



Teen mothers often face more challenges than their older counterparts.

Mother & Child?

The rise in teen pregnancy has seen many girls becoming moms while still in school. Jennifer Thorpe spoke to a group of women about this alarming trend.

MY TEEN YEARS were when I realised that I was interested in having sex, or at least sexual experiences. I'd shared an awkward lesson on the birds and the bees with classmates, but not very many on how we worked through our own desire to be intimate, and how to say "yes" or "no." I knew I wanted to be sexual, but didn't really know how to go about it, never mind how to be safe. Though it's far less taboo these days, it seems teenagers still feel insecure about sex. Perhaps that's one of the reasons why the rate of teenage pregnancy is so high in South Africa.

According to a *Mail & Guardian* article in February this year, 40 percent of all pregnancies in SA occur among girls under the age of 19. In 2010, in KwaZulu-Natal alone, there were over 17,000 pregnancies reported at schools. In some cases, classmates were the fathers. In a climate of high levels of sexual violence against girls, it's not surprising that studies have shown that between 11 percent and 20 percent of teenage pregnancies are the result of rape, and the fathers are sometimes much older than the mothers. The phenomenon

of "sugar daddies" or "transactional sex" sees older men becoming the benefactors of young girls in exchange for sex. Although sexual violence provides a reason for some pregnancies, there are many other explanations for the rise in the numbers of teen pregnancies within and outside the school context. We canvassed a number of opinions to uncover the multitude of social causes for this problem.

Not Seeing the Bigger, Better Picture

"Depending on socioeconomic background, causes for teen pregnancy can vary. It seems that in spite of kids being bombarded with information about sex and pregnancy on TV and radio, most think, It won't happen to me. In the rural community where I taught, there was a discourse of, We're poor, and we're not doing anything with our lives so we might as well have babies while we're trying to figure out what we're going to do. This meant that many learners opted to have children rather than pursuing other life choices." —Athabile Masola, high school teacher

The Not-So Sweet Treats

"Sugar daddies' shower poverty-stricken girls with gifts of toiletries and clothes and, in return, demand to have (often unprotected) sex with them. For many, their first sexual experiences are forced or committed under threat of violence. Most girls don't plan to get pregnant, but invariably many do." —Stacey Rozen, founder and director of *Storyscarves*, a good-will movement for vulnerable girls in Soweto

Inspiration is Lacking

"Teens, especially in townships, aren't exposed to a variety of resources to better themselves as individuals. Many township schools don't offer any extracurricular educational or cultural activities that could help teenagers and motivate them to move past their circumstances." —Lerato Mhlabane, YOTV presenter

Disconnection of Old Religion

"A Christian culture that promotes abstinence, loyalty and sexual purity is not enough to keep teens from exploring their God-given sexuality. The teenage generation of today is not going to buy the church's use of scare tactics around sex. Teens live in a world that forces them to grow up faster than ever. When we teach or preach to a generation using our language and not theirs, we only provide them with ideas which don't reflect or belong in their world." —Candice Smith, pastor, Trinity Methodist Church in Linden, Johannesburg

Let's Really Talk About Sex

"Many young girls don't understand that having sex involves the risk of getting pregnant. At school they generally have a once-off, very embarrassing, sex education class, and don't take the messages to heart." —Roxane Mather, MD

Real-Life Biology is Needed

"There is a lack of information available at public clinics. If you want to get contraception you have to wait all day in the queue with people fetching their diabetes medication or getting their kids vaccinated. Most of the time you're offered the injection. You aren't given proper counselling, so you

don't know the side effects or the mechanisms involved in contraception. With the injection, you may not get your period for months, so it becomes difficult to tell if you are pregnant or not." —Rebecca Hodes, deputy director of the *Aids and Society Research Unit*, University of Cape Town

Would You Come Here for Advice?

"In the rural community where I work, many girls get pregnant, sometimes more than once. I think it is often linked to the fact that the clinics where many girls would be expected to get contraception or information about safe sex are incredibly alienating spaces, even when they've been pregnant before. This means they don't find out about prevention, and aren't able to access the healthcare they need for safe pregnancies." —Desiree Barnard, human development officer in the Overberg region, Western Cape

Popular Perception and Influence

"We watch hip-hop videos that promote the idea of women as sexual objects. I would argue that as long as teenage girls are subjected to a popular culture that says they are inferior, or need a man to prove their value in life, the problem and rise of teen pregnancy will continue." —Candice Smith, high school learner

Too much Freedom

"My boyfriend and I had been having sex for over a year when I got pregnant in Grade 11. My mother knew we were dating, but never asked how serious our relationship was. I think she just assumed that if I needed to know anything, I would ask her. I felt confident that my boyfriend and I knew what we were doing, until one day, when neither of us had a condom, but didn't want to stop making out. I think I'd hoped that all the other times we'd used protection would cancel out this one time. I realise now I wasn't nearly as smart or mature as I thought. Which teenager ever is?" —Pam Nkosi (not her real name) ☐

Jennifer Thorpe is a writer, activist and advocate for women's rights based in Cape Town.

Play Your Part

CHILDLINE is a national non-profit organisation that works to protect children from all forms of violence and create a culture of children's rights. They welcome volunteers who may assist through counselling male and female teens, by telephone or

online, and at a community level. For more information, visit childlinesa.org.za, or, if you can assist, e-mail admin@childlinesa.org.za
LOVELIFE is South Africa's largest national HIV and Aids-prevention programme.

You can get involved through volunteering, sponsorship, fundraising and donations. Call ☎ 011 523 1000 or e-mail D. Marupen at donor@lovelife.org.za
STORYSCARVES is a goodwill movement that empowers and

educates vulnerable girls in Soweto, and across Africa, to explore alternative opportunities by sharing meaningful stories through creativity and the arts. Visit storyscarves.org or e-mail Stacey at info@storyscarves.org