



Briefing paper 498

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## Teenage Pregnancy

*"When a girl becomes pregnant, her life can change radically. Her education may end and her job prospects diminish. She becomes more vulnerable to poverty and exclusion, and her health often suffers".*

*United Nations Population Fund*

### 1. Introduction

The issues which result in teenage pregnancies are a complex interplay of socio-economic and psycho-social factors, as well as those of gender inequality and sexual abuse. While there has been a slight decline in the incidence of teenage pregnancy in South Africa it remains an important public health issue.<sup>1</sup> A teenage pregnancy refers to a pregnancy occurring in a girl under the age of 19.

According to World Health Organization (WHO), "At least 10 million unintended pregnancies occur each year among adolescent girls aged 15 to 19 years in the developing world.<sup>2</sup> Complications during pregnancy and childbirth are the leading cause of death for 15 to 19-year-old girls globally."<sup>3</sup> However, a girl may fall pregnant at any age from the time of her first period and this may be as young as ten years of age. According to Stats SA, 10.9 percent of births in 2017 were to mothers aged 10 to 19.<sup>4</sup>

### 2. Demographic and Risk Factors

According to the WHO, "Adolescent pregnancies are a global problem occurring in high, middle and low-income countries. Around the world, however, adolescent pregnancies are more likely to occur in marginalized communities, commonly driven by poverty and lack of education and employment opportunities."<sup>5</sup>

According to statistics from 2013, over 99 000 learners in South Africa fell pregnant, while in

2018/2019 over 120 000 teenage pregnancies were reported by the Minister of Basic Education. Moreover, 2 895 of these pregnancies were to girls between the ages 10-14 with KwaZulu-Natal, Eastern Cape, Mpumalanga and Limpopo having the highest number of teenage pregnancies. These figures clearly show that many school-going girls in South Africa are at risk of falling pregnant. However, contrary to popular belief, teenagers do not become pregnant in order to access the Child Support Grant. The uptake of the grant is lower amongst teenage mothers than it is among adult mothers.

As already mentioned, complications during pregnancy and childbirth are the world's leading cause of death for 15 to 19-year-old girls. A young girl may be able to conceive a child but may not yet be physically mature enough to safely deliver her baby. Adolescent mothers (ages 10-19 years) face higher risks of eclampsia,<sup>6</sup> puerperal endometritis,<sup>7</sup> and opportunistic infections than women aged 20 to 24 years, while babies of adolescent mothers face higher risks of low birth weight, preterm delivery and severe neonatal conditions.<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, the WHO found that "of the estimated 5.6 million abortions that occur each year among adolescent girls aged 15-19 years, 3.9 million are unsafe, contributing to maternal mortality, morbidity and lasting health problems."<sup>9</sup>

### 3. Contributing Factors

Young girls are vulnerable to pregnancy due to wide range of socio-economic and psycho-social factors including the following:

- their naivety and lack of appropriate sex education from caring and supportive adults;
- a lack of appropriate role models at home, school, church or community;
- peer pressure;
- alcohol/drug/substance abuse;
- poor parenting and a fractured family environment;
- a depressed socio-economic milieu and overcrowded living conditions;
- the highly sexualized culture in advertising;
- girls being brought up to be submissive;
- the predominance of gender inequality and patriarchy;
- a misogynistic culture, especially in popular music and other media;
- a lack of appropriate supervision;
- sexual abuse and rape;
- boredom;
- teenagers lacking the perspective to anticipate consequences and often living in the moment;
- the inappropriate distribution of power in relationships; and
- adolescence being a time of experimentation.

### 4. Impact on Education

No girl should be denied access to education as a consequence of her becoming pregnant. The right to education is entrenched in law through the Constitution and the SA Schools Act of 1996. Furthermore, there are various African instruments of human rights that protect the rights of pregnant teenagers. The Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa requires signatory states to eliminate discrimination against girls, and enjoins states to ensure that there are no barriers in the education system that block pregnant learners from attending school. The African Charter on the Rights and the Welfare of the Child also places an obligation on signatory states to take 'appropriate measures' to ensure that children who fall pregnant have a chance to

continue their education. South Africa has signed and ratified these instruments.

South Africa therefore has clear constitutional and international obligations that require the state to ensure that pregnant learners are able to attend school for as long as possible, to return to school as soon as they can, and to get the support that they need as young mothers. In this regard, the Department of Education published a set of guidelines called "Measures for the Prevention and Management of Learner Pregnancy" in 2007. However, schools are often reluctant to take responsibility for pregnant learners. Furthermore, girls often fail to resume their schooling as they need familial support to do so and this is not necessarily forthcoming. There is considerable stigma attached to being pregnant as a teenager and learners may encounter negative attention from teachers and other learners. Moreover, it is difficult to care for a child and do homework; and if family members are not able to look after the child during school hours, the question of accessing and affording day care is often a major obstacle to continuing with schooling.

Teenage pregnancy changes a teenager's life forever – seldom in a positive direction. A young girl in a situation of crisis pregnancy may feel abandoned by family and receive little support from the baby's father or his family. Younger mothers and their babies face greater health risks. Younger mothers often shelve their own educational and career dreams; this impacts on the way they raise their children, which in turn perpetuates poor school performance by their children.

Both schools and learners need to be well informed to ensure that pregnant learners are able to get quality education that is free of prejudice and stigmatisation. Every pregnant learner in the basic education sector has the right to have their dignity, privacy and confidentiality protected.

### 5. The Role of Men and Boys

Girls bear the burden of teenage pregnancy and are largely left 'carrying the baby'. Teenage boys engage in sexual activity as part of adolescent experimentation; as a result of peer pressure; and due to participation in gang culture. This takes place within a society that remain predominately patriarchal where hyper-masculinities prevail. It is necessary to investigate the socio-demographic

and sexual behaviour characteristics of young men who have impregnated at least one teenage girl in order to better understand the phenomenon of teenage pregnancy. Engaging in multiple sexual partnerships could increase the vulnerability of young people to sexually transmitted infections and/or teenage pregnancies. "Initiatives to create awareness among South African youth regarding the consequences of sexual behaviour are recommended, with a specific focus on addressing young men's involvement in teenage pregnancy."

It is important to be mindful that one of the causes of unintended pregnancy is sexual violence, which

is widespread, with more than a third of girls in some countries reporting that their first sexual encounter was coerced.

## 6. Conclusion

Teenage pregnancies are largely unintended. The pregnancy is an unfortunate consequence of the articulations of various factors which are discussed above. Teenagers who become pregnant are extremely vulnerable. They need to be treated with a non-judgemental attitude and compassionate care to see them through to a safe delivery and then a care plan needs to be put in place to help them care for their babies and to return to school.

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**Lois Law**  
**Project Co-ordinator**

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<sup>1</sup> On 27<sup>th</sup> February 2020 the SACBC Parliamentary Liaison Office hosted a Seminar on the issue of teenage pregnancy. The speakers were Siliziwe Mbambo and Kayla Horne of the Saartjie Baartman Women's Centre; Malany October of the New World Foundation; and Evona Rebelo of the Catholic Schools Office

<sup>2</sup> Almost all of these births, 95%, are in low to middle income countries including South Africa

<sup>3</sup><https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/adolescent-pregnancy>

<sup>4</sup><https://africacheck.org/reports/yes-teenagers-account-for-10-of-deliveries-in-south-africa-but-not-half-the-maternal-deaths>

<sup>5</sup><https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/adolescent-pregnancy>

<sup>6</sup>Eclampsia is a condition that only occurs during pregnancy and causes seizures, usually late in the pregnancy, and can result in high blood pressure levels in the mother thus reducing the supply of blood to the foetus.

<sup>7</sup> Endometritis is an inflammatory condition of the lining of the uterus,

<sup>8</sup><https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/adolescent-pregnancy>

<sup>9</sup><https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/adolescent-pregnancy>

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