pregnant without intending to, and may end up poor, or ill, or dead as a result. A resilient girl, on the other hand, is less likely to become pregnant in the first place, and is more capable of dealing with the situation if she does.

This is a more positive approach: it tries to find ways that young people can avoid unwanted and unplanned pregnancy, and how to cope with it when it occurs. Such an approach gives researchers, practitioners, and policymakers a different way of thinking about populations at risk. It enables them to think of what can be done to make people more resilient in the face of risks.

### Measuring resilience in Tanzania

The young dominate the populations of many countries: more than half the world's people are under the age of 25. In Tanzania, 23% of the population are adolescents, aged between 10 and 19 years (UNICEF 2011). Tanzania has spearheaded many efforts to better understand and improve the sexual and reproductive health of this important age group. The NCCR

## Featured case studies

### Video project with youths in Tanzania

Groups of young people in Dar es Salaam and Mtwara identified key aspects related to teen pregnancy. They then developed role-plays and key messages about these topics, and a camera crew made short videos of them. The young people presented these videos to policymakers to start a discussion about what types of interventions were required. Various international and national NGOs and donors expressed great interest in the videos, and they were aired on several Tanzanian TV stations. Funded by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, the NGO Femina HIP showed the videos during outreach activities in four districts in Tanzania, with the young video makers acting as change agents. Discussions also showed that youth magazines and other print media are a very powerful way of reaching young people.

### Youths write magazines in Ghana

In Ghana, youth magazines are key sources of information on sexual and reproductive health and can build young people's resilience to teen pregnancy. An education and entertainment project supported by the Adolescent Health and Development Programme of Ghana Health Services enables young people to inform their peers about sexual and reproductive health issues. Students in two senior high schools in Accra planned, designed, and produced a bi-monthly magazine. Four editions have been distributed to schools in Accra. The magazine has been well received. The launch of the first edition was attended by over 500 junior- and high-school students, officials from the ministries of education and health, and NGO representatives. The magazine is being used to initiate sex education in schools, especially about the risks of teen pregnancy.

More information on both these projects: [www.socialresilience.ch/reproductive-resilience/](http://www.socialresilience.ch/reproductive-resilience/)



North-South research was part of this effort.

The heart of our study was a survey of more than 1,250 young women, aged 15 to 19, in two locations: Dar es Salaam, Tanzania's biggest city, and Mtwara, a town on the southern coast near the border with Mozambique. The study used a framework described by Obrist et al. (2010).

About 15% of the young women in both sites turned out to be either pregnant or mothers. To get an idea of how resilient they were, we asked them a series of questions on how they dealt with threats to their own and their babies' health. For the 85% of the women who had never been pregnant, we asked how they managed to avoid the risk of becoming pregnant. We were mainly interested in learning whom these teenagers turn to, and what sources of information they use to avoid pregnancy or deal with it if it occurs.

### Pregnant girls can be resilient too

What did we find? First, a surprising proportion of both groups of young women were resilient. About half of the women who had never been pregnant fell into this category: they could get the information and support they needed to avoid unwanted pregnancies. Pregnant women and young mothers were even more resilient: the majority in both locations knew how to avoid or deal with health problems that might affect them or their babies, and they

could get the information and support to do so. Mothers or mothers-to-be in Dar es Salaam were more resilient than those in Mtwara (Figure 1).

Many of the women we surveyed took initiative to build their ability to secure their health and the health of their babies. So they defy the common stereotype of adolescent mothers as ignorant and unprepared. It is important to look at these girls as active social agents. While childbirth may be a turning point for them, it can also offer new opportunities for them to break away from the past. In the words of one researcher, "What might be regarded as a risk in one situation becomes a protective factor in another, depending on how risk and protective factors are perceived by those experiencing them" (Ungar 2003 in Collins 2010: 46).

### The role of parents, relatives, and peers

We found that young women turn to different people for advice on how to avoid pregnancy, or how to deal with it. In Tanzania, girls do not traditionally go to their parents with questions about sex, but seek advice from other relatives. This is changing as more girls are asking their parents about sexual matters (Figure 2). But that does not always make them more resilient: girls in Dar es Salaam who talked to their parents about sex were no more resilient than those who did not. However, there were regional differences: in Mtwara, girls who talked to their parents and to other relatives about sex were more resilient than their peers who did not.

How about friends? Girls did not talk to their peers about sexual matters as often as to their parents or relatives. But in Dar es Salaam, talking to friends increased the resilience of girls who had not been pregnant.

Mothers or mothers-to-be turned to their partners and to nurses for information, but doing so did not make them better able to deal with issues related to pregnancy.

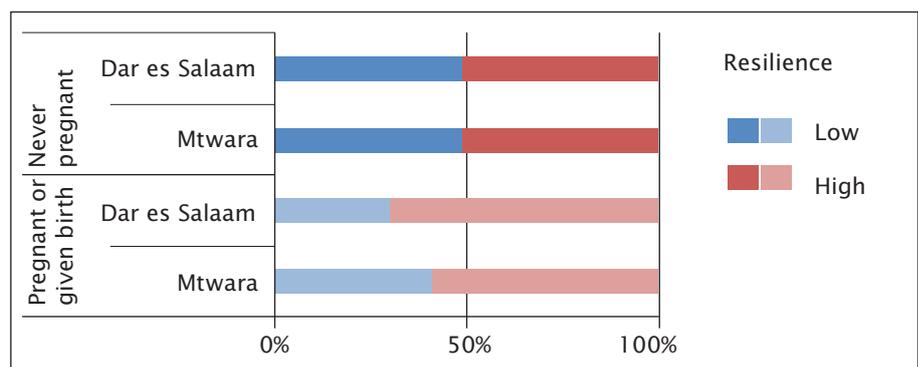


Figure 1: Teen mothers were more resilient than assumed. (Source: NCCR North-South survey of 1,250 girls aged 15 to 19, Dar es Salaam and Mtwara, 2011)

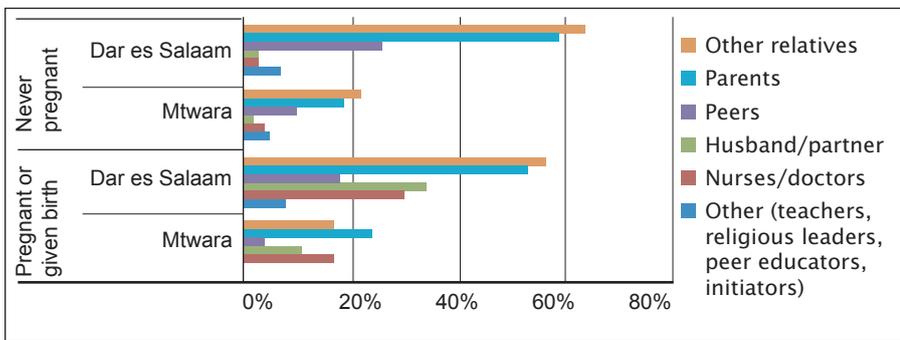


Figure 2: Whom do teenage girls go to for information and advice on sexuality and pregnancy? In this study, relatives, parents, and peers were the most important sources. During and after pregnancy, young women also turned to their husbands and partners, and to medical personnel. (Source: NCCR North-South survey of 1,250 girls aged 15 to 19, Dar es Salaam and Mtwara, 2011)

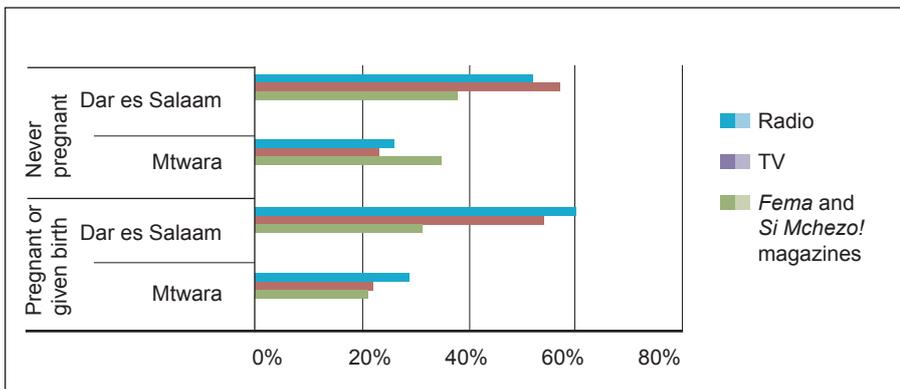


Figure 3: The media can be a vital source of information for teens: percentages of girls aged 15 to 19 with access to various media. (Source: NCCR North-South survey of 1,250 girls aged 15 to 19, Dar es Salaam and Mtwara, 2011)

### Mass media can contribute to resilience

Family members, partners, and peers may not be very reliable sources of information about sexual health and pregnancy. The mass media are one way to make sure that young women get accurate information and make informed decisions. But not everyone has access: the Tanzanian Demographic and Health Survey of 2010 found that almost 30% of girls and more than 20% of boys aged 15 to 19 years do not have access to media on a weekly basis. Our survey confirmed this general picture, though we found that adolescents in Dar es Salaam have better access to media than in Mtwara (Figure 3).

The importance of the media becomes clearer when we look at how access to the media affects resilience. The teens who used the media were more resilient when it came to teen pregnancy than their peers.

Femina HIP is the biggest local multimedia platform and civil society organisation working with youth, communities, and partners in Tanzania. It publishes *Fema* and *Si Mchezo!*, the top two magazines in Tanzania for 15 to 25 year olds. Catering to secondary school students and written in English and Swahili, *Fema* is published quarterly and has a circulation of 180,000.

Directed towards out-of-school youth and written in Swahili, *Si Mchezo!* is published on a bi-monthly basis and has a circulation of approximately 175,000. The two magazines also seek to reach young people in the workplace and in organisational settings. Both are widely read: between 30 and 40% of the girls we surveyed said they read one of these magazines (Figures 3 and 4).

The magazines also appeared to be effective, at least for girls who had never been pregnant. If they read the magazines, they knew more about how to protect themselves against pregnancy and were more resilient than their peers. Listening to the radio had the same effect.

But we cannot say the same for pregnant girls and young mothers. Mass media campaigns tend to target girls who are not pregnant, rather than those who are expecting a baby or who have given birth. More interventions aimed specifically at pregnant girls and young mothers are needed.

### Definitions

#### Adolescents

The United Nations uses the following terms (WHO 2001): **Young people:** 10 to 24 years of age

**Adolescents:** 10 to 19 years

**Youth:** 15 to 24 years

#### Social resilience

Social resilience is people's capacity to access resources so they can both cope with and actively avoid threats such as unwanted teen pregnancy. People who are resilient are better able to deal with such threats (Obrist et al. 2010).



Figure 4: The magazines *Fema* and *Si Mchezo!* are published by Femina HIP, a Tanzanian NGO. Together, they have a circulation of over 350,000.



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### Policy implications of North-South research

Focusing on the strengths of young people (their “resilience”) rather than on their weaknesses opens new possibilities to reduce unwanted teen pregnancies. It means helping young people learn about pregnancy so they can avoid it, and helping them deal with it if they do become pregnant.

A surprising proportion of young women are resilient to the risk of pregnancy. They know how to mobilise resources and information that help them avoid it, and what to do if they do get pregnant so as to maintain their own and their baby’s health.

Parents and relatives are especially important sources of information on sexuality and teen pregnancy, though this varies from place to place. Access to reliable information and support generally improves the ability of young women to avoid or deal with pregnancy.

Mass media can be a valuable source of information. Radio, television, and magazines aimed at young people can provide youth with accurate information and increase their resilience. Magazines in particular are an important way to inform them about sexual matters, pregnancy, and child rearing. Such magazines should be targeted at young mothers and mothers-to-be, as well as at helping girls avoid getting pregnant.

It is important to increase the skills of parents, relatives and other caregivers to communicate about sexual matters with young people.

### Further Reading

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More information about the project: [www.socialresilience.ch/reproductive-resilience/](http://www.socialresilience.ch/reproductive-resilience/)

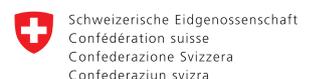
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