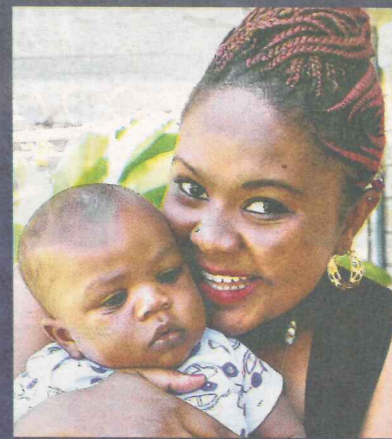


LIVING I did not abort my baby, and you have no reason to kill yours

INSIDE No brakes, no steering: Trust Google to think the unthinkable



FREE WITH YOUR DAILY NATION

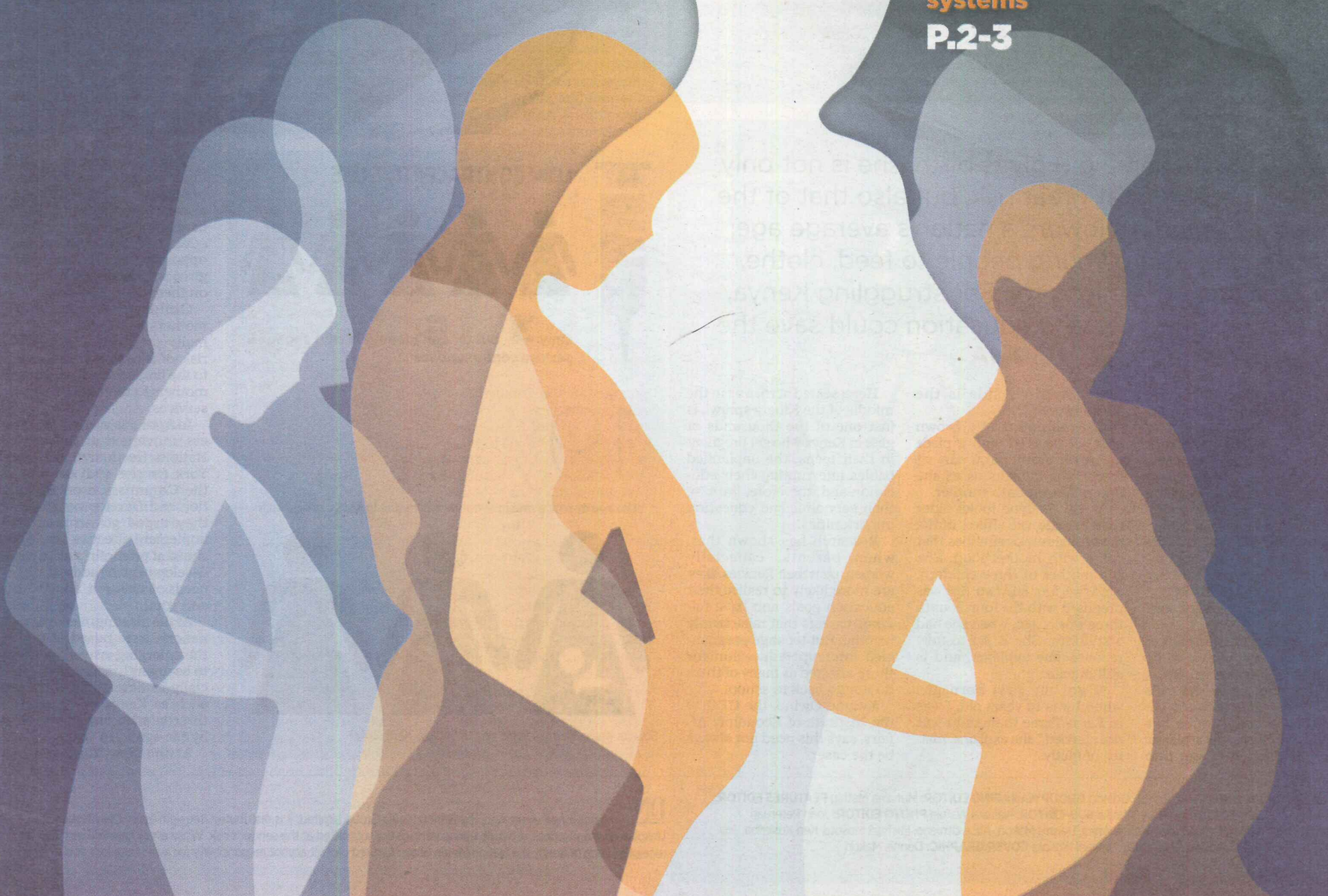
DN2

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Burden of Kenya's teen mothers

One in every three Kenyan girls is likely to give birth by the age of 19, and this scenario is putting a lot of pressure on the nation's healthcare, economic and social systems

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Life is a series of regrets for



Life is so tough, sometimes we have to sleep hungry. I don't even have money to take them to hospital when they fall sick. We have to buy everything here, even the water we need for domestic use.

Evalyne Akoth, 24-year-old mother of three who lives in Kibera. She says she will keep giving birth until she gets a boy since all her three children are girls. She was aged 19 when she got her first child.

Early birds: When a girl gives birth, she is not only putting her future at great risk, but also that of the country. Early birth lowers a nation's average age, which means more young people to feed, clothe, educate and create jobs for. For struggling Kenya, safe sexual practices and education could save the situation, writes **MERCY JUMA**

A young woman opens the door of her small house on our second knock. As the hinges creak and the wooden frame parts with the door, music filters outside from an old television set on top of a cupboard facing the doorway.

"My name is Evalyne Akoth, *karibuni kwangu*," our host invites us in, sweeping into her arms a young girl, probably two years old, who is holding a bowl of cold rice.

With one hand, she draws to one side an old, cream-white sheer curtain as she ushers us into the mud house she calls home in Kibera's Soweto village. Inside, what looks like a bedsheet hangs on a plastic rope, dividing the room into

two; the other side is the sleeping area.

Evalyne points at a brown sofa set covered with a piece of cream cloth: "You can sit there," she informs us as she lowers herself onto another.

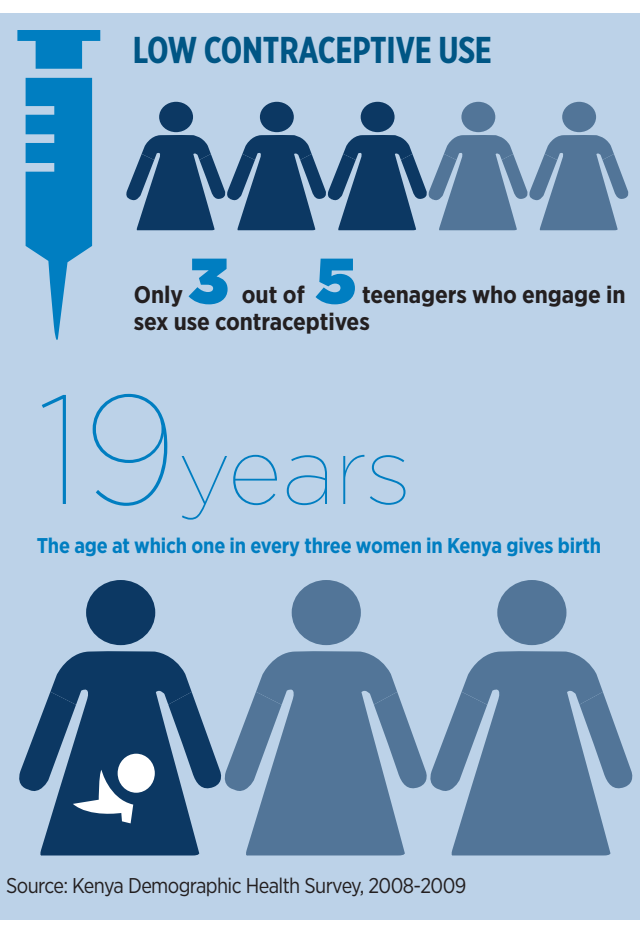
At 24, Evalyne looks older than her age, the effects of the numerous responsibilities that come with motherhood. She is a mother of three children, aged five, four and two. She was pregnant with the fourth, until three weeks ago, when she had a stillbirth. She is yet to fully recover, she explains, and is still in pain.

"I got my first-born girl when I was 19 years old. I was in Form Three then and I was not married," she explains, matter-of-factly.

Here, seated across us in the middle of the Kibera sprawl, is just one of the thousands of girls in Kenya who get pregnant in their teens, the unplanned babies interrupting their education and, therefore, limiting their economic and education opportunities.

Research has shown that, when parents, especially women, plan their families, they are more likely to realise their education goals and have full-time careers that raise family income. But teenage pregnancies interrupt education for those affected as many of them do not go back to school.

Kwame Owino, the CEO of the Institute of Economic Affairs, says this need not always be the case.



"While we should be looking at how to prevent teenage pregnancies, I think we should also focus on what to do if it happens. We should open more education and employment opportunities for women and girls, so that they can depend on themselves," he says.

Children born to young mothers like Evalyne are normally predisposed to higher risk of illness and death due to the limited exposure of their mothers to reproductive health services.

In April this year, policy makers converged at the United Nations Headquarters in New York for the 47th Session of the Commission on Population and Development, where they urged governments to implement effective strategies aimed at promoting sustainable development by addressing the needs of children, adolescents and youth.

At the meeting, teenage pregnancies were raised as one of the emerging issues that need to be urgently addressed, especially in developing countries such as Kenya, where one in three women have given birth by the age of 19 years.

At the New York meeting,

Kenya's teenage mothers



Evalyne's one-roomed house in Soweto Village, Kibera.

PHOTOS BY MERCY JUMA | NATION

Kenya was mentioned as one of the countries with a high fertility rate, an assertion that finds a strong base in the 2008-09 Kenya Demographic Health Survey. The report shows that, with a fertility rate of seven children, Kenyan women who belong in the lowest wealth quintile are giving birth to twice as many children as those in the highest wealth quintile.

Like Evalyne, many of these young mothers are unable to properly take care of their young ones and have to depend on parents, spouses and relatives. Evalyne's husband, who is older than her by eight years, does casual jobs within Kibera to feed his family.

"Life is so tough, sometimes we have to sleep hungry. I don't even have money to take them to hospital when they fall sick. We have to buy everything here, even the water we need for domestic use," explains Evalyne.

Although there is a three-year age gap between her first and last born, the children appear the same age, the result of the poor spacing between births. She, however, had not planned for her family to grow this way.

"I tried to use contraceptives once but I decided to discontinue when I got pregnant the second time. I felt it was not working," says Evalyne.

The KDHS shows that three out of five teenagers who engage in sex use contraceptives. Those who do not, of course, end up with unwanted pregnancies and the responsibilities of parenthood before they are ready. Some decide to terminate the pregnancies, in most cases through unsafe procedures.

The United Nations Population Division estimates that 222 million women worldwide would like to prevent pregnancies but are not using contraceptives. That is why, every year, 16 million girls give birth, 50 per cent of them in Africa.

Lambert Grijns, the Ambassador for Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights in The Netherlands, one of the regions in the world with the lowest teen pregnancies, was in New York for the UN meeting, and says sex education is central to reducing teen pregnancies. "Comprehensive sexuality edu-

cation that involves talking to young people about sex and its outcomes such as pregnancies and diseases is a must for any country with a young population," he says. "Sexual education needs planning, it needs to be on governments' to-do list."

Reproductive health experts agree that parents have a key role to play in family planning. "Many mothers do not want to believe that their teenage children engage in sex. They do not even consider putting them on contraceptives when they find out that they are sexually active," says Dr Joachim Osur, a reproductive health expert.

the rural areas, do not cover this topic, which is branded a taboo.

Evalyne's three children are all girls, and the one she lost was a boy. She says she will keep on trying until she has a baby boy because that is what her in-laws want. When asked whether she is thinking of planning her family, she says she is unsure.

Apart from personal hardship, the high number of teen mothers is the perfect recipe for a bottom-heavy population, where the number of people depending on those working is very high. Those depended on cater for both immediate and extended family members. Most of their income goes to supporting these people, and they end up not investing in their own education, or even in property. As it is, the average age of a Kenyan is 19 years.

Eventually, this young population will become a big burden to the government, in terms of provision of employment. If a large number of young people cannot find employment and earn satisfactory income, the youth bulge will become a demographic bomb, because a large mass of frustrated youth is likely to become a potential source of social and political instability.

"We should make these young people job-ready and provide them with other meaningful things to do. If they have a place to work and do not have a lot of idle time, then teen pregnancies, drug use and even religious radicalisation will not be there," says Owino.

Already in Kenya, the number of people who are out of work outweighs that of those who work and pay tax. Experts say this strangles the efforts being put to alleviate poverty and to promote a healthy population. According to the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, the unemployment rate stood at 40 per cent in 2011.

Evalyne's toddler is seated at the door, as we leave, picking the last grains of the cold rice. Two children of almost a similar age, peep from the next door. "Those are my friends' children; their mother was two years behind me in primary school," Evalyne tells us. Well, another teenage mother.

MY BUNDLE OF JOY CAME AT A MOST UNEXPECTED TIME

Laila Lawrence was 21 and unmarried when she got pregnant. She kept the baby, she says, not because she was prepared for it, but because she received the right support when she most needed it.

>>Read about her experience in Living magazine, just around the corner

PREVENTING TEENAGE PREGNANCIES

Keeping girls in school is one of the most effective ways of avoiding teenage pregnancies.

Better access to contraceptives also reduces unintended pregnancies.

2 Smaller families
Girls who have gone to school want smaller families and give birth to fewer children.

Secondary: 3 children
No education: 7 children

The high school effect

1 Sexual delay

Sex debut: 17 years
First child: 19 years
Secondary: 20 years
22 years

Girls who have attended secondary school start having sex two years later and have their first child three years later than girls who have no education.

3 Family planning

Women who have gone to secondary school are four times more likely to use family planning compared to girls who have no formal education.

... and many at risk of HIV

Only 1 out of 17 teenage girls who do not use contraceptives have discussed the issue with a healthcare worker.

3 out of 5 unmarried teenage girls who are sexually active do not use condoms.

INFORMED CHOICES

Access to correct information about contraceptives allows women to make informed choices

1 out of 8 women do not know of injectable contraceptives, the most popular family planning method in Kenya.

Myths and fear

Low sex drive? Weight loss? Infertility?

Many want it...
...but few access it

No!

One third of Kenya women who do not use contraceptives named health concerns and fear of side effects as the main reason.

Half of all women in Kenya do not want more children

1 out of 3 women who need family planning is not receiving it.

SOURCES: Kenya Demographic Health Survey, 2008-2009 GRAPHIC: Michael Mosota