

Growing worldwide teen boom could fuel a dangerous generation gap

by Pam Adams

Most of us - adults, children and teenagers - take the teen years for granted. We think of them as angst and zits and dates and driving. Young children can't wait until they're 13; parents dread the thought.

As for the actual state of teen-dom, or adolescence, it's such a part of the culture that familiar mythologies - from fads and fashions to music and marketing - have grown up around succeeding generations of American teenagers.

But until recently, the idea of adolescence was unknown in many parts of the world, says Cynthia B. Lloyd, author of "Growing Up Global," a 2005 report commissioned by the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine on trends affecting youth in developing countries.

TEEN PLANET - A population boom among the world's youth could fuel a dangerous generation gap. CNS Illustration by Teresa Hargrove. While much has been made of the United States' population hitting 300 million this year, international demographers are worrying about economic, cultural and political implications of a population boom among the world's youth.

Currently, the total population of 10- to 24-year-olds is estimated at 1.5 billion, of which 86 percent live in developing countries. The growth is most rapid in sub-Saharan Africa and parts of Asia. Call it a new wave of global baby boomers who are, in some instances, the first true generation of "teenagers" their countries have known.

Lloyd calls adolescence - or what Americans call the teenage years - a "relatively new life cycle phase" for many developing countries. Previously, young people tended to move directly from childhood to adulthood. Adult status was much more tied to physical changes, such as puberty, she says.

Spurred by improved health care, the onset of puberty is also declining for young people in many developing countries - from about 15 to 12 years of age. That trend, along with economic and technological gains, has affected cultural practices tied to puberty and delayed employment, marriage and childbearing while increasing time spent in school.

"All of these things have created a phase of adolescence that's new and, in many ways, unfamiliar," says Lloyd, a director of social research at the Population Council. Her areas of expertise include transition to adulthood and, of particular interest, school quality in developing countries.

The word "teenager" didn't become popular in the United States until after World War II, according to "Teenagers: An American History" (Basic Books, \$19) by Grace Palladino.

From the "bobby-soxers," with their poodle skirts and love of Frank Sinatra, the first so-called "teen idol," to Beatlemania, the concept of "teenager" has planted itself deeply in American culture. It is an age group with its own interests, attitudes and spending power, Palladino writes. Modern American teenagers are also an economic force, influencing what movies, music and television shows are distributed, what electronic and technological innovations are produced.

At differing times, America's youth have also been a political and social force. For instance, high school and college students were in the forefront of the civil rights movement and protests against the Vietnam War.

One irony of the new focus on youth internationally is this: As the United States and other industrialized countries are stretching adolescence into the mid- to late 20s, developing countries are just encountering it.

"It is relative," said Lloyd. "We're talking marriage delayed from 16 to 18 (in many developing countries) compared to from 20 to 25 in this country, but the trends are still strong."

Global communications networks leave the impression that teenagers are connected from one continent to another.

"Pick any country," said Lloyd, "you find an elite, mostly in urban areas, who look like they wear the same clothes and hang out in the same malls" as teens in the United States and other industrialized nations.

"The question is, 'How deep does that connection run? Not very.'" According to a recently released World Bank report, the vast majority of the world's teenagers don't have access to television.

Researchers like Lloyd and international development agencies suggest the possibility of a critical, and potentially dangerous, global generation gap as emerging adolescent populations age and their political and economic expectations rise.

The World Bank's 2006 World Development Report, following up on "Growing Up Global," found:

- Nearly half of all unemployment in the world is among young people.

- 500,000 young people under the age of 18 are recruited by military and paramilitary groups. Some 300,000 have been involved in armed conflict in more than 30 countries.

- 13 million adolescents give birth each year.

- Young people account for nearly half of all new HIV infections.

The goal of research studies such as "Growing Up Global" and the World Bank's recent report is to generate more resources and improve governmental policies relating to young people internationally.

"We're trying to prioritize and focus on key issues that are new and important," Lloyd says.

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