

'Parents force girls to have sex with older men for cash'

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WEIR

WOMEN'S ADVOCATES are concerned that early and preteen girls are being forced into sexual relationships with older men by their parents.

Executive director of the Women's Centre Foundation of Jamaica, Beryl Weir, says many girls are coerced into having sexual intercourse with older men because they come from poor families headed by a single mother who is marginally employed.

"What is more worrying is the trend where more parents are allowing their daughters to have relationships with older men because the older man has money," she says. She says sometimes girls as young as 13 and 12 are encouraged to enter into these relationships so their basic needs, like schooling, can be funded.

Behavioural specialist and head of the department of behavioural sciences at Northern Caribbean University, Dr. Grace Kelly, acknowledges this.

"If a child is in need they supply the need and in return they want something from the child," she says. And this payment is usually in the form of sexual intercourse.

ECONOMIC DEPRIVATIONS

Police Inspector Grace Gordon of Centre for the Investigation of Sexual Offences Carnal Abuse (CISOCA) confirms this too. She says while no formal study has been done there are cases, mostly in inner-city communities, where girls are forced into relationships because of their economic deprivations. She says sometimes the mothers of these girls give their children over to inner-city dons in return for economic support. But she says sometimes the parents are forced to comply with the don's request or they are threatened with violence. When one known girl did not comply, she explains, she was beaten and raped by gang members.

But Mrs. Weir explains that the perpetrators are not always that unfamiliar to the victim. Often, they live in the same household as the child or are close to the family.

Thirteen-year-old Beverley from an inner-city community in Kingston was one such victim. Her mother's boyfriend, who visited the house regularly, raped her and she became pregnant. She told police that a stranger had raped her because her poor mother was not willing to have the family's purveyor imprisoned. For years she hid the truth until one day he tried to rape her nine-year-old sister. Beverley stabbed him.

Dr. Kelly says incest is one of the contributing factors to the high number of pregnancies in the under 15-age group. She says incest tends to be rampant in households where there is extended family, but there are still

many cases where biological fathers impregnate their daughters:

"It's unfortunate that even some of the real fathers wait till the opportune time when their wives are not at home to make the children into their wives and these are common events. It happens when the children do not know they are in danger of being pregnant," she says.

Incest is a rising crime in Jamaica. Between 1992 and 2004, the data jumped up by 62 per cent according to police statistics.

Mrs. Weir says many of the cases that come to the Women's Centre are hushed. Most times they do not discover that some pregnancies were caused from incest until several years after the girls have moved on with their lives.

"Many times they say they were raped by an unknown person. We'll have our suspicions, but we can't go on suspicion," she says.

Sex with older men put many of these young girls at high risk of contracting sexual transmitted infections, Dr. Kelly explains. The 2004 National HIV/STI Prevention and Control Programme Epidemic Report supports this. The report noted that adolescent females between 10 and 19 were three times more at risk than boys the same age.

SOCIAL FACTORS

"This is as a result of social factors where by young girls are having sexual relations with HIV infected older men. On average 50 per cent of young women reported that their sexual partner [was] five to 10 years older than them," the report stated. The 2005 Epidemic Report adds that 15 of every 1,000 pregnant women were HIV positive.

Dr. Kelly says many girls are put at risk because some men still believe virgins can cure their sexual infections. "It's unfortunate but it still exists," Dr. Kelly says. She adds that when some men discover they are HIV positive also, they avenge themselves by having as much sexual intercourse with as many people as they can. Many of their victims end up being vulnerable young girls.

Mrs. Weir agrees, but she says what puts many girls at risk is the fact that they are not able to negotiate condom use. She says this is usually because adult males coerce them into sex. In their 2006 report on the State of the World's Children, UNICEF also identifies this. The report states that 20 per cent of teenage girls are forced into early sex.

RESPONSIBLE SEX SKILLS

Mrs. Weir says limited access to information and responsible sex skills are also adding to the rise in infections among young girls. She says while all clinics offer information, adolescents are sometimes shunned because health servants are judgemental.

She says there are still some guidance counsellors in schools who refuse to talk about sex, though the Ministry of Education mandates it, because they feel adolescents are too young to be having sex. She also says the children need more parental guidance.

"Yes some of them just have their first period, their periods are just settling out, they are just becoming aware of their sexuality and this is the vulnerable age where they need guidance," she says.

UNICEF states that correct knowledge among girls is only 36 per cent among those in schools and 31 per cent among those outside school.

Pregnancy puts a young girl at even greater risk because often they are forced out of school Mrs. Weir says. She says while the Women's Centre Foundation has a high success rate in placing girls back into school, there are many who still never go back because principals do not want their schools' names tainted. Nearly 33 per cent of females between 15 and 24 had their first child when they were in school UNICEF states and only 34 per cent of that group return to school.

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