

Child pregnancies reach crisis point in South Africa

Early pregnancy is a social, health and economic issue affecting our most precious resource: our children.



The image shows the cover of a magazine titled "Maternity" in a large, white, serif font. Below the title, a dark blue banner reads "THE REAL ISSUE". The central image is a young Black girl in a school uniform (white shirt, blue tie, and grey vest) who is pregnant. She is looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. The background is a solid light blue. Text on the cover includes: "Over 30 000 BIRTHS to children UNDER 17 in 2020" on the left; "CHILDREN HAVING CHILDREN: adverse health & socio-economic effects" on the right; "ALMOST 50% INCREASE IN EARLY PREGNANCY IN THE PAST 4.5 YEARS" on the right; and "GBV: HOW IT CONTRIBUTES TO EARLY PREGNANCY" on the bottom left. In the bottom right corner, there is a barcode and the text "ISSUE: AUG/SEPT 2022 SOUTH AFRICA 29119510 (VAT inc)".

Source: Supplied.

There has been a significant increase in the number of adolescent and young girls falling pregnant – ultimately girls who are giving birth from as young as 10 years old. This is a major cause for concern.

Amnesty International South Africa and *True Love* are shining a light on the crisis that is early pregnancy this Women's Month.

In South Africa, between April 2017 and September 2021, the number of births to young and adolescent girls between 10 and 14 years of age increased by 48.7%. Between April 2020 and March 2021, 934 girls between 10 and 14 years old

gave birth in Gauteng alone.

Further, of the 1,764 babies born in South Africa on 1 January 2022, 65 were born to adolescent girls. The youngest was a 13-year-old from the Eastern Cape.

“It is important to note that these are the number of births, not the number of pregnancies – bearing in mind some pregnancies ended in abortions and miscarriages,” Amnesty International South Africa executive director, Shenilla Mohamed said.

“These are staggering numbers. While this is a societal issue that needs to be tackled by the government and the people together, the State also has a responsibility to create an enabling environment for people to make autonomous and informed decisions.”

“ *What does the law say about young people consenting? [#LetsTalkAboutConsent pic.twitter.com/X8Wzdyay2Q](https://twitter.com/X8Wzdyay2Q)— @AmnestySAfrica (@AmnestySAfrica) [August 17, 2022](#)* ”

Early pregnancy has a ripple effect in terms of the adverse impact that comes with it. Often these pregnancies result in these girls being forced to drop out of school or fall behind with their schoolwork. This also results in a cycle of poverty – them requiring public assistance, being stigmatised, and sometimes even being forced to marry early.

Compounding factors

Other factors such as gender inequality, gender-based violence, substance abuse, poor access to contraceptives (as well as limited education about the options available), regulations around the termination of pregnancy, as well as many healthcare system challenges, all negatively influence this problem further.

A reality check can be seen in the stats. In 2020, more than 600 adolescent and young girls aged 10 to 13 were registered to give birth. This figure includes late registrations.

In 2020, a total of 33,899 births occurred to children aged 17 years and younger.

Stats SA noted that acquiring information about the fathers remains a challenge, with 64% of births having been registered with no details of the fathers supplied and no information is collected on the “profile of the type of man who has fathered these children”, or on how many cases of statutory rape were opened against men who impregnated underage girls.



Cosatu welcomes in signing of 3 GBV bills into law

31 Jan 2022



Gender-based violence is a contributing factor to early pregnancies, as up to one in three children under the age of 18 experienced sexual abuse.

According to South African law, children below the age of 12 do not have the capacity to consent to sexual activity.

Sexual intercourse with a child below the age of 12 is always considered as rape. Even if the child says “yes”, they are unable to give consent at that age.

Consensual sexual intercourse may occur between two children who are at least 12 years old and under the age of 16. 16- to 18-year-olds may only have consensual sex with persons no more than two years younger than them.

This means that even though a child between the ages of 12 and 16 can consent, if there is more than a two year age difference, and one is over 16, the latter will be guilty of statutory rape.

In an event where the pregnancy occurs as a result of rape and statutory rape, cases must be reported to the South African Police Service (SAPS). The criminal justice system, including the Saps and the National Prosecuting Authority, must respond in a timeous, efficient and effective manner to these cases.

Government must intercede

Amnesty International South Africa has launched an awareness campaign about the crisis of early pregnancy in the country and is calling President Cyril Ramaphosa and his government to play its part in combatting this.

“The State needs to ensure the fulfilment of all rights (housing, education, non-discrimination) that implicate the broader social determinants of health, including early pregnancy,” Mohamed continued.

Early pregnancy is a crisis as it ultimately prevents adolescent and young girls from progressing in the most important years of their lives.

To put a stop to this, Amnesty International South Africa is urging everyone living in the country to take a stand and add their voice by writing to President Ramaphosa calling on him to ensure government works together to address the high levels of early pregnancy in South Africa.



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26 Nov 2021



In partnership with *True Love* and their August edition, aptly referred to as #TheRealMaternityIssue, the campaign aims to ensure the message reaches everyone living in South Africa.

“We hope that the message will reach the people who have the power to influence our laws and policies to protect adolescent and young girls,” Mohamed said.

“President Ramaphosa it is time that you and your government take this issue of early pregnancy seriously and protect girls’ rights to health, information, education, equality and to live freely from gender-based violence and discrimination.

“We encourage South Africans to help us play a pivotal role in raising awareness about the issue and to take action on the Amnesty International South Africa’s website – calling on the government to ensure that there is real change so our young girls are protected and capacitated with information to make informed decisions about their bodies.”

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