



Communication and Marketing Department
Isebe loThungelwano neNtengiso
Kommunikasie en Bemerkingsdepartement

Private Bag X3, Rondebosch 7701, South Africa
Welgelegen House, Chapel Road Extension, Rosebank, Cape Town
Tel: +27 (0) 21 650 5427/5428/5674 Fax: +27 (0) 21 650 5628

www.uct.ac.za

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UCT-led project supports highly growing number of adolescent mothers



Associate Professor Elona Toska

Photo: Nasief Manie

With Africa projected to have nearly one billion adolescents by 2050, the number of pregnant women and young mothers would likely double, and supporting them by designing services that fit their needs is crucial, said University of Cape Town (UCT) [Centre for Social Science Research's](#) Associate Professor Elona Toska.

Toska, an adolescent health researcher, relayed this message during the 3rd African Workshop on Women and HIV, held in Cape Town from 12 to 13 March. The workshop focused on improving the quality of life for women living with HIV, reducing transmission rates and strengthening care integration.

Two UCT academics – Associate Professor Phumla Sinxadi from the [Division of Clinical Pharmacology](#) and Dr Elzette Rousseau from the [Desmond Tutu Health Foundation](#) – hold the workshop's local co-chair title in South Africa.

A multi-pronged referral system

Toska shared a presentation under the title "From research to reality: Outcomes and insights from a multi-pronged referral system for adolescent mothers living with and affected by HIV in South Africa". Her presentation was based on a research titled "Help empower youth brought up in adversity with their babies and young children (Hey Baby)", a joint project between UCT and the University of Oxford, and currently on the go in the Eastern Cape.

"The research study surveys how HIV and the experiences of living with and being exposed to HIV, really occur during adolescence while at the same time, the young women in our region and in South Africa specifically are also dealing with relationships where they become pregnant and become mothers," Toska said.

"There's a lot of considerations here, but one of the areas that a large body of evidence has pulled together is that there's a lot of shared pathways and factors that drive HIV exposure, risk and acquisition as well as becoming pregnant and a mother in adolescence."

Early pregnancy and motherhood

Toska said early pregnancy and motherhood in the region is often unplanned and unintended. However, she stressed, that doesn't mean that adolescent girls and young women don't love their children and aren't good mothers. Often, they just need support to get by.

Through Hey Baby in 2018, the team recruited and worked with more than 1 000 adolescents, who were mothers to 1 200 children. The number of children in the cohort has since increased to 1 700.

"We are social scientists, so we try to understand life as it happens with young people. We're not giving them post-exposure prophylaxis or HIV tests. We're not taking them to the clinic unless they ask us to," Toska said. "And in the process of doing this work, we do what we call referrals."

She said about a third of adolescents recruited for the mother and baby study are living with HIV. And what they learned during conversations is that these women have a different set of unique experiences that relate mainly to their children, some of whom may have been exposed to HIV in utero, during birth or while breastfeeding.

A detailed Q&A

Toska said their overall research findings are based on responses from 630 participants collected through one-on-one interviews conducted between 2020 and 2025.

The interviews, she said, are a detailed exchange. Participants answer questions about their mental health, violence in the home or elsewhere, whether they attend school or not, and if they have food in their home.

For those living with HIV or other chronic conditions, discussions also centre around medication compliance. Their answers spark the referral process, which researchers categorise into emergency and non-emergency groups. Toska said emergency referrals are serious cases and include facilitating urgent support for suicide ideation or attempts, sexual

abuse and the urgent need for emergency contraception, especially after a case of sexual abuse. A woman who is defaulting on her antiretroviral treatment is also considered an emergency case.

Supporting young mothers

According to the research findings, a third of the young women required a single referral (counselling, food, medication) over time, while 10% needed more than one referral during two of their three interviews.

Further, their research also indicated that adolescent mothers living with HIV were 47% more likely to need referrals. Interestingly, school-going adolescent mothers were much less likely to require a referral. This, she said, highlights the importance of keeping young mothers in school and adequately supporting their needs.

“So, for example, a young mother may need a food referral and counselling support or assistance with getting to the Department of Home Affairs to get access to the Child Support Grant,” she said.

What’s important to note, she added, is that participants’ needs also evolve over time.

“What you need when your baby is under six months old is very different to what you need when your baby is three months old or three years old, and where you are as a young mother, depending on how old you are and where you are in your educational or professional trajectory also count in the referral process,” Toska said.

Story by Niémah Davids, UCT News

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Issued by: UCT Communication and Marketing Department

Thami Nkwanyane

Media Liaison and Monitoring Officer
Communication and Marketing Department
University of Cape Town
Rondebosch
Tel: (021) 650 5672
Cell: (072) 563 9500
Email: thami.nkwanyane@uct.ac.za
Website: www.uct.ac.za