

A proposal before Rwanda's Parliament to allow 15-year-olds seek medical care — including contraception — without parental consent ignited heated debate Monday, as lawmakers weighed the urgency of tackling teenage pregnancy against concerns over legal inconsistencies and public health risks.

Supporters of the measure say it is a pragmatic response to the country's stubborn rates of adolescent pregnancies, which have persisted despite years of education campaigns. Critics warn it could encourage early sexual activity and fuel the spread of sexually transmitted infections.

The proposal is part of a sweeping health services bill aimed at consolidating more than 100 existing legal provisions. It would lower the age at which minors can independently consent to medical treatment, a shift intended to address cases of girls who avoid clinics because they fear parental involvement.

Government figures reveal the scale of the problem: in 2024, 22,454 teenage girls were sexually abused and became pregnant. The number was 19,701 in 2020, rose to 23,111 in 2021 and 24,472 in 2022, before dipping slightly to 22,055 in 2023.

MP Izere Marie Ingrid said the statistics make clear that action is needed but stressed that contraception access must be paired with strong behavioral education. "Providing family planning services without guidance could expose young people to diseases that threaten their future," she said.



Some lawmakers said the measure clashes with Rwanda's legal framework. MP Ntezimana Jean Claude noted that a 15-year-old cannot represent themselves in court, questioning why they would be allowed to make potentially life-altering medical decisions alone.

MP Niyorurema Jean Rene argued that Rwanda's prevention campaigns have lost momentum and should be revitalized before expanding minors' medical rights. "We are rushing to adopt what works elsewhere without assessing if it fits here," he said, calling for parental notification requirements if the measure passes.

Others sought a compromise. MP Tumukunde Hope Gasatura supported access to health services for adolescents but suggested setting the age at 16, when Rwandans receive national identity cards required for many hospital visits.

State Minister for Health Yvan Butera told Parliament that relying on awareness campaigns alone has failed to produce lasting change. He urged a strategy that combines education, family involvement, and science-based tools, citing lessons from Rwanda's HIV/AIDS response in the 1980s and 1990s, when prevention improved only after new medical interventions were introduced.

Nearly 38 percent of babies born to teenage mothers in Rwanda experience stunted growth, he said, with long-term consequences for their physical and mental development. "We should not accept having more than 9,000 children at risk every year when prevention is possible," Butera said.

The bill is expected to come to a vote later this month, with the outcome likely to shape Rwanda's approach to adolescent health for years to come.