

Birth by rape: The stats in SA will astound you

By [Paul Potsane](#)

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At 10 years old, she's a child. She shouldn't be a mother. And she's not alone. The number of new mothers between the ages of 10 and 14, giving birth at public-health facilities in South Africa, has risen by almost 50% in the past four years. These statistics are disguised as teenage pregnancies, when in fact each of these pregnancies is likely evidence of statutory rape.



Source: [Pexels](#)

Does calling it rape make you feel uncomfortable? Why doesn't it make you feel outraged instead?

This is a complicated problem that is far greater than we realise. According to Stats SA, 90,037 girls between the ages of 10 and 19 gave birth from March 2021 to April 2022, in all provinces. Struggling to understand just how big a number that is? Soccer City's capacity is 94,736 – that's Africa's largest stadium. And if we wait one more year before we act, we'll be able to fill it with girls who are far too young to be called mothers.

But these aren't just statistics. They're the lives of the most vulnerable members of our society. Lives that have, sometimes violently, been irrevocably changed. This is a heavy burden for such young shoulders to bear. And what of the parents, other adults, society and government? How are we collectively so shocked but collectively impotent when it comes to protecting our children?

It's a 'savage indictment' of our society that this is allowed to happen without an outcry and with few consequences for the perpetrators. The consequences for the young girls, on the other hand, are very real.

Maternal complications from pregnancy and childbirth are the leading cause of death and disability in girls aged 15 to 19 years globally. And the younger the girl, the greater the risk. Teenage pregnancy in many cases is also the result of forced and unprotected sex, increasing the chance of contracting HIV.

Faced with shame and stigmatisation at home and in their communities, young mothers must cope with mental-health difficulties and the weighty disappointment from families, while also being forced to accept an adult role that they are neither emotionally nor physically ready for.

Many girls who are pregnant also drop out of school, foregoing the opportunity for education and employment, perpetuating the vicious cycle of poverty. Life for these young girls is in its infancy but there's very little they can do to empower themselves, and the ripple effects are devastating, far reaching and long term – for them, their families, communities and the country. This isn't a them problem, it's an everybody problem.



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The health and wellbeing of a country's adolescents is crucial as they represent the future workforce and potential contributors to economic productivity. In South Africa, 50% of our population are youth between the ages of 15 and 34, in addition we face a soaring unemployment rate of 46%. If we're faced with such an immense teenage pregnancy rate, and pregnancy drives further poverty, what will the country's outlook be in five years' time?

Poverty or pregnancy?

The problem of teenage pregnancy isn't new, it isn't unique to South Africa and not all of these pregnancies are unplanned or are the result of sexual violence. But many are due to transactional economic necessity, force, coercion and societal pressure to be accepted.

South Africa's 'blesser' and 'blessee' phenomenon also plays a major role, where there is a reward system between a young girl and her often significantly older partner. How do you begin to fix this when young people don't consider this rape, they consider it an exchange? With these transactional relationships the girls, and often their families, are supported financially.

The uncomfortable truth about teenage pregnancy is that parents – and not the young girl – are left to choose between poverty and pregnancy. Morality doesn't feature in this equation and the majority of these cases are never reported as rape.

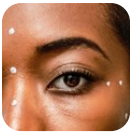
But when girls as young as 10 are falling pregnant, it's time to admit that society is failing them. When the burden of prevention and staying safe is on the girl child, it's time to admit that the system is failing them. And when we teach girls not to get raped rather than teaching boys and men not to rape, then the time for speaking politely is over.

The age of consent in South Africa is 16. Contraception is legally available at age 12 (although not without judgement) and only at age 15 is PrEP available. With over 4,000 10 to 14-year-olds giving birth in 2020, it's an uncomfortable truth: 11-year-olds are having sex. And without contraception available to them, the fact is that our children are having children.

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Laying accountability where it belongs

For many young girls in relationships with older men, condom use is not an option, they have little access to modern contraceptive alternatives and support services are not youth friendly or non-judgemental. How is an 11-year-old supposed to make such huge life choices when the reality is that she's still just a child? We shouldn't be hiding this, and we shouldn't be putting the blame – and shame on our children.

The issue of teenage pregnancy is complex but what isn't is laying the blame for these pregnancies at the feet of those responsible: older men. A 40-year-old man has no business being in a relationship with a 16-year-old girl and these inappropriate relationships shouldn't be condoned but condemned.

As the adults in these "relationships" they should know better and perhaps turn a blind eye in the pursuit of selfish pleasure. Greater society shouldn't need to police them but if reporting these men to authorities is the only way to hold them accountable and shift societal norms – then this is the role we need to play. If we want to start fixing this immense problem, this is where we need to begin.

Being a young girl in South Africa today is extraordinarily hard and this is why we need extraordinary measures to safeguard them. It's essential that we provide safe spaces where they can speak openly about the pressures they're facing and the reasons driving their sexual behaviour. We need to support them, provide reliable information and help them understand their sexual health and rights.

Our children deserve a future, and we cannot afford to not protect them anymore. It's time to let our children be children.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paul Potsane is the head of programs at Shout-It-Now.

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