

A CALL FOR ABSTRACTS

CALL FOR ABSTRACTS: EARLY AND UNINTENDED PREGNANCIES IN EASTERN AND SOUTHERN AFRICA

Theme: Date: 28-29 November 2024

Venue: UKZN, Unite Conference Centre, Durban, South Africa

Adolescent girls and young women (AGYW) in East and Southern Africa (ESA) are disproportionately burdened by poor sexual and reproductive health (SRH)¹, which includes HIV. While countries in the region have made significant strides in improving some SRH indicators, the triple challenge of early and unintended pregnancy (EUP)², new HIV infections³ and sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV)⁴ remains alarmingly and persistently high amongst adolescent girls. The complex pathways which exist between EUP, HIV and SGBV are mutually constitutive and self-reinforcing which means that adolescent girls vulnerability cannot just be understood in terms of individual risk behaviour but as being situated in broader structures of harmful social norms and practices, restrictive legal contexts, and gendered, social and economic inequalities. Policies and programmes, and accessible and quality SRH services can play a critical role in AGYW realising their rights and attaining a healthy sexual and reproductive life.

Early and unintended pregnancy⁵ plays a key role in deepening life-time vulnerability for adolescent girls' by interrupting educational trajectories and thus limiting their future productive potential. EUP can push young girls into unwanted child marriages⁶ and compromise their SRH and well-being. Complications in pregnancy and childbirth are the leading cause of maternal mortality amongst girls (15-19 years)⁷. Adolescent girls are also the most likely to suffer the most serious consequences of unsafe abortion⁸. EUP and early motherhood fundamentally disrupts childhood and schooling trajectories and perpetuates intergenerational cycles of ill-health and poverty. Secondary schooling is widely known to be

¹ Starrs, A. M., Ezeh, A. C., Barker, G., Basu, A., Bertrand, J. T., Blum, R., ... & Ashford, L. S. (2018). Accelerate progress—sexual and reproductive health and rights for all: report of the Guttmacher–Lancet Commission. *The Lancet*, 391(10140), 2642-2692.

² UNFPA (2022) State of World Population 2022, UNFPA

³ UNAIDS (2022)

⁴ Sardinha, L., Yüksel-Kaptanoğlu, I., Maheu-Giroux, M., & García-Moreno, C. (2024). Intimate partner violence against adolescent girls: regional and national prevalence estimates and associated country-level factors. *The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health*, 8(9), 636-646.

⁵ According to the World Health Organization "adolescent pregnancy" refers to pregnancy in a woman aged 10–19 years. (https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/42903/9241591455_eng.pdf).

⁶ UNICEF (2022). Child marriage in Eastern and Southern Africa

⁷ <https://www.afro.who.int/health-topics/maternal-health>.

⁸ Bankole, A., Remez, L., Owolabi, O., Philbin, J., & Williams, P. (2020). From unsafe to safe abortion in sub-Saharan Africa: slow but steady progress.

associated with improved SRH and to advance gender equality through employment opportunity. A recent multi-country analysis found a lower prevalence of intimate partner violence against adolescent girls in countries with higher rates of female secondary school enrolment⁹. In 2023, the adolescent birth rate in SSA was amongst the highest in the world and particularly so for younger adolescent girls (10-14 years of age). Countries in the East and Southern Africa region have some of the highest adolescent pregnancy rates in the world and more than twice the global averages¹⁰. Against this background, EUP needs to be urgently addressed.

Conference Overview

The conference on EUP is a two-day hybrid event hosted by the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) in collaboration with the KwaZulu-Natal Provincial Government. The conference is contextualised within the triple and interrelated threats of EUP, sexual and gender-based violence, and HIV and AIDS.

More specifically, it aims to bring together stakeholders from government, civil society, academia, and the private sector in ESA to explore the multifaceted challenges posed by EUP in the region and to discuss innovative strategies to mitigate EUP and its related issues, emphasizing cross-sectoral collaboration and regional learning. Our goal is to ensure that our young people reach their full potential in a supportive and equitable environment.

Call for Abstracts

We invite Civil Society, Community-based organisations, researchers, practitioners, and policy-makers to submit abstracts for presentations that align with the conference themes. Abstracts should focus on EUP in ESA and can include research that can inform policy and programmes, implementation science, and other evidence-based programmes, policy barriers and solutions, particularly in relation to the following themes:

Conference Themes

1. Understanding Drivers of EUP:

What are the evidence gaps in our understanding of the drivers of EUP? How can dealing with EUP also address traditional social and gender norms, existing gender inequalities, sexual and gender-based violence, and HIV and AIDS?

2. Cross-Sectoral Approaches to Address EUP:

What innovative multi-sectoral strategies and frameworks can best address EUP? What are some of the barriers and challenges with multi-sectoral approaches and what can be done to overcome these challenges? What are the opportunities for collaboration across sectors and regions?

3. Age of consent and lack of policy harmonisation:

To what extent do legal and policy frameworks address or perpetuate EUP? This includes the implications of existing policies, age of consent, and barriers to accessing sexual and reproductive health services.

⁹ Sardinha, L., Yüksel-Kaptanoğlu, I., Maheu-Giroux, M., & García-Moreno, C. (2024). Intimate partner violence against adolescent girls: regional and national prevalence estimates and associated country-level factors. *The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health*, 8(9), 636-646.

¹⁰ UNFPA (2022) State of World Population 2022, UNFPA

4. Cultural and Religious Influences:

How do cultural norms and religious beliefs shape attitudes toward early pregnancy and reproductive health? What impact do these factors have on policy implementation and community acceptance?

5. Adolescent friendly health services:

How can sexual and reproductive health services (e.g; access to contraceptives) better meet the needs of adolescent girls in addressing EUP? What are some of the innovations in service delivery in the region?

6. Local and International Good Practices:

What are some promising institutional practices (e.g., family, education, religion, legal, policy level, national/ regional commitments or media) and community-based practices (e.g., education and awareness, peer-based models, social mobilization, and advocacy activities) in addressing EUP within the region? How can we enhance regional learning in this space? What is required to scale up successful interventions to address EUP?

7. Funding Initiatives and tracking indicators for reducing EUP

What are the costs imposed by EUP on health systems? How can we generate revenues to invest in reproductive health services? What mechanisms need to be put in place to ensure budget allocations for implementing interventions aimed at reducing EUP? What monitoring and evaluation indicators are required for tracking progress in reducing EUP.

Submission Guidelines

- Abstracts should be between **250-300 words**, clearly outlining the objectives, methods, results, and implications of the proposed presentation.
- Please include the title of your presentation, your name, affiliation, and contact information.
- All submissions will undergo a peer-review process. Selected abstracts will be invited for oral presentations and published in a special issue of the UKZN Alternation Journal.

Important Dates

- **Abstract Submission Deadline:** Monday, 4 November 2024
- **Notification of Acceptance:** Rolling basis until 10 November 2024
- **Conference Dates:** 28-29 November 2024

Registration and Information

- **Invitation to follow**
- www.eup.ukzn.ac.za
- **Contact Information:** For any conference-related inquiries, please email: eup@ukzn.ac.za

Join us in our collective effort to address early and unintended pregnancies in Eastern and Southern Africa. Together, we can forge pathways to a healthier, more equitable future for our youth, ensuring that they reach their full potential.