

Angel Nsanzimana is seated with a group of adolescent mothers soothing her one-year old baby but the insistent cries of the child forces her to start breasting so she can carry-on her conversation with the group.

Nsanzimana, 19, carries her baby every time when coming to join her colleagues because she doesn't have anyone to leave help her baby with. She juggles between her tailoring classes and caring for the baby and this is also the same when she goes back home.

Everyone in the group has almost a similar story like that of Nsanzimana, getting pregnant at a young age and giving birth yet living at their parents' home. Her life dramatically changed when she became pregnant at 17, she dropped out of school and after giving birth she started adapting to motherhood in very difficult situations.



Angel Nsanzimana

Together with her colleagues, they are happy of acquiring new skills and the group has initiated a saving scheme, but most importantly this initiative has psychologically helped this group of adolescent mothers to feel being part of the society again.

Adolescent pregnancy is a growing concern in Rwanda as well as it is globally where about 21 million between 15 to 19-years old girls become pregnant in developing regions.

Complications of pregnancy and childbirth are ranked second leading cause of death among this age group but also the economic and social consequences are dire to these adolescents, their parents and the community. Stigma, rejection, more violence within families, lower level of education, less employment opportunities and maintained cycles of poverty are among the consequences.

Addressing social exclusion

Pastor Sylvester Nkezabera, the head of Rugendabari Parish of the Anglican Church of Rwanda explains that after seeing what adolescent mothers went through after giving birth like Stigma and rejection by their families and friends because of cultural beliefs, they started looking for ways to help them.



Pastor Sylvester Nkezabera, the head of Rugendabari Parish of the Anglican Church of Rwanda

Pastor Nkezabera started talking to the young mothers as a way of bringing them together for counseling because they were becoming desolate as a result of social neglect from families and friends.

“After giving birth while still at my parent’s home most of my family and friends rejected me, they blamed me for bringing shame to family and this affected my whole life, I hated myself and would not want to meet or look at anyone,” says Valentine Mukanyamibwa.

Mukanyamibwa explains that she was approached by Pastor Nkezabera who invited her to join other young mothers and was surprised to find others with similar situations.

She attests that the meetings and interactions with others mostly in similar situations healed her, today she is living a normal life where she interacts with everyone and goes by her activities without feeling judged as she had experienced before.



Valentine Mukanyamibwa.

“I was in a state of solitude when the Pastor found me and advised me to join other girls,” explains Jeannette Mukakarega, emphasizing that she valued meeting others so much that even when they started a saving scheme were happy to contribute even Rwf.100 per week and bring the money personally to the group, an opportunity for meeting others.

This initiative at Rugendabari Parish in Shyogwe Diocese started in 2017 with three groups each composed of 20 young mothers. As life improved for some they would leave and today have only one group.

With no financial support to help the young mothers the plan was to provide physiological support through counseling but the diocese received support from one of its partners who offered to train the young mothers to which 16 from the group agreed to start training.

Interactions

The benefactor agreed to support a one-year intensive training in tailoring and also provided the group with twenty pigs to improve on their farming activities.

The group meeting for tailoring classes is composed of 16 adolescent mothers from Rugendabari sector in Muhanga District, southern Rwanda. They have found a new preoccupation and whenever they meet its also time to reflect on their situations.

Meeting regularly for the training at the parish has helped these young mothers not to be alone because they have gained friends, they now know people care about them and their saving scheme is picking up while helping those who need to borrow.

For Immaculée Tuyishimire, the group is now having regular prayers whenever they meet, this lifted her spirits reminding her that the solitude nightmare was over. “I thank God every time for how my life has changed and feel psychologically stable now.”

Tuyishimire observes that they have embarked on a journey of healing with a focus to improve their lives and are ready to support others that may have similar problems they have had in the past because young girls keep falling into such dire situations.

When Nsanzimana joined this group she could not even find money to buy soap for her baby and her parents were hostile towards her. Through the saving scheme she borrowed Rwf 10,000 to start selling tomatoes to which she earned a small profit of Rwf 2,000 and borrowed another Rwf 20,000 to increase her stock, when she got another profit was able to rent a small shop near her home.

She now has a shop where she sells milk, doughnuts and bread. She notes that since starting these activities she is on good terms with her parents and able to afford basic necessities for the baby.

Mukanyamibwa never thought that one could borrow money only to worried to pay back, but she started by borrowing from Rwf 10,000 to sell airtime and has now saved up to Rwf 50,000 from her small venture.

Pastor Nkezabera observes that they encouraged all the young mothers in the area to come join the group to support them through counseling but they see that the initiative is bringing hope. He cautions parents and communities to avoid neglecting

and stigmatizing young girls in such situations but rather support them.

He says that although many of these girls after joining the group feel their spirits restored but some continue to be rejected by their families as the church lack a way to reach the families as many are even from different religious beliefs.

Stigma can still be an issue however, and the mother regularly feels embarrassed. But, unlike in many other parts of the world, the culture in Rugendabari does not force teenagers to leave their family home if they become pregnant.

Although the Anglican Church of Rwanda program is making a big impact in Rugendabari, there is still much work to be done elsewhere. But if the program has proven anything, it's that it takes a whole village to raise a child – whether a teenager or a newborn. (END)