

# Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights

**A**dolescence is a time of life when boys and girls go through the normal developmental growth stage of puberty. Their bodies change and they experience new emotions as they begin to become adults. Like any developmental period in the life cycle, adolescence brings with it opportunities for growth as well as risks. Ideally, adolescents experience their natural sexual development with healthy enjoyment and wonder. However, many adolescents and youth face sexual and reproductive health risks — sexually transmitted infections (STIs); HIV/AIDS; too early or unwanted pregnancy; unsafe abortion; and violence — which may be exacerbated by factors related to their age and physical maturity, and by gender-based biases. From a public health perspective, it is therefore important that adolescents have the right to obtain factual information and to comprehend all phases of their development, including their sexual development.

## Ipas's Vision

In a world where adolescents are free of sexual and reproductive health problems, they will be able to exercise age-appropriate

- Each year at least 111 million new cases of curable STIs occur in young people under 25 years of age.
- More than half of all new HIV infections worldwide — over 7,000 each day — occur among young people.
- Rates of reported sexual abuse range from 7-34% for girls and 3-29% for boys.
- Ten percent of world births are to teenage mothers. Deaths related to pregnancy and childbirth are 2-5 times higher among women under 18 than among those aged 20-29.
- Up to 4.4 million abortions are sought by teenagers every year, the majority of them unsafe. One-third of women hospitalized for abortion-related complications are under 20 years of age.
- Every five minutes a young person commits suicide, often because of emotional and social problems related to sexual and reproductive health, including physical abuse, sexual violence, breakdowns of intimate relationships, alcohol and drug abuse, unwanted pregnancy, unsafe abortion, HIV/STI infection and anxiety about being physically attracted to members of the same sex.\*

decisionmaking and will be equipped to make healthy choices now and in the future. In this context, Ipas is committed to promoting female and male adolescents' rights to:

- receive factual, clear, nonjudgmental, comprehensive and age-appropriate information about sexuality and sexual and reproductive health issues from both peers and adults in a manner that respects their sociocultural context;
- receive support in dealing with the practice and outcomes of sex in a positive, informed, responsible, respectful, safe and healthy way;
- receive high-quality, youth-friendly prevention services and health care such as pregnancy testing, antenatal care, HIV/STI testing and follow-up services, emergency contraception and other contraceptive methods, violence screening and follow-up services, counseling for unwanted pregnancy and other sexual and reproductive health problems, postabortion care and safe, legal abortion;
- co-lead efforts to improve adolescent health policies and interventions.

## Ipas's Action

In order to ensure that adolescents develop into adults whose lives reflect their full potential, governmental and nongovernmental organizations must support adolescents' healthy sexual and reproductive development.



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Bangladesh Center for Communication Programs (BCCP)

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Ipas advocates for a comprehensive approach to adolescent sexual and reproductive health and rights that at the very least addresses: unwanted sex (coerced or a result of physical/sexual violence), unsafe sex (without a condom to protect against HIV/STIs), unprotected sex (without contraceptives to prevent pregnancy), violence, unplanned and unwanted pregnancy, HIV/STIs, abortion, and unsafe abortion. Ipas promotes work in two major areas:

## 1 Improving abortion-related policies and services to meet the needs and wishes of adolescent clients

Ipas supports research, policy advocacy, training and interventions to better meet adolescents' needs and wishes. Examples of past and current work include:

- research in Brazil, Ethiopia, Kenya, Mexico, Nigeria and Vietnam on adolescents' and health care providers' perceptions regarding unwanted pregnancy, abortion and abortion care services;
- publication of documents and presentations at meetings that highlight the ways in which adolescents are particularly vulnerable to both HIV/AIDS and abortion — for example, *Intersecting health risks: adoles-*

*cent unwanted pregnancy, abortion and AIDS* — and on adolescents' rights — for example, a series of fact sheets developed by the International Sexual and Reproductive Rights Coalition;

- incorporation of adolescents as a specific client group in policy and training documents and materials.

## 2 Supporting other organizations in incorporating abortion issues into their programs

Ipas has strong partnerships with ministries of health, service providers, professional associations, NGOs and community groups at the international, regional and local levels. These alliances place Ipas in an excellent position to forge connections among such organizations and to provide them with educational tools, documentation and technical assistance to better address adolescents' needs in relation to unwanted pregnancy and abortion. Examples of past and current collaborative work include:

- advocacy on behalf of adolescents at international and national meetings. For instance, Ipas is a member of the International Sexual and Reproductive Rights Coalition which advocates for adolescent

sexual and reproductive rights at United Nations meetings.

- development of training materials for adolescents and youth workers. Ipas developed *Gender or sex: who cares? Skills-building resource pack on gender and reproductive health for adolescents and youth workers* with the Health & Development Networks in Thailand and collaborated with the Instituto de Educación y Salud in Peru on the Spanish version.
- training peer educators, trainers and health providers. Ipas's training collaborators include the AIDS Society of the Philippines, State Women's Program of San Luis Potosí, Mexico, the Family Guidance Association of Ethiopia and GRAPAAR in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.
- research with adolescents using Internet-based technology. Ipas's web research collaborators include Nairobiits (Nairobi, Kenya) and Comitê pela Democratização de Informática (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil).

For more information, contact the Ipas Adolescent Working Group by e-mail at [ipas@ipas.org](mailto:ipas@ipas.org) or visit our website: <http://www.ipas.org>

\* Source: de Bruyn, Maria. July 1999. *Young lives at risk. Adolescents and sexual health*. Panos Briefing No. 35. London, The Panos Institute.



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