

Living on the Edge of Tomorrow: Stories of Youth, Struggle, and Silent Strength in Urban Kenya

"The rusty *mabati* roof of the one room shack that I call home in Mathare area 4 rattles with each gust of wind. It's a daily struggle for me and my child to keep warm. My name is *Cynthia*, and I'm 19. I live with my three-year-old daughter, *Zawadi*.

Most days, I sell boiled maize and *mandazi* next to the *boda boda* shade at area 4 stage. On good days, I make enough for supper. On bad days, *Zawadi* and I go to bed with only hope in our stomachs. School became a memory the day I found out I was pregnant at 15. My boyfriend vanished, my parents threw me out, and society stamped "failure" across my forehead.

"I had dreams, but dreams don't feed babies."

Across the sprawling Nairobi metropolis Kibera's Gatwekera area, *Brian*, 17, speaks with the shaky voice of a boy forced into fatherhood.

"It happened one time," he says, his eyes watery. "We used a condom, but it burst. Now my son is eight months old. I don't know how to be a father—I don't even know how to be a man yet."

Ostracized by his peers and overwhelmed by responsibility, *Brian* dropped out of school to try and hustle. "No one talks about what happens to boys who become fathers too early. They only talk about the girls."

These stories are not isolated. They are the lived reality of thousands of adolescents across urban Kenya—young lives burdened with decisions that they had no tools or support to make.

Speaking at the World Population Day celebrations and launch of the 2025 State of the World Population Report in Nairobi, Dr. Mohamed Sheikh, Director General of the National Council for Population and Development (NCPD), painted a stark but hopeful picture.

"Young people are dealing with lack of economic stability, persistent gender inequality, and limited reproductive healthcare," he said. "But it's not all doom and gloom. Kenya has made significant progress. Teenage pregnancies have reduced from 20% in 2008 to 15% in 2022. These gains are commendable—but we must do more."

For the first time in history, this flagship report by the UNFPA was launched in a Global South country—Kenya. Dr. Natalia Kanem, UNFPA Executive Director, described it as "a major milestone," underscoring that "vast numbers of people are unable to create the

families they desire. Few exercise true choice in their most intimate, consequential decisions.”

Thomas Andersen, UNFPA Kenya Country Representative, emphasized that reproductive agency must be central in our evolving society. “Fertility decline is significantly influenced by reductions in adolescent childbearing,” he noted. “If we invest in gender equality and give young people the power of informed choice, we create dividends for all.”

For youth like Cynthia and Brian, the gap between hope and reality is still too wide. They face stigma, poverty, and the crushing weight of expectation in a society that often judges but rarely supports.

“I don’t want pity,” Cynthia says. “I want a chance. I want education, a job, and childcare support. Is that too much to ask?”

In Kibera, Brian echoes similar sentiment. “We need someone to talk to. We need skills, work, and to be seen—not just blamed.”

The message from the event was clear: Kenya’s future depends on its youth. Through better urban planning, education, reproductive healthcare, and youth-led dialogue, the country can turn struggle into strength.

“Let us empower young people with education, skills, and health services,” Dr. Sheikh concluded. “Let us commit to creating a Kenya where every young person, regardless of where they live or what challenges they face, can make informed choices and realize their full potential.”