

The gender impact of South Africa's pandemics

By [Phinah Kodisang](#)

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Covid-19 has revealed the endemic impact of systemic patriarchy on 10 to 19-year-old girls in South Africa who bear the brunt of gender inequality and the exacerbated circumstances due to the pandemic.



Phinah Kodisang, CEO of Soul City Institute of Social Justice. | Source: Supplied.

Recent developments concerning adolescent girls in South Africa are evidence of the gender impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and a reflection of the overall failed efforts to adequately address systemic issues at the core of adolescent girls and young women's lives.

The recent numbers issued by the different departments reflect how adolescent girls and young women continue to be failed by everyone in the value chain, resulting in a violation of their rights.

We have been grappling with understanding and critically analysing what the "teenage pregnancy" numbers we saw in the past two weeks mean. But the covert manner in which government officials have tackled statutory rape as they've discussed these figures is disappointing and needs to be dealt with effectively.



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1,300+ young women infected with HIV weekly

The Department of Basic Education has added to the crisis by reporting that scores of young girls between the ages of 10

and 19 are infected with HIV every week. According to the report given during the department's state of teenage pregnancy and comprehensive sexuality report presented to the Portfolio Committee on Basic Education last week, 1,300 new cases of HIV occur in girls aged 10 to 19.

According to South Africa's latest National Strategic Plan on HIV, STIs and TB, girls and women between the ages of 15 and 24 have the [highest new infections of any age or sex cohort](#). In 2016, these young women and girls accounted for [almost 40% of new infections](#).

The acknowledgement by the department's deputy director-general Dr Granville Whittle that rape is among the drivers of these new infections is indicative of what we have been saying as the institute.

We have consistently argued that in a country where sexual violence against women is a pandemic on its own, it is only logical that the pregnancies reported are due to sexual violence and statutory rape in the case of minors.



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Sexual violence driving high pregnancy rate, HIV infections

The department's report of the 30% increase in teenage pregnancy - higher weekly than the annual average between April 2020 and March 2021 - and the 1,300 weekly HIV infections also reveals what we have known and highlighted since the first lockdown.

In addition, the Covid-19 pandemic has exposed girls and young women to a higher risk of HIV infection due to interruptions to sexual and reproductive health services and the continued barriers to youth-friendly services.

Transactional and age-disparate sex, low condom use and gender-based violence (GBV) also put young women and girls at risk.

This is backed up by the research conducted by the South African Medical Research Council, which lists GBV, deficiencies in the health system and the inadequate education about contraception for adolescents as drivers of teenage pregnancies, indicating that ["one in five children under the age of 18 experienced sexual abuse"](#).

Introduce health system interventions to prevent sexual violence

More and more, we see the need for comprehensive prevention and an outcome-based response that is multi-sectoral and sufficiently funded.



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For example, school-based interventions such as the Soul Buddyz programme have produced evidence in preventing sexual debut, HIV infection and impacted positively on condom use and keeping girls in school until matric.

These programmes should be rolled out across the country to prevent sexual violence and raise awareness about adolescents' sexual and reproductive health and rights.

Health system interventions and education campaigns to address the socio-cultural beliefs and misinformation that undermine contraceptives are also needed. But now more than ever, we need government leaders who are ready and willing to deal with the systemic issues at hand.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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