

Joint Media Release

Research gives a voice to adolescent girls in Tonga to share experiences and challenges of unplanned pregnancy and motherhood

(Thursday 25 March 2021 – Tonga, Pacific) “Barriers surround us such as taboos for topics including reproductive health, that are not commonly discussed at home and in communities,” said 18 year-old Ana Malia Falemaka, Youth Mentor with the Talitha Project.

“The launching of these new research results is essential for us young women and adolescents, as it provides a platform of information that informs us girls about the changes in our body and the role one acquires in motherhood,” Ana Malia explained.

The complex and life-changing experience of adolescent unplanned pregnancy and motherhood in Tonga is addressed in research released today.

The ‘Adolescent Unplanned Pregnancy in the Pacific – Tonga’ research report is developed by the University of NSW (UNSW), supported by the Australian Government’s Gender Equality Fund, through Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development (*Pacific Women*).

Talitha Project and the Tonga Family Health Association partnered in the research to collect data from young women and girls aged 16 to 19 years who had experienced an unplanned pregnancy, along with older women who were grandmothers.

The report finds that girls have been missing-out on learning about the biology of reproduction, puberty and periods, including how pregnancy occurs, revealing a significant educational gap for girls and young women in Tonga.

Speaking at the launch in Tonga’s capital, Nuku’alofa, the Deputy Australian High Commissioner, Mr Nicholas Murphy, said: “We are working in partnership with Tonga to help ensure women and girls’ health and safety is a top priority for Australia in Tonga.”

“This report has been insightful in understanding the challenges that young women and adolescents face with unplanned pregnancy,” said Mr Murphy.

The research seeks to understand the everyday realities for adolescents in Tonga who face unplanned pregnancy and motherhood. Through interviews, the research uses the voices of the girls to reveal their personal experiences and challenges facing these young women in Tongan society.

Dr Christine Linhart, UNSW Lecturer in International Public Health, joined the launch virtually, explaining how “adolescent unplanned pregnancy is a frightening and very isolating experience for most of the young women we interviewed, often resulting in significant negative outcomes for their mental and physical health, and compromised the health of their unborn child.”

“The research reveals a need for strengthened sexual and reproductive health education for adolescents in Tonga, along with improved provision of accessible, non-judgmental and confidential sexual and reproductive health services and commodities for adolescents,” said Dr Linhart.

Talitha Project and the Tonga Family Health Association partnered in the research.

Vanessa Heleta, Director of Talitha Project, said: “we already have quantitative data and know the high number of teenage pregnancies but what’s so important is this research amplifies the biggest question of “why” – why did these girls become young mothers in the first place?”

“Through the research girls are telling us neither parents, teachers or anyone has taught them about puberty, menstruation cycle, contraception and just the absolute basic information about their bodies,



PACIFIC WOMEN
SHAPING PACIFIC DEVELOPMENT



yet girls have a right to know what is happening in their bodies - you can't make good decisions on false or absent information.”

“Now we can all work together in bringing about a solution and it's very simple. We need the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Health and, more importantly, we need the parents, community and all the church leaders to get on board.”

Sione Hufanga, UN Country Representative and President of the Tonga Family Health Association, agreed “education and advocacy for girls and young women is increasingly important in Tonga.”

‘Without a proper attention and care towards the associated risk of unwanted pregnancy, it can easily put two lives at extreme health risk, which has powerful influence to increase two National and Global Indicators namely Maternal Mortality Rates as well as Infant Mortality Rates beyond national and SDGs global target threshold,” he said.

The research is being released in Tonga this week through a half day workshop to present and discuss with partners ways to address the key findings, such as education, advocacy, research and other actions.

Tonga is one of three Pacific countries participating in the research, involving 94 face-to-face interviews and five focus groups conducted in Tonga, Vanuatu and Chuuk State in 2019. The findings for Vanuatu and Chuuk State, Federated States of Micronesia, will be released this year.

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