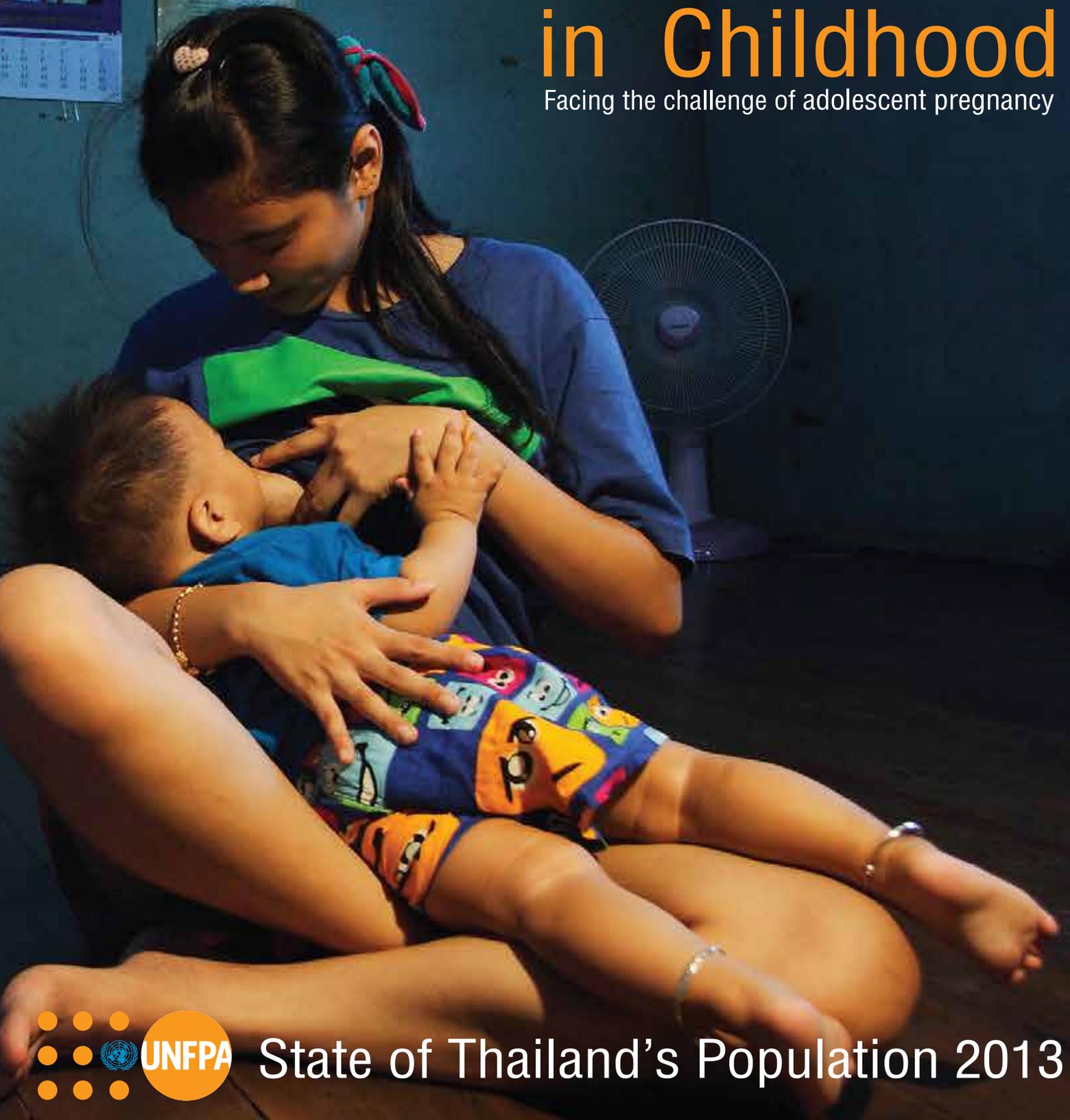




Motherhood in Childhood

Facing the challenge of adolescent pregnancy



State of Thailand's Population 2013

The State of Thailand's Population 2013

Motherhood in childhood

facing the challenge of adolescent pregnancy

The State of Thailand's Population 2013

The report was produced by the United Nations Population Fund Thailand Country Office and the Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board.

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Acknowledgments

The editorial team is grateful for additional insights and contributions from every individual who has given us time for the interview. Our thanks also go to officials of the Bureau of Reproductive Health, the Bureau of Policy and Strategy, the Ministry of Public Health, the National Statistical Office and the Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board who have given us statistical data support.

Book Design and Graphics

Prang Priyatruk

Success Publication Co., Ltd.

April 2014

You can download the electronic file from <http://countryoffice.unfpa.org/thailand/>

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Foreword



Thailand's population structure has changed, making it an ageing society. There is a larger number of older people, coupled with a falling number of children and nationals of working age. Consequently, Thailand needs to accelerate the creation of quality of life and productiveness of its people, using stringent measures so as to support its growing elderly population. This can be accomplished by encouraging safe births, providing access to appropriate reproductive health, developing knowledge-management systems in terms of family study and promoting sexual behaviour that is appropriate and safe. However, adolescent pregnancy is still a big problem, leading to unsafe births that create many adverse effects, such as health problems for the mothers and the children, problems that arise from poverty, loss of educational and development opportunities as well as social problems caused by unsafe abortions and child abandonment.

Taking into account both short- and long-term effects of the problem and its rising trend, the government has decided to make this issue a top priority. It aims to resolve the issue by emphasising access to opportunities and fundamental rights, education, vocational training, health care, age-appropriate development and by setting guidelines for adolescents/youth (15 to 21 years of age) to protect them from unwanted pregnancies in accordance with the framework for life-cycle development and the nation's strategic plan. OSCC 1300 (One Stop Crisis Centre), which provides information and a link with all involved agencies, was created to give victims access to services and their fundamental rights, so they can return to their daily lives with dignity.

The Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board hopes that the 2013 State of Thailand's Population Report on adolescent pregnancy, which tracks the trend of the problem, society's attitude towards it, causes and factors leading to the problem and its effects, in addition to important lessons for Thailand and other nations, plus suggestions for short- and long-term policies, provides guidelines on dealing with adolescent strategies and can be implemented in order to achieve genuine solutions in the future.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Arkhom Termpittayapaisith'. The signature is stylized and cursive.

Mr. Arkhom Termpittayapaisith
Secretary-General of the National Economic and Social Development Board

Foreword



Every pregnancy should be a moment for celebration, and this is as true in Thailand as it is anywhere else in the world. Unfortunately, this is not always the case. Worldwide, millions of pregnancies are unplanned and undesired, and never is this news sadder than when it happens to young women and girls. The consequences are often tragic – abortion, single motherhood, girls not finishing school and being doomed to remain in low-paid jobs, as well as children growing up without fathers. These are issues that should not exist today to the extent they do, especially since the causes are largely understood.

More often than not, the society points fingers of blame at the girl who gets pregnant. However, the sad reality is that the factors and forces leading to adolescent pregnancy – and hence the responsibility to help prevent it – lie with a range of actors. Besides the girl, this responsibility lies with her parents, her peers, teachers and members of her community, and beyond them, it lies with those who at the national level shape the laws and regulations that might impede her access to the best possible means of protecting herself from getting pregnant. In many ways, adolescent pregnancy is the result of a lack of choices available to the girl: the lack of the choice to stand up to pressure from a boy due to gender norms, the lack of choice to obtain and carry contraceptives because her parents, health care providers or shopkeepers frown at this as shameful instead of praising it as responsible behaviour.

Each year, close to 125,000 young Thai women under the age of 19 give birth. However, it is estimated that this represents only half of the total number of pregnancies in this age group, as an additional 125,000 pregnancies or more are likely to end in abortion each year. This represents more than 10 percent of all adolescent girls in the country. Sadly, in a country where 80 percent of married couples use contraception, the number of adolescent pregnancies has been rising in recent years

This 2013 State of Thailand's Population Report is being presented as a companion to the 2013 State of World Population Report in a move to illustrate the adolescent pregnancy situation in Thailand. While the rise of adolescent pregnancy in many developing countries is to a large extent caused by poverty, in Thailand it stems from prevalent social norms which have not kept pace with rapidly changing adolescent lifestyles, especially sexual behaviour.

Everyone, at all ages and social strata, has basic rights – the right to education, to health and to live a life free of coercion and violence. Unfortunately, the violation of such rights is often both the cause and consequence of adolescent pregnancy. For instance, when a girl is not given the best possible sex education, she may end up getting pregnant, which in turn may mean she will not finish her schooling. Similarly, when she does not have access to contraception, she may end up pregnant, which may mean she will have an unsafe abortion with disastrous consequences for her health. When a girl allows herself to be forced or pressured

into sex due to gender norms, she may end up getting pregnant, which would likely mean her becoming economically dependent on the man and hence continuing to submit to coercion and pressure.

This report seeks to paint a picture of adolescent pregnancy in Thailand and separate facts from fiction. It lays out the drivers behind the epidemic – the complex interplay between individual behaviour, changing cultural norms and economic factors that conspire to give young women and girls fewer choices than they should have. This report also seeks to chart ways to reverse this trend – by engaging men and boys to respect girls' autonomy, by providing young women with better sex education and access to reproductive health services and by empowering them economically and socially.

The State of Thailand's Population Report aims to capture the lives and stories of these young women, of their parents, friends and other members of their community in order to illustrate how, together, they make up the forces that, by act or omission, “conspire” against the capacity of girls to make informed decisions about their sexual life. The content of this report is derived from interviews, research and a review of available data and legal information. Discrepancies and challenges in the process of data collection remain, pointing to the need for more investment of time and energy. UNFPA hopes this report will bring us one step closer to ensuring that all girls and women in Thailand are able to make free and informed decisions about their sexual and reproductive lives.



Caspar Peek
Representative for Thailand
UNFPA

Chapter 1

Access to basic rights – the foundation for preventing adolescent pregnancy

1

In Thailand, an average of 355 women under the age of 20 give birth every day, 10 of whom are less than 15 years old¹. In reality, the number of pregnant adolescents is larger, but there are no figures on how many such pregnancies end in abortion.

Even though Thailand's economy has grown rapidly in the last decade, and women have gained more educational and vocational opportunities, the number of pregnant women aged 15-19 has increased. These young women are burdened with pregnancy at a time when they should be in school building their desired futures.

Adolescent pregnancy undermines a girl's ability to exercise her rights to education, health and autonomy. The problem is, in part, caused by rapid economic and social change that has seen urban society grow and the middle class expand rapidly.

This has brought a proliferation of choices and developing technology, but left many teenagers without sufficient age-appropriate knowledge to cope with the massive flow of information.

Adolescent pregnancy has many causes, including a lack of comprehensive sex education, negative attitudes towards premarital sex that refuse to acknowledge the reality of adolescent behaviour, parents not advising their children about sex, traditional beliefs that adolescent girls should get married and raise a family instead of completing their education, young people engaging in sex without understanding the consequences, teenagers' lack of knowledge or access to reproductive health services, as well as authorities' lack of awareness about their need for knowledge, services and social support.

Hence, many factors – family, education, social context, tradition and environmental conditions – all contribute to the large number of pregnant Thai adolescents. Sadly, most research confirms that teenagers are not ready for pregnancy and motherhood. Thus, adolescent pregnancy is often undesirable regardless of whether it is planned or not.

A change of role from young woman to “adolescent mother” means opportunities are lost for the teenager, her family and society. It is difficult to assess the extent of the short- and long-term impact of adolescent pregnancy on livelihood, quality of life, health, society and the economy. Some adolescent mothers end up separated from their partner and left to face problems alone, which can lead to emotional insecurity, stress and depression. Many young women have to conceal their pregnancy from parents and people around them. Adolescents are also at higher risk of death and illness during pregnancy and childbirth. Adolescent pregnancy has consequences for the health of the infant, such as increased chance of low birth weight, preterm birth and infant mortality. Children born of unwanted pregnancies are also sometimes abandoned at hospitals.

Meanwhile, a number of pregnant teenagers drop out of school, while some quit their job and are left with no income. As a result, they become “children raising children”.

The results of international studies show that inequality and a lack of rights protection for young women are significant obstacles to solving the problem of adolescent pregnancy. More specifically, young girls often lack educational opportunities, have little or no education,

¹ Public Health Statistic 2012, Bureau of Reproductive Health, Department of Health 2013

“children raising children”



are unable to access education on sex and relationships, do not have the skills to delay sexual activity or develop a relationship, do not receive information or access to contraception, and can fall victim to sexual abuse.

Having a large number of pregnant adolescents places a burden on the overall resources of a country.

Low birth rate and challenges for the Thai population

Thailand has progressed and its people enjoy rising incomes, but the country is now stuck in the so-called middle-income trap. Thailand is now transitioning into an ageing society as a result of a rapid decline in the birth rate and people living longer. Some 40 years ago, a Thai woman had, on average, 5 to 6 children, but that has now fallen to 1-2. Also, more women now get married at a later age, and more choose to stay single. The total fertility rate (the average number of children born to a woman of reproductive age) has dropped to just 1.62 (Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board, 2013.)² This is likely to drop further to the level of Asian countries with especially low birth rates such as Japan, South Korea and Singapore.

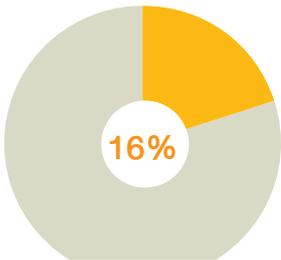
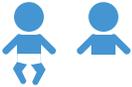
The problems of low birth rate and the income trap are turning Thailand into a “getting old before getting rich” society. But that is only one part of the worry. The more pressing concern is that while Thailand’s birth rate continues to fall, adolescent pregnancy is on the rise. Teenagers are the population sector most in need of education, because their behaviour will reflect the trend of Thai human resources in the future.

Current demographic trends threaten to impact the nation’s competitiveness and lead to a greater fiscal burden through social security costs.

The responsibility of looking after the entire population will fall on a smaller working-age population in the future. Thus, Thailand needs to increase the working efficiency of its new generation to be able to handle the increasing burden brought by an ageing population. The “dependency ratio” – the number of children and the elderly per 100 working-age people – is changing rapidly. Data from the Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board reveals that in 2010, for every 100 individuals of working age there were 30 children and 20 elderly persons. But by 2040, the dependency ratio will be 100 working-age people having to take care of 60 elderly persons and 20 children.

The concern is that 16 percent of present births are to adolescent mothers,³ and that trend is increasing. The question is whether these teenage mothers and their children will have the opportunity to become productive members of society at a

A Thai woman has on average 1.6 children



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